

**Forum:** Security Council

**Issue:** Question of the situation in Northern Syria

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**Position:** Chair of Security Council

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## Introduction

The case of an oppressive majority using conflict and chaos to suppress a rebellious minority is exemplified in the case of the Turkish invasion of northern Syria. Starting on October 9, 2019, the Turkish-led Operation 'Peace Spring' into northern Syria aimed to establish a 32km 'safe zone' between the Turkish border and Kurds, return over 3 million Syrian refugees to their host country and diversify the ethnic population in northern Syria. This is as the majority of northern Syria is currently in the control of Kurdish militias, who are suspected by Turkey of funding and aiding Kurdish rebellions in Turkey. The operation has faced military opposition from Kurdish militias (and more recently Syrian regime forces), causing thousands of deaths, the displacement of over 200,000 people, and the further disruption of Syria's fragile political state. The Middle East and the world are left to figure out how to deal with this crisis and restore order in Northern Syria.

The Kurds are an ethnic group of people originating in the Middle East, composing of around 10% of Syria, 15-20% of Turkey and significant minorities in other bordering states (Iran, Iraq). While they were supposedly guaranteed an independent state in the 1916 Treaty of Sevres, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne overwrote this and subsequently no independent Kurdish state has existed. This (sometimes violent) struggle for independence has put the Kurds at odds with several other ethnic groups and countries, such as Turkey, and caused several conflicts. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), the main Kurdish resistance group in Turkey, has launched several attacks on Turkey from northern Syria and often receives aid and support from Kurdish militias in northern Syria. The desire of Turkey to eliminate the PKK and other Kurdish resistance groups it deems to be terrorists has led it to invade northern Syria and remove Kurds from the established 'safe zone', reducing support and supplies from being transported to Kurdish militias in or near Turkey.

While the area is fresh from the proclaimed defeat of the Islamic State (IS), many IS militants are being housed in Kurdish controlled prisons in the northern region. The invasion has diverted many Kurdish militants and resources away from the security of these IS personnel, and the confusion created by the war

makes it only easier for IS personal to escape the prisons and rejoin sleeper cells and the IS. Further worsening the problem, IS terror attacks have seen an increase after the invasion, with 30 Syrian regime soldiers being killed in attacks and more than 50 being injured. It is essential that these terror threats are kept under control and no more IS militants are allowed to escape.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Kurds

The Kurds are indigenous people originating from the Middle East, predominantly from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia. They form a distinctive community and have their own language and culture. The majority are Muslims, but some follow other religions. They are the fourth-largest ethnic group in the middle-east, with a population of 25-35 million.



*Caption 1: A Kurdish protest*

### Syria

Syria is a country located in the Middle East, bordering Turkey and Iraq. Its population is around 10% Kurdish, with most Kurds located in the northeast bordering Turkey. It is currently in the midst of a 9-year civil war.

## **Turkey**

Turkey is a country situated at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. It shares borders with Syria and Iraq, Iran and Armenia. Its population is 15-20% Kurdish, and there is deep hostility between the Kurds and the state.

## **Islamic State**

The Islamic State (IS), also known as ISIS or ISIL, is a jihadist group operating in the Middle East. While it once controlled 88,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory at its peak, it's physical caliphate is deemed to have ended and the group has been 'defeated'. However, many former members and fighters are still alive, and the group continues to generate revenue through criminal activity and donations.

## **Syrian Defence Force**

The Syrian Defence Force (SDF) is a coalition of several Kurdish militias operating in northern Syria. In 2017, they were armed by the United States government and aided in combating and defeating IS. However, Turkey and other countries consider the group as terrorists and call for its disbanding. The United States has also retracted support for the group after the defeat of IS but maintains a relatively neutral stance on the invasion.

