



April 26, 2018

***Open letter about the current situation of the minorities in Syria and Iraq***

**Recipients: Heads of state or government of all EU member states and all NATO countries as well as international organizations (United Nations, European Union, NATO, Council of Europe, International Court of Justice, Human Rights Council, League of Arab States)**

Dear Chancellor Merkel (amongst other recipients; see below),

In a modern state, the protection of minorities plays an important role. You can recognize the degree of democratization of a society well from it. Such a state protection is currently missing for minorities in Syria and Iraq. On the contrary, the civil war and political destabilization in these countries has created gaps of power, which have enabled and furthered Islamist terror against minorities. Ezidis (Yazidis), Christians, Alevis, Jews, Druze and members of other religious and ethnic groups have been displaced by the hundreds of thousands from their homes in recent years. Day after day they are being dehumanized, abducted and murdered. Their cultural heritage is being trampled. Where once cultural diversity made a successful living together between the different religious groups and ethnicities possible, in many places there is now just hatred, violence and terror through radical Islamist groups left.

**Afrin – a political and moral failure of the community of states**

The attack on the north Syrian city Afrin is an example of this process. Forgotten by the rest of the world, especially the economically and politically powerful democracies of the Western world, the civil population of Afrin is experiencing unimaginable sorrows. Turkey's invasion in Afrin, which was classified as a violation of international law and was condemned as such by many experts and a number of government representatives, has led to persecution, expulsion and killing of civilians, especially non-Muslims.

The military advance of Turkey into Afrin was carried out not only with Turkish soldiers, but in cooperation with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This consists among others of jihadists, who previously committed war crimes for the so-called Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist terrorist groups. According to unconfirmed reports, several hundred civilians were abducted by the jihadist militias, which are allied with Turkey. There are said to be at least 300 civilian casualties. 170,000 civilians have been forced to leave their homes. Jihadists have plundered houses and shops of the displaced people of Afrin. According to reports from international aid organizations, the displaced ones are often isolated from medical care. They also have insufficient access to water and food. Furthermore, medical care stations in Afrin are being deliberately bombarded and destroyed.

According to eyewitness reports, the jihadists have been looking for non-Muslim houses since the occupation of Afrin on 18 March 2018. It is also said that they order people to recite Quranic verses so as to check whether those people remaining in the city of Afrin are Muslims or not. The Muslims are being “educated” to follow extremism, while dissenters are removed. Meanwhile, the use of the Kurdish language and the practice of the Christian and Ezidi faiths is forbidden. Turkish media recently published videos with students waving the national flag of Turkey on their way to school. In Afrin, three Christian churches were burnt down, four others and a Bible center were plundered and the literature was scattered. Shops and houses of Christians, recognizable by crosses or other signs, were robbed and set on fire. All this nourishes the well-founded suspicion that we are watching the beginning of an ethnic and religious cleansing.

### **Shingal – a genocide with no end**

It would be naive and unrealistic to suspect that the invasion of Afrin was a one-time event. Turkish President Erdogan recently announced further attacks by the Turkish military on the whole of northern Syria and an intervention in Shingal, even though the PKK has already left the region. The northern Iraqi region of Shingal was the scene of a cruel genocide by the IS against the people living there, mostly Ezidis, starting on 3 August 2014. During this genocide, thousands of people were brutally tortured and murdered. The horrible images are still highly present in the collective memory of the Ezidi community. More than 3,000 Ezidis, especially women and children are still in IS captivity. According to UN sources, the difficult political situation has forced more than 400,000 people to leave Shingal. Large numbers of them remain in poorly equipped refugee camps in northern Iraq. For these people, a return to their homeland, to their villages and houses, moves

further and further into the far distant future. The region is further destabilized by the threat of additional military intervention by Turkey. Understandably, these people cannot and do not want to return to their homes without any security being given. Although the IS terrorists have been expelled from Shingal, the majority of the Ezidis are severely traumatized. There is no adequate psychological help for them. Also, there is no help from the government. The very important reconstruction of the infrastructure in the region is deliberately being obstructed by the central government in Baghdad. All this leads to even more lack of prospects for the Ezidis and strengthens the desire of many of them to emigrate to Europe. Thus, causes of escape are not effectively combated, but rather created and enlarged.

