A grayscale background image showing a group of refugees, including an elderly man, a young boy, and a woman carrying a child on her back, walking past a white aid truck. A solid red horizontal bar is at the top left, and a solid red vertical bar is on the right side.

ERDOGAN'S "SECURITY ZONE"

Refugees and humanitarian aid in North East Syria

Key facts and proposals about the motivations, impact and long term consequences of the Turkish invasion on North East Syria



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On the 9th October 2019, Turkey started their long-threatened invasion of Northern Syria following Trump's much-criticised decision to withdraw US military support for the Syrian Democratic Forces. Widespread and indiscriminate shelling and air strikes targetting most of the cities and villages along the border has caused civilian deaths, injuries, damage to infrastructure and mass population movements away from the conflict. The evacuation of all international NGO staff has further intensified the crisis. As the conflict moves into a new stage with the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria entering into an agreement on the 13th October which sees Russian-supported Syrian government troops defending the border from Turkish attacks, the threat to human life and the future security of the region remains unstable and unpredictable.

In addition to being a humanitarian crisis in its own terms, Turkish attacks are also compounding the effects of the Syrian Civil War that the region was already experiencing. Since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, an estimated 5.6 million people have fled Syria to other countries, while 6.2 million have been internally displaced (IDPs) within Syria (UNHCR figures). With the current estimates placing the number of displaced civilians at over 200,000, the number of Syrians who have been displaced or become refugees has broken 12 million. Over the course of the war and the subsequent rise of ISIS across Syria and Iraq, North and East Syria has received hundreds of thousands of IDPs from across Syria, as well as refugees from the ISIS caliphate in Iraq. In this report we will examine Erdogan's stated reasons for the invasion, including proposals for a so-called "security zone" in which to resettle refugees. We will also assess the ongoing humanitarian impact of the invasion, as well as analysing the long term impact of the invasion on the stability and security of the region.

Methodology

From summer 2019, Rojava Information Centre had been researching and writing a dossier about refugees in North East Syria. For this dossier, we conducted 50 interviews with camp residents, staff of local and international NGOs, and representatives from the Autonomous Administration. Visits were conducted to thirteen camps, at which we met with educational, health and women's institutions and spoke to camp administrations and residents' councils. Many secondary sources were also consulted, including media reports, documents produced by humanitarian actors and research. However, shortly before the dossier was ready to publish, Turkey invaded North East Syria and we chose to report on the development of the war rather than completing the dossier. However, as we watched a humanitarian crisis unfold due to the attacks, we decided to publish a report specifically looking at the humanitarian impact of the attacks. We drew on the research we had already done for the dossier, as well as the dozens of contacts we had developed within NGOs, camp administrations and governance structures.

Turkey's False Pretences: Why the “security zone” won't work

Nowhere to go

Erdoğan has used the pretext of refugee resettlement to justify his desire for a so-called safe zone south of the Turkish border. Turkey hosts 3.6 million refugees from Syria, 83% of whom are not from North and East Syria. North and East Syria already hosts a population of 5 million, 1.7 million of whom are in need of humanitarian aid, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. This includes approximately 310,000 refugees and internally displaced people in camps (official and unofficial), re-purposed buildings and abandoned villages. Although relative calm has been restored to the region over recent years, many of these refugees and IDPs are still unable to return home. Like the Syrian refugees in Turkey, they are from regions still experiencing conflict or in need of significant reconstruction of infrastructure and economy, such as areas under the Assad regime's control, Deir ez Zor, Raqqa, Idlib and Iraq.

“There are at least 1,650,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance in north-east Syria. The life-saving humanitarian response will be threatened if instability forces aid agencies to suspend or relocate their programming and staff, as is already happening.”