## **General Overview**

### **The Kurds**

Ever since the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which failed to recognize a Kurdish homeland in the Middle East, the Kurds have been at odds with the states they live in, forming several opposition parties in Iraq (Kurdistan Democratic Party - KDP, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan - PUK), Turkey (Kurdistan Workers Party - PKK), Iran (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran - KDPI) and Syria (Kurdish Democratic Union Party - PYD). While revolutions have failed to bring them lasting independence, there have been several times where Kurdish regions were partially autonomous, notably the Republic of Mahabad in Iran (1946) and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (2003-present). To this day, Kurds are still seeking independence, but no country is willing or ready to give it to them. In the past, this was due to the war on IS, as the United States and other countries feared that granting the Kurds independence would divert the attention of countries from the pressing need to destroy the terrorist group. However, even after the war on IS has ended, no country has stepped up to sacrifice some of its territory to create a new Turkish state, as giving up land would have severe economic consequences to any nation.

### **Kurds in Turkey**

Kurdish Autonomy interests in Turkey date back to the Treaty of Lausanne, but it wasn't until 1974 when the PKK was formed as a Marxist organization with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdistan in southeast Turkey. A military coup occurred in 1980, cracking down on Kurds, among other groups, and PKK leadership fled to Syria. From 1984 onwards, military action was initiated against the Turkish government, with fighters coming from both inside Turkey, and northern Syria. Due to this, the United States, EU and UN all designate the group as a terrorist organization. To this day, an estimated 40,000 people have been killed, the majority of them Kurds themselves; Most deaths have occurred in Turkey and Syria, but significant numbers of casualties have occurred in Iran and Iraq from Kurdish operations as well. While peace talks have occurred several times throughout the conflict between the Turkish government and jailed PKK leaders, no lasting ceasefire has been created and the 40-year conflict continues on. Since July 20, 2015, there have been at least 4,766 people killed in clashes.

### *Kurds in Syria*

While Kurds have lived in Syria for a significant amount of time before the current conflict, they have been at odds and isolated from the rest of Syria. The formal start to this isolation began in 1962, where Syria stripped 120,000 Kurds of citizenship who were unable to prove their residence in Syria before 1945, rendering the Kurds stateless and unable to travel. These Kurds and their descendants are also unable to vote, own property or businesses or legally marry. An 'Arab Belt' established in 1973 further took action on Syrian Kurds. This was an area along the border with Turkey where Kurds were cleared from the area. This was intended to weaken Kurdish presence in the resource-rich northern areas of Syria. While some Kurds have been granted their citizenship since 1962 in 2011 when Syrian president Bashar al-Assad wished to court Kurdish support amidst the Syrian civil war, many remain stateless and this issue must be solved to resolve the conflict in northeast Syria.

In 2003, the PYD was formed. Affiliated with the PKK in nearby Turkey, it called for the recognition of Kurdish rights and regional autonomy. It has drawn tensions between other Syrian Kurdish parties due to its loyalty to the PKK. While the current percentage of Kurds who support the PKK is unknown, it is estimated that only around 20% of Kurds support the party and its violent actions.

A year later, Kurds staged a mass protest in Qamishli after Syrian forces opened fire on a procession mourning 9 Kurdish youths killed during a fight in a soccer match. Syrian forces cracked down on these demonstrations, which spread to neighboring towns and other areas. Since the civil war, Kurdish autonomy in the northeast regions of Syria has increased. In 2013, they declared 3 autonomous cantons in Syria's north. Kurdish militants captured many cities, such as Ras al-Ain, leading to the declaration of autonomy. These areas have been held and governed majorly by Kurdish Forces, including the PYD, until the Turkish invasion.

## The rise and fall of IS

Kurdish forces in Syria have been essential in the international effort to repel IS from Syria and dismantle the group. The IS first took control over large areas of the Middle East in 2014. The first town attacked by IS was Kobani, a tactically located Syrian Kurdish town controlled by the PYD. YPG, the military arm of the PYD, bore the majority of the offensive load in Syria, along with allied Arab rebels and support from the United States. U.S. support for the YPG led to tensions between it and Turkey, who designated the group as an offshoot of the PKK and therefore a terrorist group.