Iraqi Christians and other minorities in Iraq have faced a similar fate. They also had to flee en masse after the invasion of IS into Northern Iraq, especially into the Nineveh plains. They had to leave their belongings behind. Their religious sanctuaries have been destroyed many times. The 2000-year-old history of Christians in Iraq is facing a drastic turning point. The survival of Christians in Iraq is more uncertain than it has ever been before.

### **Future perspectives**

Currently, there are about one million Ezidis worldwide. The main settlement area of Shingal with around 400,000 Ezidis has been destroyed – a return is unthinkable in view of the traumatic consequences for the civil population and the consequences of the destruction of infrastructure and the inadequate security situation. The majority of Syrian Ezidis, almost 30.000 followers, lived in Afrin. The Ezidis have had ancient sanctuaries here for millennia, are known for their olive groves and lived peacefully with their Muslim, Alevi and Christian neighbors before Turkish troops invaded the "secular" province, which was considered recently as one of the last safe places in Syria.

The ongoing destabilization in many countries of the Middle East is putting increasing pressure on minorities. Effective state protection from violence and death barely exists. Overall, we are watching the increasing de-Christianization and de-Ezidization in the Middle East with greatest concern. The heritage of millennia-old religions and minority cultures threatens to be irreversibly lost if the international community neglects its responsibilities and does not actively intervene.

## **What is the international community now obliged to do?**

1. In order to combat the spiral of violence in Syria and adjacent countries effectively, deliveries of arms and other armaments to Turkey and other warring parties must be stopped immediately and unconditionally. Incoming weapons are used against the vulnerable civil population in Afrin and elsewhere. Furthermore, conversations about an armistice are absolutely necessary in order to stop people's suffering and try to launch peace talks.
2. It must be possible for international humanitarian aid organizations to access the region of Afrin so that medicines, food and water can be distributed to the needy.
3. It is also necessary to send neutral observers to the Afrin region to document the political and military situation and any human rights abuses continuously.
4. The protection of minorities must be particularly urged. In the short and medium term, plans for protected areas and no-fly zones in the vulnerable regions of northern Syria and northwestern Iraq are indispensable.
5. There has to be broad diplomatic action to create stability in Syria and Iraq. It is also in the best interests of Europe to do so. New military offensives do not prevent escape causes but create new ones. The European Union especially, which itself always recalls for us its moral values, has a duty to intervene. The EU must admonish its alliance partner Turkey.
6. Turkey is also a member state of NATO. NATO as an organization and its member states have the obligation to remind Turkey of its duties concerning international law. This includes reviewing the international legitimacy of the military intervention in Afrin and any further military operations which are planned in the region.
7. A modern "Marshall Plan" is needed to counteract the destruction of the infrastructure, to allow reconstruction and to give people the opportunity to return. It is simply about the intention to reduce the impetus to flee decisively and effectively.

## **Society of Ezidian Academics (Gesellschaft Ezidischer AkademikerInnen e.V., GEA)**

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- **ADEL – Center for Human Rights (NGO [Non-Governmental Organization], Syria)**
- **AGADEKA – Rat der Völker e.V.**
- **Aktion Hoffnungsschimmer – Hilfe für Flüchtlinge in Not**
- **Arbeitsgemeinschaft Migration und Vielfalt in der SPD auf Bundesebene**
- **Arci solidarietà e Sviluppo (NGO, Nuoro, Italy)**
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- **Yezidische Gemeinde Nienburg e.V. (Hevgirtina Ezidiya Nienburg)**
- **Zentralverband der Ezidischen Vereine e.V. (Central Union of Êzîdî Associations)**
- **Zentrum der Eziden in Göttingen e.V. (Navenda Êzîdîyan li Göttingen)**

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