

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
R O U N D T A B L E

September 25, 2018

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
United States Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20520

*Re: Religious Freedom In Syria: The Sole Foundation For Lasting Peace*

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals, who include scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates, and faith-based NGO's. Although we hold very different religious and theological views, we are united by our commitment to international religious freedom. Many of us are participants in the International Religious Freedom Roundtable.

We first wish to express our congratulations and deep appreciation to you for convening the highly successful first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom on July 24-26, 2018. We also thank President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Ambassador at Large, Sam Brownback, and the many other State Department officials and staff for their strong expressions of support for international religious freedom. The conference was historic and conclusive---making clear that the US will include achieving freedom of religion as a goal in making foreign policy decisions. This is something many of us have worked toward for decades. We are *very* grateful for this commitment and for the pro-active stance of this Administration on a wide range of international religious freedom issues.

This letter addresses Syria and time-critical US policy opportunities to support religious freedom in Syria and the region. *We respectfully urge you to make Syria policy a key post-Ministerial initiative with the proactive goal of securing religious freedom, and related civil and political rights, for all Syrian citizens.* Religious freedom in its fullest sense—equal rights for all regardless of faith or ethnicity—is the sole foundation for real democracy, peace, reconciliation, and stability in Syria. It is essential to attract millions of Syrian refugees to return home and stabilize minority populations, including Christians, who have called this area home for over 5,000 years. It can give some solace to those who suffered unspeakable atrocities, based on religious totalitarianism.

Our Syria policy needs to be clear-eyed and forceful to reach this goal, particularly in light of the many threats to democracy and religious freedom coming from Iran, Hezbollah, the remnants of Daesh and similar groups, the Assad regime, and unfortunately from Turkey, our supposed ally and NATO partner. Each is seeking territorial and ideological gains that are detrimental to US national security interests and those of our allies in the region.

The US and its Global Alliance Against Daesh allies are in a unique position to influence the long-term outcome in Syria because of our highly successful military partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): a multi-religious, multi-ethnic military force first formed to fend off attacks by Daesh, after the Assad regime abandoned the area militarily. With our backing, the SDF has liberated large swaths of Syrian territory and is now close to eradicating Daesh. The SDF currently controls almost one third of Syria territory and has a large standing army, capable of self-defense on the ground. This area contains 90% of Syrian oil reserves and approximately 60% of other key Syrian economic and natural resources (water and farmland). It is capable of becoming economically self-sufficient and even a trading partner of the US. In addition to its military success, the area is closely aligned with US interests in the region due to its commitment to a pluralistic model of self-governance.

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) oversees the civilian government for the area controlled by the SDF, recently named the Self Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (SA).<sup>1</sup> The initial governance document was the 2013 Social Contract adopted, following faith-based reconciliation, by the diverse citizenry of the Afrin, Kobani, and Hasakah regions: Kurds, Arab Muslims, Syriac Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans), Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens. The Social Contract is used throughout the SA and provides for a democratic, pluralistic, inclusive, and non-sectarian government system. It gives equal rights to all, including freedom to profess and practice a religion, regardless of faith, gender, or ethnicity. Principles contained in our own Constitution, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are found in the Social Contract.

The SA is the only part of Syria where Christians, Kurds, Yazidis, and other minorities have full civil rights, freedom of religion (including the right to convert), and the right to use their own historic languages, including Aramaic, the language of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Women have equal rights and participate fully in leadership at all levels of government and the military—having the right to half of all government leadership posts. Minorities share leadership. The SA pluralistic system and the rule of law have operated during five brutal years of war. It has been extended to liberated areas. It is not perfect. Millennia of religious and ethnic divisions do not get resolved overnight. But, with support from the international community, it could become a governance model for the region.

