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Report III. 15 February 2016 Update: Kurdistan: Confronting ISIS. Why Political Solutions are necessary to defeat ISIS



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Recommendations

General recommendations

The KLA asks the Australian government and the international community to consider the following recommendations.

1. Support Kurdish representation at all political, military and humanitarian negotiations impacting the future of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, given the geopolitical importance of the Kurdish regions, the sacrifices being made by Kurdish forces in fighting ISIS and the need to develop consistent policies regarding the Kurdistan regions.
2. Consider something like a Marshal Plan linked to political milestones in Syria and Iraq, given the damage to infrastructure and services, the UN estimating that it will cost US\$300+ BILLION to rebuild Syria.
3. Consider ways to facilitate small business development in Syria and Iraq.
4. Provide long term support for citizen-endorsed political transformations such as democratic federal systems of government in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Kurdistan.
5. Develop objective criteria to clearly distinguish between a terrorist organization and an armed political movement with legitimate grievances and democratic aspirations.

Iraq

For Iraq, we ask the Australian government and the international community to:

- Facilitate the Baghdad government to enact articles in the constitution related to federalism and the separation of powers;
- Post-ISIS, extend UN support beyond the 90 day Stabilisation Control Cells;
- Ensure Iraqi Security Forces represent the different ethnicities in Iraq;
- Ensure Peshmerga and Sunni Arab forces answer to an elected government and directly receive weapons, clothes, medical attention and salaries in their fight against ISIS; and
- Ensure co-ordinated humanitarian aid, reconstruction and the return of refugees and IDPs to their homeland.

For the Kurdistan Region of Iraq we ask the international community to:

- Provide financial and other resources linked to political, military, economic and business reforms;
- Support the resolution of disputes between:
 - The government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG);



- Ankara and the KRG (over border closures, Turkish troops and Turkish air strikes);
- Kurdish political parties within the Kurdistan parliament to finalise the constitution; and
- The KRG, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its Peoples Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) to ensure post-ISIS reconciliation and reconstruction;
- Support the Kurdistan Region to adopt a federal system, if this helps solve disputes over territory, and is the will of the people.

Syria

For Syria, we call on the international community to:

- Pressure the Assad regime and Russia to stop airstrikes and sieges and allow humanitarian aid into areas where the majority of Opposition groups agree to a ceasefire, before restarting negotiations;
- Broaden the criteria for an Opposition group to participate in negotiations to include a willingness to (1) negotiate; (2) implement a ceasefire; (3) establish a local multi-ethnic multi-religious administration that employs democratic mechanisms; and (4) defend the area from attack and infiltration by ISIS, al-Nusra and other groups unwilling to comply with 1.- 3.; and
- Recognise and support an autonomous region in Rojava within a federal system of government in Syria.

Turkey

We call on the international community to urgently consider various strategies to help Turkey to:

- Stop the collective punishment of Kurdish civilians by ending curfews and sieges of Kurdish towns and suburbs;
- Engage in a multilateral ceasefire with Kurdish militants;
- Embark on a political roadmap with measurable steps and democratic outcomes, overseen by independent monitors. Included in the roadmap would be conditions for delisting the PKK as a terrorist organization, and the decentralization of power;
- Stop the state's persecution of political and community leaders, local and foreign journalists, academics and others by supporting freedom of expression, fair and thorough policing and criminal investigations, and an independent judiciary;
- Comply with articles related to the use of minority languages in the Treaty of Lausanne by removing all bans and restrictions on the use of Kurdish and other minority languages, including their use in state education;



- Allow lawyers and family to visit Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned leader of PKK, who has been held in complete isolation since April 2015, and set a timeline for his release from prison;
- Reconcile with the PYD and the existence of an autonomous region of Rojava in Syria, given that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has proved highly beneficial to Turkey's interests; PYD has repeatedly offered to engage with Turkey; and Turkey and Kurds are meant to be fighting a common enemy (ISIS);
- Stop blockading humanitarian supplies and building materials into Rojava;
- Stop attacking Latakia, Aleppo and Rojava from Turkish soil;
- Prevent Turkey deploying troops into Syria;
- Prevent Turkey supplying Salafi militias in Syria;
- Withdraw Turkish troops from Iraqi soil, unless Baghdad, Erbil and Ankara come to an agreement; and
- Cease violating the airspace of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and conducting airstrikes that are killing people and destroying villages and farm land.