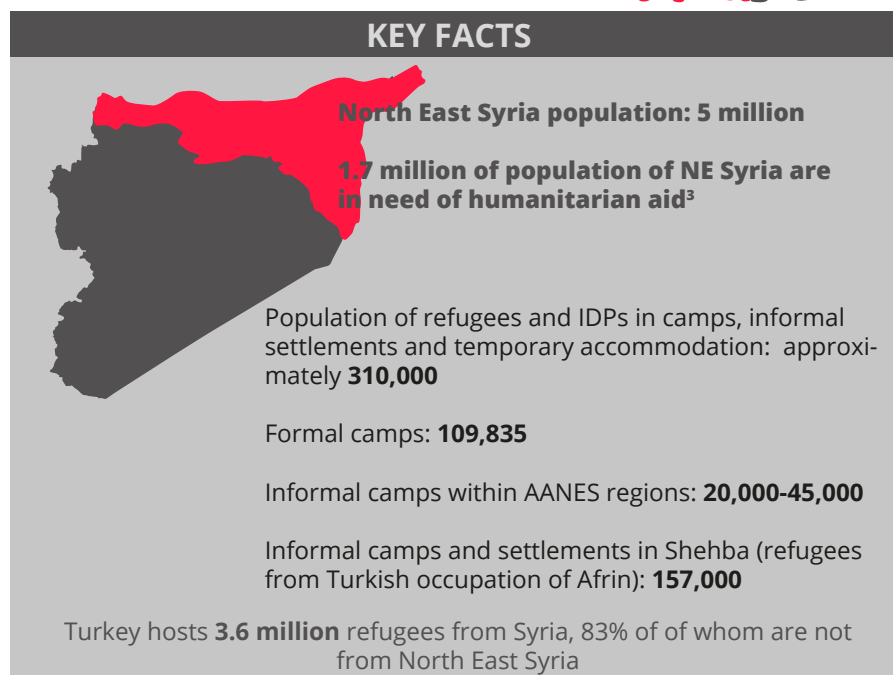
Statement released by 15 aid agencies operating in North East Syria, 10 October 2019

5.63 million Syrian refugees in other countries¹
6.2 million IDPs² in Syria

Refugees displaced so far by the Turkish invasion: over 200,000 – brings it to 12 million



KEY FACTS



¹ https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.258149391.428380943.1570808861-1231511476.1567778157

² <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people>

³ UN OCHOA

“Stretched to a breaking point”

Since the first arrivals of displaced people in the region, local authorities in North and East Syria have found ways to provide for fundamental needs, even when international aid was inadequate or lacking. Despite the Administration’s track record of providing support to refugees and IDPs, neither the Administration nor aid organisations would be able to cope with an influx of millions of forcibly relocated people. International NGO Cadus stated that “the Turkish invasion will escalate the humanitarian crisis to an even more dramatic level” due to the “extremely high number of internally displaced people and the difficult access of humanitarian organizations pre-existing the Turkish invasion.” Following the commencement of the Turkish invasion, 15 international aid agencies released a statement saying that “the aid response in Syria is already stretched to breaking point” and refugees expelled from Turkey would require “humanitarian assistance that the international community is not in a position to provide.”¹

“If Syrian refugees return to Syria, then those returns must be voluntary, dignified and safe.”

Cadus, international healthcare NGO operating in North East Syria

Turkey’s track record

In this context, it is important to examine Turkey’s capacity and track record of supporting refugee populations. Over recent months Turkey has implemented a policy of forced returns to Syria, including to places of ongoing conflict. As international NGO Cadus has argued, “if Syrian refugees return to Syria, then those returns must be voluntary, dignified and safe.” The Turkish invasion and occupation of the Afrin region of North and East Syria in 2018 must also be considered as part of their track record. Turkey cited similar reasons for the Afrin invasion as they are using for the current invasion. The invasion of Afrin displaced 300,00 people, and the region is now occupied and controlled by Turkish proxy forces.

157,000 of the displaced Afrin residents now reside in Shehba region, living in camps and repurposed buildings, accessing critically low levels of humanitarian aid due to being geographically cut off by two unfriendly powers: Turkey and the Syrian government. The Turkish-backed occupation of the Afrin region has been particularly brutal. Turkish-backed militias – including jihadist groups such as the Sultan Murad Brigade and Ahrar Al-Sharqiya, who are a leading group in the current offensive on North and East Syria – have engaged in looting, confiscation of property, abduction for ransom, forced displacement, extrajudicial killing, and sexual violence against women and girls. The UN has reported that since the invasion, “areas in northern Syria, such as Afrin, al-Bab, Jarablus, and Azaz that were already under the control of Turkish forces and/or affiliated armed groups, are continuing to face lawlessness and rampant criminality and violence.”² It is likely that any additional Turkish-occupied regions would experience a similar fate.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/15-aid-agencies-warn-humanitarian-crisis-north-east-syria-civilians-risk>