The prevailing mindset is the antithesis of Daesh and Jihadi ideology. Defeating that ideology is a key goal of the Global Coalition. SDC and SA leaders are articulate spokesmen and women for extending the pluralistic model throughout Syria, to resolve conflict and restore peace to its multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups. Their justice system is unique. They have abolished the death penalty and work to rehabilitate criminals, including captured Syrian Daesh fighters, and convert them to a new way of thinking about the world. One was quoted as saying with wonder: the SA government model is “like a mother who loves all her children equally.” They have much to teach the world about combatting the Daesh ideology and want to be allied with the US and its allies over the long term.

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<sup>1</sup> It includes the regions of Afrin (now occupied by Turkey), Euphrates, Jazira, Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, and Deir al-Zor.

<sup>2</sup> The Syrian Constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of religion but makes Sharia law dominant. Minorities and converts experience profound restrictions. Areas governed by Turkey and its jihadi allies are subject to severe Islamic law.

Our presence in the SA is due to strategic military decisions and sizeable expenditures of money and lives. This has given us and our allies real and tangible power in Syria and the right to insist on an outcome acceptable to and supportive of our national security interests and the SA's legitimate aspirations. These facts are a war prize of eminent value, won with blood and tears, primarily shed by our SDF allies: brave men and women motivated by their desire to destroy combat the hateful ideology of Daesh. Our own military holds the SDF and its civilian counterparts in the highest regard. Americans and Europeans have joined in the SDF fight to support their vision of defeating Islamist extremism in Syria. Nonetheless, we have vacillated on whether our partners in war will be our partners in peace. We have not enabled SA representation in peace talks, failed to forcefully speak out in the face of threats to invade the SA from both Turkey and the Assad regime, and allowed Turkey to invade and terrorize Afrin. We are equivocating on promises made in January 2018 to provide diplomatic and humanitarian support for rebuilding areas devastated by war and the huge refugee populations that fled from other parts of Syria and even Iraq (the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar).

Our reluctance to press for SA representation in the peace talks was historically due to deference to Turkey, which opposes their presence. However, Turkey has clearly demonstrated its goals for Syria by its actions in Afrin: to establish a Sunni Muslim religious state and to eliminate the SDF and the SA governance model. In January 2018, under the pretext that a few thousand YPG self-defense forces in tiny Afrin posed an "existential threat" to the Turkish state, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unleashed "Operation Olive Branch." He acted in defiance of UN Security Council Resolution 2401, which called for a ceasefire in all of Syria.<sup>3</sup> Turkey used the firepower, aircraft, and tanks of NATO's second largest army (350,000 active and 525,000 reserve personnel), supported by a mercenary Syrian jihadi army of Daesh and al Nusra leftovers (63,000 strong according to Turkey). Afrin's few and lightly armed defenders received no support from the US or its allies, and they had no warplanes or anti-aircraft weapons. They fought valiantly for several months but were unable to hold out against Turkey's relentless air campaign and pulverizing of Afrin's cities and villages.

Turkey's ground troops came to Afrin armed with a special purpose *fatwa* authorizing them specifically to eliminate the apostate "multi-religious, multi-ethnic SDF," to kill (behead) Christians and Yazidis, and seize their property and women. They looted homes and businesses, summarily executed all captured "terrorists," and raped and enslaved young women, trafficking them to other parts of rebel-held Syria. Historic Yazidi villages were emptied, ancient temples and historic sites were destroyed (including what is reported to be the oldest Christian church in the world). Olive groves (a key part of Afrin's agrarian economy) have been burned on an industrial scale or seized by the invaders. Door to door searches for Christians and Yazidis were conducted. They were to be killed on the spot if found, based on a pernicious new doctrine that killing them would give the fighter certainty of admission to heaven, without the need to die during jihad. Christian churches, Yazidi temples, and Kurdish mosques were seized and converted to mosques preaching the same ideology rampant in Daesh controlled areas. Old people have been killed and even dismembered for refusing to convert to this version of Islam.

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<sup>3</sup> "Erdogan to UN Security Council: Damn Your Resolution in Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 28, 2018.