Turkish military did join the fight against IS in the same year, providing aerial support and granting the U.S. access to its Incirlik Air Base to stage raids from. but also used this opportunity to attack PKK targets in Syria and Iraq, ending a 2-year ceasefire. In 2016, it intervened directly in northern Syria, backing Arab fighters against IS. It also used this to restrict Syrian Kurds from connecting their autonomous regions and halted a Kurdish advance west of the Euphrates river, creating a complex front-line. In 2018, Turkish troops captured a city held by Syrian Kurds, causing tens of thousands to flee their homes in the region.

In 2017, the U.S. began arming the SDF, as the U.S. led coalition prepared to seize Raqqa. By December 2017, IS had lost 95% of its territory, and victory over the group was declared in Iraq on December 9, 2017. This caused a shift in operations towards Syria, where the U.S. coalition gradually captured IS territory. In October 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS, was killed in a U.S. operation in northwestern Syria, and in the same year, the SDF took control over the last populated area held by IS, declaring the total elimination of the group and ending the group's territorial rule.



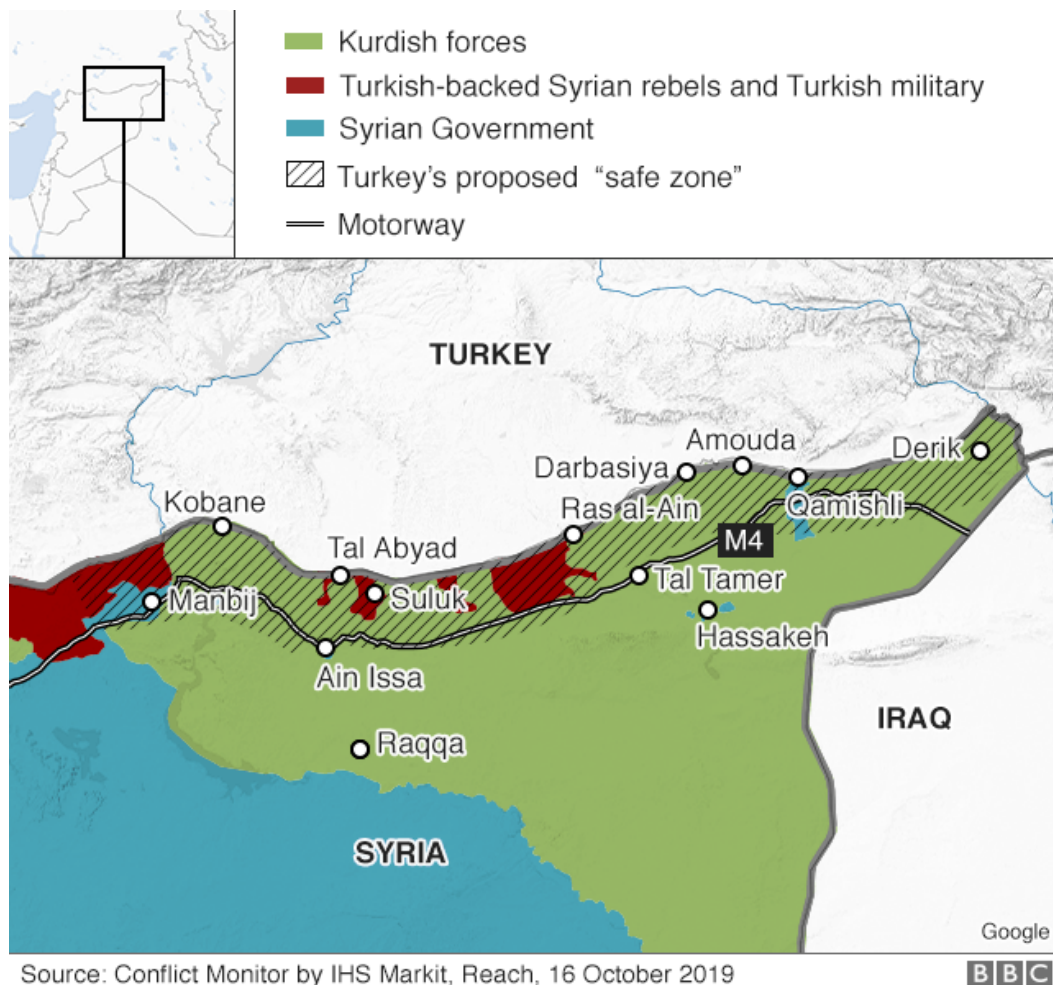


*Caption 2: Armed Syrian Democratic Forces preparing for combat*

While this signaled the end of the group's official territorial claims, it is important not to overlook their remaining supplies and fighters. IS is still a potent fighting force, and the group will seize any opportunities presented to them by the conflict in northeast Syria to re-emerge and recruit new members. Kurdish militants currently operate as the security forces in several IS jails and prisons, and any decrease in Kurds protecting these prisoners due to having to fight Turkey may lead to group members escaping and escalating the threat of a reformed IS. Any solutions need to consider this aspect and maintain measures to keep IS dismantled.

### **The invasion of northeast Syria**

On the 9th of October, 2019, Turkish forces launched their latest offensive in northeastern Syria in order to establish a 32km 'safe zone' from the Turkish border. This area was still controlled by the SDF but, since then, the SDF has lost much of its territory and appears to be losing its grip on key cities such as Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. On the 13th of October, Kurdish leaders agreed to allow Syrian army forces to enter the cities of Manbij and Kobane to protect them from being captured by Turkey and its allies. This leaves northeast Syria divided by Syrian regime forces, Syrian opposition militia and their Turkish allies and areas still held by the SDF.



*Caption 3: A map of the regions controlled by the various groups in northeast Syria*

Turkey has long threatened to launch an operation in SDF-held territory to create a ‘safe zone’ along the Syrian side of the border. It wishes to push back the YPG and hopes to settle up to 3 million of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees it’s hosting. While U.S. troops were formerly stationed in Turkey and carried out joint patrols of the ‘safe zone’ with Turkish troops, U.S. President Trump’s withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria led Turkish President Erdogan to move forward with the operation with Turkish troops alone.