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25129&LangID=E>

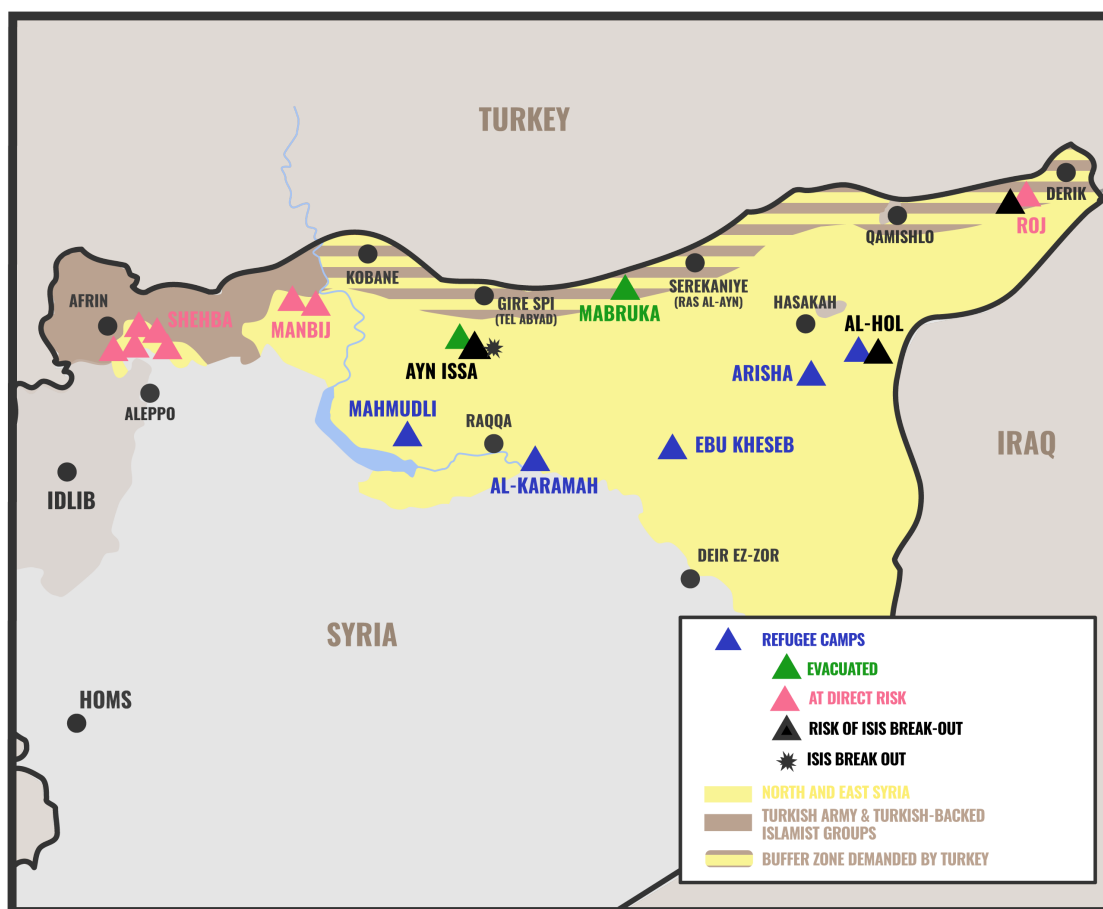
Humanitarian impact

New displacements

Turkish shelling, air strikes and ground incursions are already creating new waves of displacements. The number of IDPs from the border strip reached 191,069 in two days as a result of the ongoing conflict (United Nations Human Needs Assessment Program),³ and most likely now is over 250,000. This far exceeds the initial estimates for the first two days, which were between 60,000 and 70,000 displacements. An estimated 450,000 people live within 5 kilometers of the border and will be displaced or caught in the crossfire if the fighting continues. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi has said that “hundreds of thousands of civilians in northern Syria are now in harm’s way. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must not be a target.”⁴ However, this call fell on deaf ears. Most displaced people have fled to Raqqa, Tel Tamer, Hasakah and Ayn Issa. Many have also gone to the Semalka border, but only a small number have been able to cross.