Turkey's troops have committed countless atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes that continue to this day. Afrin was once the most religiously free area in Syria, where Christian Kurdish converts had been told they could set up churches in every town and village. It had been untouched by the civil war. Women wore Western dress. The head of government was a woman. Today, in the streets of Afrin, Daesh flags are flown. Women wear burkas—if they dare to leave their homes. In essence, life in Afrin today is like life in Daesh territory.<sup>4</sup>

Most Afrin residents fled before the final Turkish onslaught—hundreds of thousands left in a three-day period, mainly on foot with only the clothes on their backs. They endured horrific conditions because Turkey would not allow humanitarian aid to reach them. They are not permitted to return. This is consistent with President Erdoğan's stated pre-invasion goal: cleansing the area of its current (Kurdish) residents and replacing them with Arab Muslims sympathetic to his goals for Syria—aka "Afrin's rightful owners."<sup>5</sup>

Turkey has imported defeated Islamist fighters and their families from Damascus suburbs and Southern Syria and from Turkish refugee camps into Afrin. Most of the remaining armed Syrian opposition forces (in Idlib, Afrin, and the rest of Northwestern Syria) are now effectively Turkish mercenaries—with the exception of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by al-Qaeda affiliates. Turkey controls the "official" Syrian opposition. Leaders of the High Negotiating Commission based in Istanbul came and gloated over looted and ethnically cleansed Yazidi villages in Afrin. President Erdoğan has made clear by his treatment of Afrin and other actions that *his* goal for Syria is to achieve what Daesh has failed to accomplish.

We must cease our silence (and in Turkish eyes weakness) in the face of the Turkish occupation of Afrin and its continued threats to invade Manbij and the rest of the SA, threatening even our own troops. The SDF cannot successfully defend the SA against Turkey or the Assad regime because it has no air force or anti-aircraft capabilities of its own. It must rely on continued US and Global Coalition air defenses and diplomatic guarantees to stop any invasion. Our silence when Turkey invaded Afrin was a real betrayal of our SDF allies. Our vacillation on support for the SA has prompted civilian panic over the last six months. Repeated threats of Turkish invasion have caused the leaders of the SA to even consider capitulation to control by the Assad regime because they fear Turkey's jihadis more than the regime.

A regime takeover of the SA would be a tragedy, giving Assad and his allies, Iran and Russia, the benefits of all of the US military efforts in Syria against Daesh—not to mention opening the door for Iran's long hoped for corridor to the Mediterranean and its setting up military bases threatening Israel. Indeed, SDF controlled territory is the only part of Syria without a significant Iranian presence as shown on the attached map.

Economizing by introducing forces and humanitarian support from Muslim majority, sectarian regional powers, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, in place of Global Coalition military and other support will undercut SA ambitions to retain religious freedom and democratic institutions. We need to maintain our troop presence and forcefully engage in post-war planning

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<sup>4</sup> "Fear grips Syria city seized from Kurds by Turkish-backed rebels," *Rudaw*, October 12, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey will deliver Afrin to its true owners, says Erdogan," *YeniSafak*, March 10, 2018.

to retain our power to impose a peace for all of Syria that is in our own best interests. We should cease to be ambiguous about the degree to which we will support SA defense, participation in peace talks, and reconstruction efforts.

It is most important that the US and its Global Coalition allies cement their gains in Northeastern Syria *now* because of the coming battles in Northwestern Syria, fluid alliances, and the inevitable struggle over post-war outcomes and territory. Assad may succeed in crushing the opposition forces in Idlib but face a restive population capable of ongoing uprisings. He may not be able to maintain control if Iran is no longer able to bankroll his war. On the other hand, a victory in Idlib will inevitably cause him to consider invading the SA with Russian and Iranian support. Parts of Syria under Turkish control could become a base for a new Daesh-like state threatening the region— undercutting the entire purpose of Global Coalition involvement in Syria. In all of these scenarios, a strong, independent, and democratic SA, with a committed Global Coalition presence and support, is our best hope for stabilizing Syria, Iraq, and the region and getting the benefit of our extensive investment in the war against Daesh in Syria and Iraq. We welcome Ambassador James Jeffrey's recent statements that the US intends to keep our troops in the SA and your recent comments that the SDC should participate in peace talks. But the White House should clarify that this is official US policy, not subject to change.