Iran

Now that Iran's assets have been released and sanctions lifted, the international community needs to persuade the Iranian government to:

- Improve human rights by respecting freedom of expression, an independent judiciary and fair trials;
- Allow the use of the Kurdish language for all purposes, including in education;
- Have provincial governors elected;
- Ensure a decentralisation of power; and
- Cease using the death penalty, especially for crimes that are 'unknown' or drug related.



Introduction

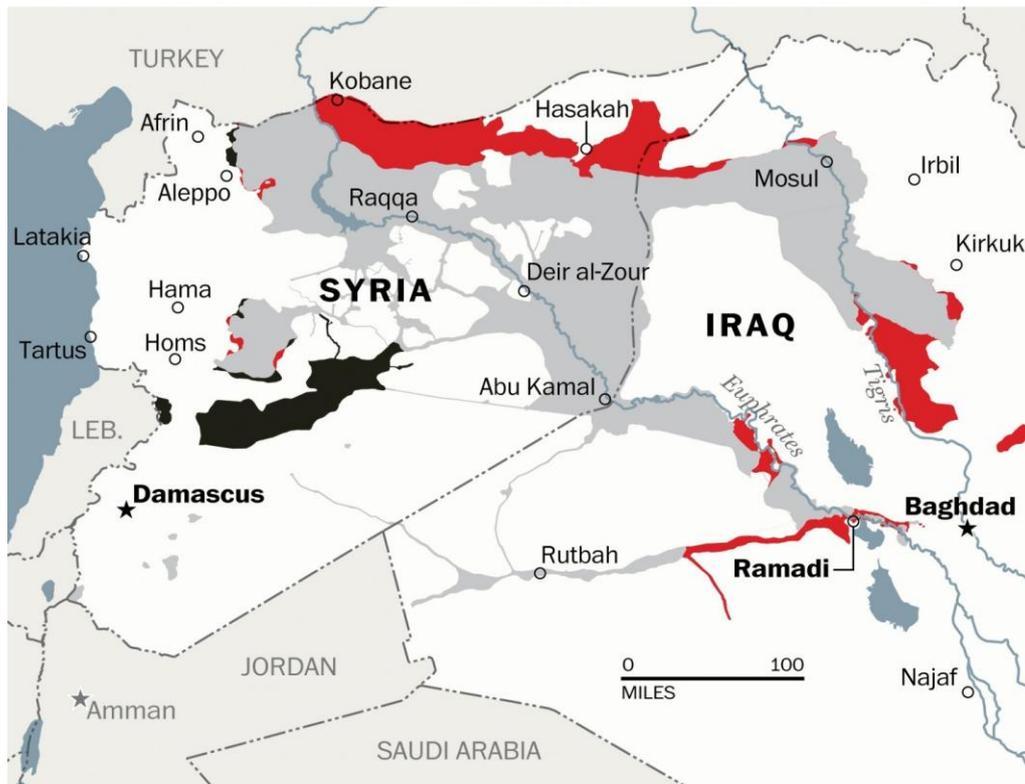
Between June 2014 and December 2015 ISIS survived 8,000 US-led coalition air strikes and multiple ground offensives in Iraq and Syria, despite sometimes being outnumbered 20:1. Contributing to their survival were the divisions within the air and ground forces fighting them, their ability to embed themselves in local marginalised communities, their flexible military tactics, which increasingly involve withdrawal and subsequent attacks; and their recruiting power. Between June 2014 and December 2015 the number of foreign ISIS fighters doubled, reaching between 27,000 and 31,000 mercenaries from 86 countries: 16,000 from North Africa and the Middle East, the largest numbers being from Tunisia (6,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Turkey (2,100) and Jordan (2,000)¹. But most recruits are local volunteers or conscripts¹. As of December 2015, ISIS maintained control over one third of Syria and 17% of Iraq, and has increased its activity in Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan, co-opting other groups in West Africa, North Africa and South East Asia. It has also conducted suicide attacks in Ankara, Beirut, Djakarta, Paris, Istanbul, Saudi Arabia and the Sinai, and has called for the overthrow of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Evidence suggests that ISIS continues to be a serious threat.

Even so, between August 2014 and December 2015, the US-led coalition killed 25,000 ISIS militants. ISIS is fighting on many fronts and in 2015, lost 5% of its Syrian territory and 40% of its territory in Iraq. It has had only one significant military success since June 2015, when on 16 January it attacked Deir ez-Zor, south east of Raqqa, taking control of 60% of the city, killing at least 50 Syrian government troops, executing 85 civilians and kidnapping several hundred civilians. Otherwise, in 2015, Kurdish forces retook Shingal and the Iraqi government claimed victory in Ramadi, ISIS is surrounded in Fallujah, Mosul and Raqqa; its revenue sources have been severely depleted, with air strikes destroying its oil fields, refineries and convoys and an ISIS store of cash in Mosul, and by people under ISIS control experiencing increasing shortages, impacting ISIS's largest revenue source: local taxes, rents and fines, and confiscation of assets, estimated to be six times the revenue from oil. Within the group, splinters are appearing, and its social contract with citizens in territory it controls suffers from corruption, brutal methods of control, enforced conscription, poor services, and the halving of ISIS salaries. This implosion means ISIS could be militarily defeated in 2016, if there is the will to do so.