Impact on refugee camps

THREATS ON REFUGEES OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA, 13 OCTOBER 2019



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, October 2019

3 <https://twitter.com/vdcnsy/status/1182701814870876161>

4 <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2019/10/5d9f10eb4/hundreds-thousands-harms-way-northern-syria.html>

The impact of the Turkish invasion on the existing refugee and IDP population of North and East Syria will be significant. Roj, Mabruka and both Manbij camps are within 30 kilometers of the Turkish border, within the so-called “security zone” that Turkey is proposing to move millions of refugees into. Air strikes and shelling have also targetted the town and camp of Ayn Issa – which is outside of Turkey’s proposed 30km “security zone.” Previous to the break out on the 13th October (discussed below), Ayn Issa camp housed 950 foreign ISIS affiliates, as well as over 12,000 IDPs from Raqqa and Deir ez Zor. The remaining Ayn Issa camp residents are being evacuated due to shelling and the approach of Turkish proxy forces. On the 11th October the Autonomous Administration evacuated Mabruka camp, which is the camp closest to the heaviest fighting. The population of the camp was relocated to Arisha camp, placing additional strain on already over-capacity facilities. Camp Roj is situated next to Qerechoh, a strategically located hill that has been targetted by Turkish air strikes in the past.

The Administration has had to pull out or withdraw some support from the camps, and as of the 14th October all international staff working for NGOs were evacuated. Kurdish Red Crescent, one of the primary local NGOs providing health services in the camps, announced on the 9th October that they had to reposition ambulance and medical teams from several camps – including Al Hol, Roj, Arisha and Ayn Issa – in order to respond to emergencies at the border. The Administration, local NGOs and the UN continue to run very reduced and limited services at the remaining camps. Ongoing conflict will also cut off the flow of humanitarian aid to the region, reducing the already inadequate levels of aid to a trickle.

The official camps in North East Syria are:

Camp	Region	Population	Under 18's	Place of origin
Al Hol	Jazeera	68,607	67% children	45% Iraq – Ninewa and Anbar 41% Syria – mostly Deir ez Zor 14% third country nationals
Roj	Jazeera	4,098	58% children	Iraq: Mosul, Samarra, Shirqat
Newroz	Jazeera	Recently closed due to successful returns		Iraq: Sinjar, Mosul, Homs
Arisha	Jazeera	8,780	67% children	Syria: Deir ez Zor
Mabruka	Jazeera	3,776 – now moved to Arisha	63% children	Syria: Raqqa, Deir ez Zor
Ayn Issa	Raqqa	13,309	62% children	Syria: Deir ez Zor, Raqqa
Mahmoudli	Raqqa	7,000	60% children	Syria: Hama, Homs, Raqqa, Deir ez Zor
Manbij East Old	Manbij	2,497	64% children	Syria: Aleppo

Larger unofficial camps supported by the Administration and some NGOs:

20,000 - 45,000 people in unofficial camps located within the regions of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. This includes more established, larger camps like Ebu Kheseb and Al Karamah, as well as smaller settlements. The residents are from many parts of Syria, including Syrian government-controlled regions, areas requiring reconstruction, and places still experiencing conflict and violence.

Shehba region: Shehba, the region where over half of the 300,000 people displaced by the Turkish-backed invasion and occupation of Afrin in 2018 settled, hosts several camps as well as many families living in repurposed buildings or in temporary accommodation. There are five camps in the region: Berxwedan (2,700 people), Afrin (391 people), Serdem (3,500 people), Shehba Camp (450 people) and Veger (446 people). Approximately 150,000 displaced people are also settled in the region, in temporary accommodation or within previously empty villages. This brings the total of displaced people in the region to approximately 157,000, still waiting for an end to the occupation by Turkish proxy forces so they can return to their homes.

Regime restrictions

Because of regulations on how international humanitarian actors coordinate work with local authorities and organisations, the United Nations and international NGOs are often limited in who they are able to work with as a “local partner.” Because the Autonomous Administration – as a non-state actor – lacks political recognition, international aid agencies generally are unable to work with the Administration within an official framework. Instead, NGOs and UN bodies who register in Damascus are tied to working within the parameters set by the Syrian government, which historically has largely excluded the region of North and East Syria, as well as proscribing coordination with the Autonomous Administration.