The SA is subject to Syria-wide sanctions administered by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC), depriving it of access to world financial markets and foreign investment. It has no friends along its borders and is wholly dependent on the US and its allies for humanitarian aid to cope with massive war damage and massive refugee populations from other parts of Syria and even the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar. Yet the SA has enormous untapped natural resources: oil, farmland, and water. Relief from Syria-wide sanctions and designation of the SA as a special economic zone would enable its residents to rebuild their economy and repay the US and its allies for their war costs through trade and economic opportunities. Most importantly, all of this will enable Syria's Northeast to maintain its pluralistic model and its provision of freedom of religion and equal rights to all its citizens. It will have a significant impact on moving post-war Syria into alignment with US national security interests. We should implement the plans announced in January 2018 to support the SA diplomatically and with funds and other help in recovery from the long battle against Daesh.

One of the most tangible achievements of the Ministerial was highlighting Turkey's unjust detention of American Pastor Andrew Brunson, resulting in his recent release and return home. The impact on Turkey of US sanctions related to Pastor Brunson has been substantial and attention getting. ***We respectfully urge the Administration to use this unique opportunity to force further concessions from the Turkish government that are in the best interests of the Global Coalition and our allies, the SDF.*** Sanctions should not be lifted until Turkey agrees to withdraw from Afrin, allowing its lawful residents to return, and agrees to stop threatening the SA and our military presence there. Turkey's denial of religious freedom and human rights to hundreds of thousands of its own citizens also merits ongoing sanctions. Once Turkey pulls out of Afrin, the US, the UN, and other international bodies should document Turkey's war crimes in Afrin and make appropriate recommendations.

In conclusion, we urge the Administration to embrace the following policies:

- (1) Declare that our partners in war (the Syrian Democratic Forces and their civilian

counterparts) will be our partners in peace.

(2) Require that our partners have a seat at the table in Syrian peace talks that recognize both their military achievements (securing 1/3 of Syrian territory) and their political ideas (inclusive self-governance and equal rights for all, regardless of religion or ethnicity).

(3) Announce that the U.S. military will not withdraw from the SA until a comprehensive peace plan for Syria is achieved and there is no further risk of Turkish or Assad regime invasion.

(4) Insist that Turkey withdraw from Afrin and that its lawful residents be safely repatriated with appropriate compensation from Turkey for the many wrongs committed against them.

(5) Reassure the SA that the US will support its future efforts to rebuild its infrastructure and economy, including lifting OFAC sanctions as to this part of Syria and making it a special economic zone.

The SA is a small area in the greater scheme of things, but it is the place where Daesh was brought to its knees. It offers more than a fair chance of being the place where the antidote to Daesh (religious freedom and democracy) takes root in Syria and the Middle East.

Respectfully,

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BETHNAHRIN WOMEN UNION

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SET MY PEOPLE FREE  
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SHAI FUND  
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SYRIAC NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYRIA  
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THE SACERDOTAL CAODAI COUNCIL  
Hanh Thai-Tang