¹ Only 400 Iraqi Kurds have joined ISIS.

The Islamic State in 2015

● Islamic State controlled (no change) ● Territory lost ● Territory gained



Source: IHS Jane's Conflict Monitor

THE WASHINGTON POST

To militarily defeat ISIS, Raqqa and Mosul need to be taken. These offensives require large ground forces that need to discriminate between ISIS sympathisers and ISIS victims. Afterwards, security forces will be required to maintain stability, prevent ISIS attacks and infiltration and enable the establishment of functional administrations to distribute humanitarian aid and oversee reconstruction.

Multiple experts have suggested how to proceed militarily.ⁱⁱ One suggestion is the need for a fully equipped and trained ground force of about 100,000. Others emphasise the need to arm Kurdish and Sunni Arab forces, train anti-bomb squads, and deploy coalition forward air traffic controllers and special forces for intelligence gathering and high value targets, and/or deploy highly skilled 5,000 member brigades to reinforce local ground forces. Closing the Syrian-Turkish border is essential while reviewing the rules of engagement designed to protect civilians is more controversial, and perhaps self-defeating.

US and EU consider a large foreign force would be counterproductive. Half of all Arab countries in the US-led coalition have conducted no airstrikes, Bahrain and Jordan having been inactive for months. After three ISIS attacks in Saudi Arabia in



2015, on 15 December, Saudi Arabia announced a new 'Islamic' coalition of 34 countries stretching from north Africa to Asia to combat terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan. Within a day of the announcement, Pakistan, Malaysia and Lebanon were among those that claimed they were not consulted before being listed, while Iran, Iraq and Syria were not invited to join the coalitionⁱⁱⁱ. This makes it a Sunni coalition not focused on ISIS alone. To date, this 'coalition' has been inactive.

A few commentators suggest the need to talk to ISIS leaders to understand their intentions. Many experts agree that ISIS is a multi-layered organisation that has capitalised on the marginalisation of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria with at least one third of ISIS leadership being Iraqi Baathists, including its three top leaders, among them, the ISIS 'caliph', Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who keeps a low profile, having only made two public announcements in 2015. These factors, along with ISIS strategies in grabbing territory and high value assets, would seem to indicate that the ISIS leadership is more politically motivated in creating a Sunni nation state, rather than religiously motivated. However, the ISIS leadership has learnt from 30 years of extremist Islamic militancy, and is exploiting 7th century military, legal and sexual practices and 21st century technology to attract recruits and manage territory.

In late 2015 an international push for a political solution for Syria - but not Iraq - gained momentum, with two UN meetings in November; the 17 December UN Security Council Resolution 2253 demanding those supporting, financing or trading with ISIS and other UN designated terrorist groups be held accountable; the 18 December UN Security Council endorsement of the 17-nation Syrian Support Group proceeding with the Vienna peace plan; and the 22 December UN Security Council demand for humanitarian corridors into government-besieged towns in Syria. To date, each effort has failed either because it did not address important details (e.g. which organisations are to be included in negotiations), or because there has been no follow up action (e.g. in holding known supporters of terrorism accountable), or because the declaration was overridden by on-the-ground realities (e.g. an intensification of regime offensives and Russian airstrikes). Likewise, the 11 February Syrian Support Group announcement of a ceasefire within a week is being undermined by no agreement on which groups are terrorists, Turkey and Saudi Arabia announcing they are prepared to send in ground troops in support of Salafi groups in Aleppo and Turkey intensifying its attacks on Rojava and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) around Azaz and the Menagh airbase, north of Aleppo, which they recently captured from ISIS.

Even if ISIS is militarily defeated, given the widespread destruction of essential services and infrastructure, the moral bankruptcy of the Syrian and Iraqi



governments, the generations lost to militancy and missing an education (2.1 million Syrian children are not going to school), unless something akin to a Marshal plan is linked to political transformations, other movements could well replace ISIS.