Kurdish Red Crescent also faces obstacles in coordinating with Damascus-registered international NGOs (such as the Damascus-registered UNHCR) because they themselves are not registered in Damascus. All funding from UN bodies registered with the Syrian government is channelled through NGOs which are also registered with the Syrian government, presenting a severe challenge to the Autonomous Administration and local NGOs not registered with the government. Local actors, camp administrators and Administration representatives on all levels are concerned about the impact of these restrictions on the ability to effectively deliver humanitarian aid to the refugees and IDPs in North and East Syria.

“The Autonomous Administration of North Syria is still not officially recognised, if it was more recognised by the international community, they could coordinate or direct the NGOs better... This is not only in health but in other places. Because of this, here, international NGOs do not increase the capacity of local authorities, but the fact is that the NGO will leave but the local partner is the one that stays.”

Şerwan Berî, Head Manager of Kurdish Red Crescent

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“There are 42,000 children in al Hol who are being regularly exposed to [ISIS] ideology”

Monthly meeting of refugee camp responsables - Mahmud Karo, Head of Bureau of Refugees, Ministry of Jazeera Region Social Affairs

Creating the conditions for crisis

ISIS resurgence

Beyond the immediate humanitarian consequences of the Turkish invasion, the attacks will have a longer term destabilising effect, threatening the peace that the people of North and East Syria have rebuilt since declaring autonomy and battling ISIS. At the time of invasion, the Administration’s security forces were still actively fighting ISIS sleeper cells, and the invasion opened the door to a resurgence of ISIS and other jihadist groups as local authorities have had to reduce counter-terror work. On the 11th October, a popular restaurant in Qamishlo

was targetted by a double car bomb attack which was claimed by ISIS, killing 3 and wounding 9. ISIS also claimed four attacks in Deir ez Zor and one attack on the road between Raqqa and Deir ez Zor in the first three days of the war. During the same time period, two sleeper cell attacks on Sere Kaniye have been pre-empted, and one

on Raqqa. This trend indicates that the SDF's reallocation of forces to defend against the Turkish invasion has opened the way for ISIS sleeper cells to carry out attacks. The reduced capacity of local authorities to prevent and respond to terror threats will reach even more critical levels as the conflict continues and resources are directed towards the war effort.

Breakdown of security in prisons and camps

Since before the start of the conflict, the Autonomous Administration has warned that it would not be able to both effectively guard ISIS detainees in prisons and camps and defend itself against Turkish invasion. On the 13th October, this warning became reality, as 785 foreign ISIS linked individuals escaped from Ayn Issa camp. Reports indicate that the breakout occurred following Turkish shelling, which created chaos within the camp. The chaos then created an opportunity for the breakout attempts, which were facilitated by sleeper cells operating within the camp, and possibly outside as well. The residents who escaped were all from the high security section of the camp dedicated to foreign ISIS affiliates, largely women and children. The foreign ISIS-linked women are often the most militant adherents of ISIS ideology, imposing strict social rules on other camp residents and enforcing them with violence. The breakout occurs as American forces withdraw from Ayn Issa and Turkish proxy forces gain control of parts of the highway passing through Ayn Issa. Only some of the detainees were recaptured. Another high risk area is Al Hol camp, where 11,200 ISIS-linked women and children are detained, as well as many Syrian and Iraqi affiliates. Since the start of Turkish attacks, the ISIS-linked women in Al Hol camp have staged two uprisings (9th and 11th October, with some activity reported on the 13th), attacking the camp security forces, setting fire to tents and attempting to break out. The situation grows increasingly tense and unstable as more security forces are moved to the front. One camp staff member described the situation in the camp on the 13th as "the calm before the storm," with camp residents preparing to assassinate the staff while awaiting the arrival of ISIS from the outside to facilitate breakout.