THE WAY TO HAPPINESS FLORIDA USA  
Kelly Yaegermann, President

UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA  
Meto Koloski

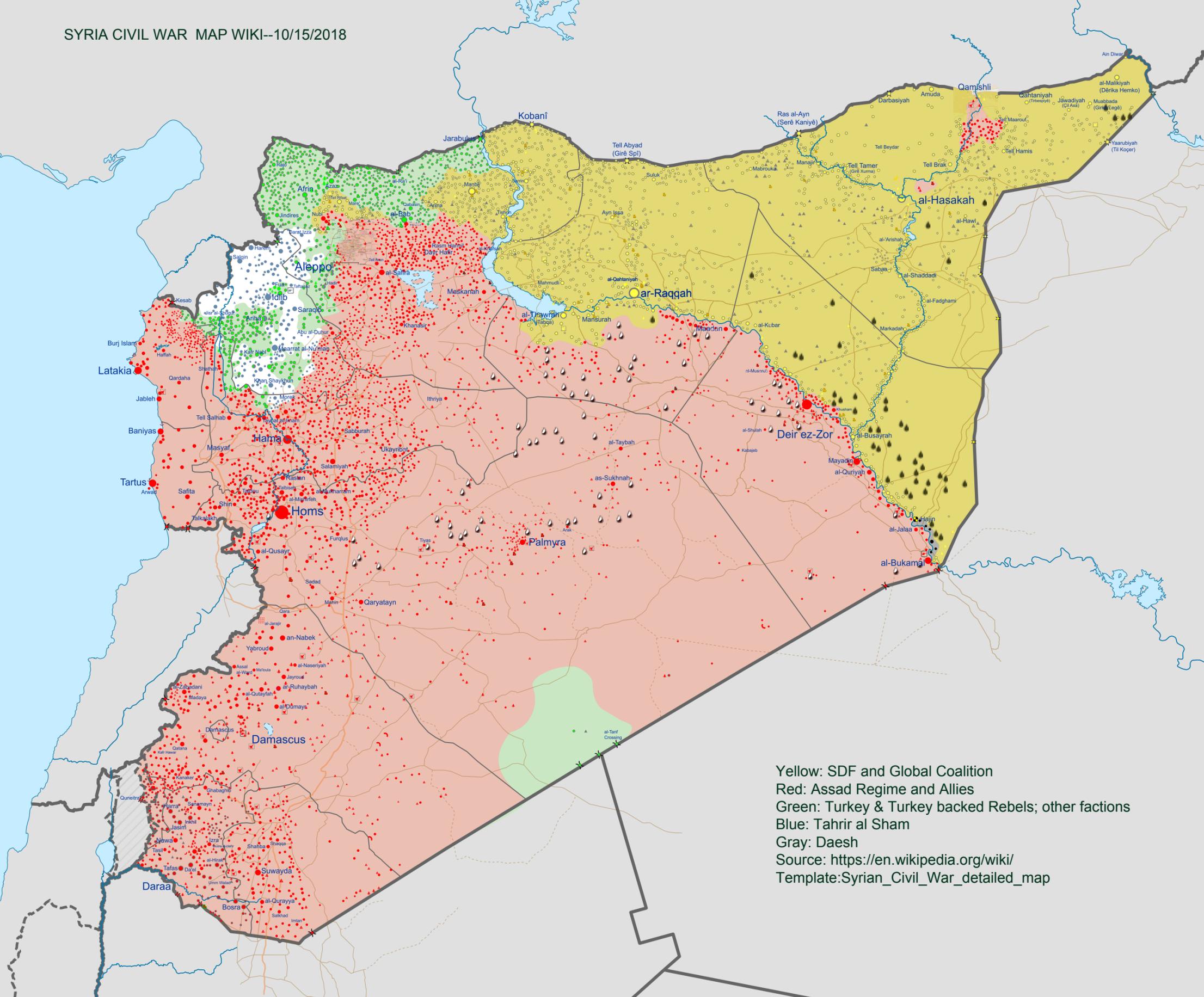
UNIVERSAL SYRIAC UNION PARTY LEBANON

VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP  
Rev. Cong Chinh Nguyen, Chairman