The SDF stated that they would protect their territory at all costs, but Turkish forces were able to push their way into sparsely populated, mostly Arab areas between the towns in the first 5 days of the assault. Turkish air and artillery strikes affected a much larger area. Hours after the attack, the SDF reached an agreement with the Syrian government for the Syrian army to enter and deploy along the border and repel the assault.

### *Humanitarian effects*

When the Turkish offensive began, the UN estimated potentially affected areas contained 2.2 million people, including 1.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, and two government-controlled cities: Qamishli and Hassakeh. By the 13th of October, airstrikes, shelling and fighting on the group had killed several civilians and forced more than 200,000 others to flee their homes. The UN said that most people

displaced were from the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, the ones initially attacked by Turkish forces. Some 5,000 Internally Displaced People had to be evacuated towards Hassakeh city after the surrounding area was shelled.



*Caption 4: Syrian Kurds protesting the Turkish invasion in northern Syria*

Syrian farmers are also reportedly suffering from the invasion by Turkey. Before the invasion, northeast Syria was a major agricultural region of Syria, containing the important Euphrates river. Violent Turkish airstrikes have forced farmers to flee, often without harvesting their crops. The Turkish military operation began just as the first phase of the cotton harvest was starting. Syrian opposition factions are accused of seizing masses of property and an estimated 1.5 million acres of agricultural land, 5,000 tons of fertilizer, about 130 factories and 7 cotton gins, along with grain silos. They have also been accused of other human rights violations, including the displacement of civilians, extrajudicial killings and mistreatment of prisoners of war.

### ***Resettlement of refugees***

In October 2019, Amnesty International published a report accusing Turkey of forcibly deporting many refugees to the Idlib province, an active war zone, while stating that these were voluntary returns. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner expressed concern during the military offensive about the treatment of civilians, and the United Nations has lost much of its access to information in the region due to the conflict and evacuation of Non-Governmental Organizations.

On November 22, 2019, Turkey resettled the first group of around 70 Syrian refugees in Syria. Two days later, 600 families were transported to Tal Abyad, beginning to resettle the Syrian refugees into 20 miles



of northern Syria, formerly Kurdish-held territory. Experts and U.S. officials worry that resettling large numbers of refugees not originally from the region will upset the delicate balance currently in the region. The EU, Human Rights Watch, Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 15 other aid agencies and numerous other NGOs have called on Turkey to abandon its refugee resettlement plan. The refugees themselves have expressed fear towards their resettlement, as the majority of them originate from western Syria, and they will be resettled far from their hometowns. They believe that they will be received with hostility from the local population and the resettlement puts them in danger. Any solution will need to address how refugees in the area will be dealt with.