Further undermining the ability of local authorities to effectively guard detained ISIS fighters and affiliates, Turkey is actively seeking to release prisoners. As in Ayn Issa camp, Turkish shelling has consistently targetted prisons holding ISIS fighters, seeking to break open the prison and facilitate escape. There has been ongoing shelling of Navkur and Jirkin prisons in Qamishlo, and the shelling of two prisons near Mashtenur in Kobane, all of which hold ISIS prisoners. As the SDF moved 5 high security ISIS prisoners from Navkur prison to a more secure facility, the area was shelled again and the prisoners were able to escape into Qamishlo city. This tactic is also being used by ISIS: a car bomb was detonated outside of Ghuwairan prison in Hasakah, which also holds ISIS prisoners.

"At first the Syrian refugees need a suitable environment to live in – electricity, water, food, jobs, roads, schools. That is important for them to be able to live... We need to work on rebuilding the cities in order to encourage the people to go back."

Abdul Kadir Muahed, Head of Humanitarian Affairs, Syrian Democratic Council

Destruction of Infrastructure

The shelling of villages and cities along the length of the border, as well as air strikes in Sere Kaniye, Tel Abyad and Tel Helef, are causing widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, including water pumping stations, dams, power stations and oil fields, in a strategy that the UN OCHR called “disturbing.”⁵ The destruction of infrastructure has manifold effects: it places further strain on local authority resources, makes it harder for displaced people to return to their homes, and in the long term can create resentment with local governance structures.

A large number of IDPs currently in the refugee camps of North and East Syria are unable to return home because of destroyed housing, lack of electricity, water and jobs, and the instability caused by weakened political and community structures. Inadequate infrastructure can also lead to a sense of disaffection with local authorities, further creating fertile conditions for the rise of ISIS. This has already been a worrying trend in Raqqa, where ISIS is taking advantage of the slow rate of reconstruction to recruit. These conditions further strengthen the argument for political recognition for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, so that they are better able to access aid for reconstruction.

Proposals and conclusions

Immediate:

Cessation of hostilities

First and foremost, there needs to be immediate cessation of the Turkish invasion of North and East Syria. This includes withdrawal of all ground forces- including proxies, an immediate halt of shelling or shooting from across the border, and removal of aircraft and drones from the airspace of North and East Syria. Turkish proxy forces should also be removed from the region of Afrin, which was invaded and occupied in early 2018.

International humanitarian action

Mass displacements, damage to local infrastructure and the disruption of the local economy have had a devastating impact on civilian populations. Turkish shelling of Alok water station has caused widespread water shortages across Hasakah region, the healthcare infrastructure is stretched beyond its capacity, and many people have been left without a home. Immediate and extensive humanitarian aid is required, in coordination with the Autonomous Administration.

No fly zone

The establishment of a No Fly Zone would ensure a measure of safety for civilians within North and East Syria from air strikes. Turkish aerial bombardment of North and East Syria is capable of causing immense destruction of infrastructure and

5 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25129&LangID=E>

human life. With the Syrian Democratic Forces lacking any air force, the establishment of a No Fly Zone would protect the population from a threat they have no way of defending themselves against.

Long term:

Political recognition for North and East Syria

Currently the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is not officially politically recognised. This means that they are excluded from international negotiations such as peace accords and constitutional committees and face challenges in coordinating with the international humanitarian community. This has a significant impact on their ability to access and coordinate aid, including reconstruction aid. Political recognition for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria would avoid the current situation of aid for North and East Syria being channelled through the Assad government, who do not have actual sovereignty over the region. It remains to be seen how the military agreement with the Syrian government will affect the political status of the region.

International action on ISIS detainees

There is a general reluctance from many governments whose nationals are currently in al Hol, Roj and formerly Ayn Issa to repatriate ISIS-linked detainees. The Autonomous Administration has proposed an international court to be hosted in North and East Syria to judge ISIS members (see our report “Bringing ISIS to Justice” for an analysis of this proposal), while ISIS-linked women who are not being charged with a crime and the children should be repatriated and placed in reintegration programmes by their home countries.

Voluntary and dignified returns

If there are Syrian refugees in Turkey who wish to return to their homes, their return should be facilitated. As North and East Syria borders Turkey, the Autonomous Administration is in a good position to facilitate returns of refugees to their hometowns in partnership with United Nations, ensuring that the safety and voluntary nature of the returns is confirmed.



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