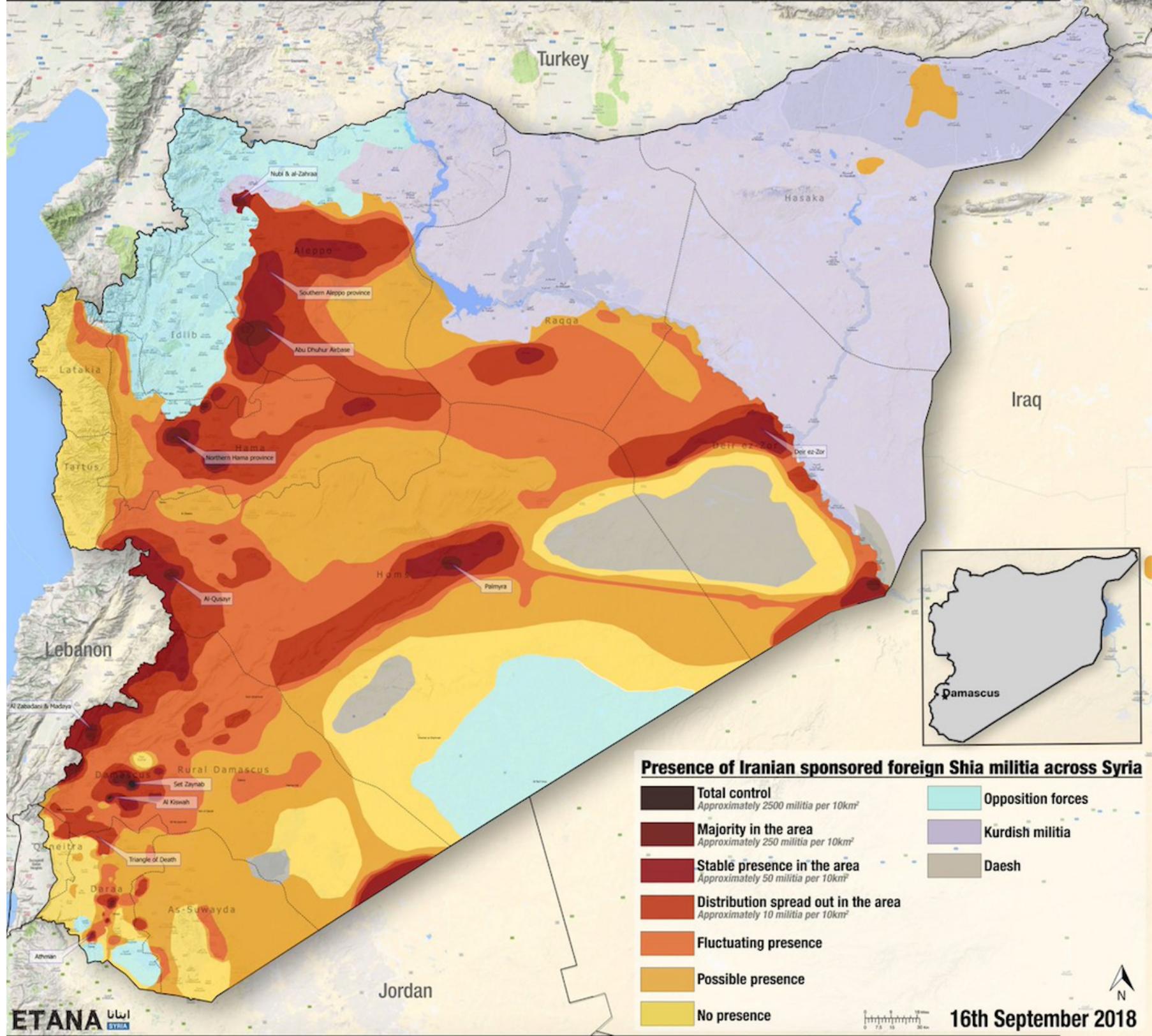
INDIVIDUAL SIGNATURES

Hammad Ahmad  
Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

Katherine A. Capps, M.A., J.M.  
Waterbrooks Institute



Yellow: SDF and Global Coalition  
Red: Assad Regime and Allies  
Green: Turkey & Turkey backed Rebels; other factions  
Blue: Tahrir al Sham  
Gray: Daesh  
Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>  
Template:Syrian\_Civil\_War\_detailed\_map



**Presence of Iranian sponsored foreign Shia militia across Syria**