### ***IS Prisons***

One of the most worrying consequences to the international community regarding the Turkish invasion is the resurgence of IS in Syria. In December 2019, IS militants had increased their terror activity in Syria, carrying out deadly attacks on military groups and installations. Attacks have killed at least 30 Syrian regime soldiers and injured in excess of 50 others. The SDF has also suffered casualties, with a suicide attack killing 3 SDF fighters in Raqqa. There is a real threat of IS sleeper cells being reactivated and capable of continuing the reign of terror on civilians. The militant group has been active in Syria's desert regions and the objectives of the group have shifted from outright combat to assassinations, ambushes, and suicide attacks.

Nearly 11,000 IS fighters and their families are being held in detention camps in northeast Syria. The SDF - Kurdish militias operating as the guards for these detention camps - has been requesting international assistance in dealing with the prisoners, whose countries of origin, such as the U.S., the UK, and Australia have been reluctant to take back. SDF leaders warn that they can't guarantee the security of these prisoners if their soldiers are needed to redeploy to repel the Turkish attack, and fear IS can use the war to re-emerge and recruit more members. On the 11th of October, at least 5 detained fighters escaped prison, and 2 days later, 750 foreign women and their children affiliated to IS managed to break out of a camp. It is unclear which detention sites the SDF still has control over and the status of the prisoners inside, and it is essential for any solution to address these prisoners and suppress any further IS activity in the region.

### **UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events**

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948 (A/RES/3/217)

This declaration of Human Rights is one of the core resolutions passed by the United Nations, and all member-states - including Turkey and Syria - are signatories. Currently, Syrian opposition factions have been accused of gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and torture. These need to be addressed to restore the rights of Syrians living in the conflict zones and ensure their future well-being.

- Security Council Resolution 2165 (S/RES/2165)
- Security Council Resolution 2254 (S/RES/2254)
- Security Council Resolution 2449 (S/RES/2449)

Resolution 2165 focuses on providing paths for aid to enter Syria. While it was approved in 2014, it has been continuously extended, and another extension is expected soon. This aid is intended to be for humanitarian purposes and directed at displaced civilians, and also provides measures to ensure the safety of United Nations and non-governmental personnel.



*Caption 5: A UNHCR convoy near Raqqa*

Resolution 2254 expressed the importance of a democratic, Syrian-led solution to the civil war. It stressed that a lasting solution wouldn't be found without consulting the Syrian people and supported free and fair elections which would lead to the imposition of a lasting peace and government. Resolution 2449 sought to extend Resolution 2165 while making further modifications to adapt to the increase in IDPs and the need to scale up the level of aid being provided.

There have been no prior resolutions targeting the Turkish invasion, considering this is a relatively new issue. The United Nations met on October 10, 2019, to discuss the invasion but no resolution was passed. The council diplomats agreed that the Turkish invasion could worsen the situation in Syria, with some condemning the attack, but no unilateral statement was issued.

The UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) is providing humanitarian aid to refugees fleeing Syria, mostly in the form of cash to buy basic needs. They distribute supplies in key towns in northeast Syria, such as Al-Hassakeh and Tal Tamer. An estimated 31,800 refugees have been assisted.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) provides seed assistance, veterinary support and animal vaccinations in Syria to help the agricultural sector grow. This is especially important considering the conflict regions are in some of Syria's agricultural regions, however, no major initiatives have been announced to increase food assistance in the region as the conflict needs to be brought to an end before agricultural support can be provided again.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
10 August 1920	The Treaty of Sevres is signed, overwriting the previous Sykes-Picot agreement and leaving the Kurdish people without a country.
22 January 1946	Kurds establish the short-lived Republic of Mahabad, an independently-governed Kurdish state in Soviet-controlled Iran. Iran re-occupies Mahabad after the Soviet withdrawal.
1962	Syria revokes the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds who failed to prove their residence in Syria prior to 1945.
1973	An 'Arab Belt' is established in northeast Syria, intended to weaken Kurdish dominance of agriculture and resource-rich areas.
1974	The PKK is founded as a Marxist organization aiming to establish an independent Kurdistan in southeast Turkey.
20 September 2003	The PYD is founded by Syrian Kurds, calling for the recognition of Kurdish rights and regional autonomy.
March 2004	Mass protests are staged in Qamishli, Syria after Syrian forces open fire on a procession mourning 9 Kurdish youths. Demonstrations spread to neighboring towns and also inspire protests in Europe.
April 2011	Bashar al-Assad grants Kurds listed as foreigners in a 1962 census citizenship amid the civil war. Kurds who were never registered remain stateless.
2012	Turkey and the PKK renew peace talks aiming to bring a deadly 3-decade conflict to an end. These talks break down and the conflict still continues to this day.
12 November 2013	Kurds declare autonomy in northern Syria as government forces withdraw to combat the civil uprisings in the south.
2014	IS takes control over large areas of Iraq and Kurds battle them in Kobani. U.S. support for the PYD creates tensions with Turkey.
2015	Turkey attacks IS, bombing the group's positions in Syria. It also attacks PKK targets, ending a 2-year ceasefire.
24 August 2016	Turkey directly intervenes in northern Syria, restricting the Kurds connecting their 2 separate autonomous regions.
9 May 2017	The U.S. directly arms the YPG, angering Turkey. This is in preparation for the invasion of Raqqa.

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17 March 2018	Turkish troops capture Afrin, a city previously held by YPG forces. This displaces thousands of civilians.
23 March 2019	Victory is declared over IS by SDF forces after Baghouz is captured.
9 October 2019	Operation 'Peace Spring' commences. Turkish troops cross the Syrian border and attack the cities of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.
11 October 2019	5 IS militants escape from a prison in Qamishli after Turkish shelling exploded a prison wall.
13 October 2019	The U.S. commences the withdrawal of troops from northern Syria.
22 November 2019	Turkey resettles the first group of refugees in northern Syria.

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## Possible Solutions

Firstly, it must be decided how to deal with the invasion. The security council does have the jurisdiction and power to impose sanctions on Turkey for its actions, but the feasibility and effectiveness of any proposed sanctions must be considered: they may be used as a negotiating tool, but certainly not as a full solution to the problem. A Turkish withdrawal must eventually take place as the current incursion violates the sovereignty of Syria and international law. While refugees must be resettled somewhere, as it is not realistic for Turkey to support them indefinitely, they must certainly not forcibly be resettled and not into a war-zone or other region with hostile activity.

Next, political stability in the region needs to be addressed and resolved. This is the root problem of the crisis at hand, and re-establishing justice and order in the region needs to be completed. Democratic elections are a good first step, allowing Syrians to decide who they want to be led by. However, this will not come without opposition from the Assad regime, and negotiations should be held with them to decide how to proceed further, as elections may lead to the Assads being requested to step down from power. The status of the Kurds also needs to be decided. As they still seek autonomy and no country is willing to grant them full independence, alternate solutions will need to be proposed. Delegates will have to be creative with solutions to this problem. It is inherent that forcibly granting the Kurds autonomy in the region will do more harm than good, further upsetting the political scene in the Middle East. Similar to the establishment of Israel in 1945, any Kurdish state will certainly be met by conflict, which is unwanted in the present situation.

Finally, methods to deal with the remains of IS should be implemented. It is necessary to prevent the group from reemerging from its defeat and using the present turmoil to become a threat again. Regarding IS prisoners, steps will need to take place to ensure their return to their host countries or find a permanent prison or solution to reintegrate them into society. Underground sleeper cells will need to be dealt with,



however, no simple solutions can be seen to this problem. The best path would be to re-establish police and government presence in the regions, supported by the local people. It is of utmost importance that the security and safety of the Kurds and others living in northeast Syria be re-established so development and recovery efforts can move forward.

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