Iraq

According to the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq, between January 2014 and October 2015, war with ISIS has killed 18,800 Iraqi civilians, displaced 3.2 million and resulted in 3,500 women and children being taken captive. Countless others have died from a lack of water, food or medical care. Since November 2015, the Baghdad government faces escalating economic and political challenges, having failed to implement reforms. ISIS suicide attacks and hostage-taking in Baghdad and Diyala province continue, criminality is rampant, Russia has increased its influence, the Iraq government has announced victory in Ramadi and more Turkish troops have been deployed into northern Iraq.

In the absence of reform

The much-needed reforms to reduce corruption, public expenditure and sectarianism announced in August 2015, have not proceeded. Sectarianism is entrenched and the government fails to act on critical issues. Protests are ongoing in 10 provinces. Instead, the government introduces discriminatory legislation, as reflected in a new National Identity Card system, and fails to address an increasing lawless environment. It continues to refuse Basra's application to become an autonomous region and has not resolved disputes with Sunni Arabs, or address a Sunni Arab call for autonomy. It has done little to resolve disputes with the KRG and has not embarked on any major reconstruction effort so civilians can return home.

Instead of recruiting Sunni Arabs into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), in January 2016 the Baghdad government announced it would allow up to 40,000 Sunni Arabs to join the Shia Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). However, in September 2015, US Special Forces began training a Sunni Tribal Mobilisation Force, numbering up to 10,000. Baghdad has yet to commit to supplying Peshmerga salaries, weapons, equipment and medicines despite wishing them to join an offensive on Mosul.

Baghdad's refusal to recruit, pay or adequately arm Kurdish and Sunni Arab fighters is based on a fear of a post-ISIS power struggle. After the ISF withdrew from northern Iraq in June 2014, Peshmerga liberated and/or defended the disputed territories in Kirkuk, Nineveh and Diyala provinces, the KRG becoming responsible for maintaining their administrations and services. Kurdish President, Massoud Barzani, and other KRG officials claim these territories will remain under the jurisdiction of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Baghdad and Commanders of



the Shia PMUs disagree. Forerunners of potential conflict, involving clashes, deaths and/or abductions, as well as the destruction of property have occurred in Baghdad, where Shia militants threatened Kurdish families with death if they did not leave within 30 days, and in Diyala province, where clashes have occurred between Shia and Sunni Arabs. In the multi-ethnic city of Tuz Khormato in Salahaddin province clashes have occurred between Sunni Arabs and Shia Turkmen (Hashid al-Shaabi) and between Shia Turkmen and Kurdish Peshmerga, although in late January Hashid al-Shaabi leaders announced they would fight alongside Peshmerga to push ISIS out of the province of Kirkuk.

As well as religious and ethnic divisions, there are divisions within the Sunni Arab community (between those who oppose and those who support ISIS; and between those who want an autonomous region as opposed to provincial self rule) and in the Shia community (between those who are tied with Iran and those who are not, and between those who want regional autonomy and those who do not). To prevent future sectarian conflict, urgent mediation is required to create a functioning federation in Iraq.

Russian and Iranian influence

After Russia established a joint intelligence and co-ordination centre in Baghdad at the end of September 2015, the first 100 of 300 promised tanks from Russia arrived in Umm Qasr on 17 December. Until 28 December, Baghdad refused US offers of Apache helicopters and US Special Forces to help fight ISIS in Anbar province. On 15 January 200 US Special Forces arrived in Iraq, mainly to training ISF and Sunni Arab forces in up to 12 training facilities, but in early January the Baghdad government repeated its claim that no foreign ground troops must step outside these bases. Iranian-influenced Shia militias have grown in power and the international community is failing to address the increasing military and political influence of Iran.

Ramadi victory

The offensive on Ramadi was seven months in coming, partly because Anbar's Sunni tribes opposed the use of Shia PMUs, after the looting, destruction, abductions and killings in Tikrit and Baiji. By late November, 10,000 ISF closed in on Ramadi. Some had recently been trained in conventional warfare in addition to counter-insurgency tactics. ISIS snipers, suicide bombers and IEDs slowed their advance. On 20 December, the Iraqi government dropped leaflets from the air, giving Ramadi residents 72 hours to evacuate the city. On the 22 December ISF entered the city, Kurdish soldiers among them². Independent of the ISF, Sunni Tribal Mobilisation

² Kurds make up 1% of Iraqi Security Forces, down from 20% prior to June 2014, when many left to join the Peshmerga after the ISF deserted Mosul and the disputed territories.



Forces, loyal to the new Anbar governor, Suhaib al-Rawi, and some Shia PMUs participated in the offensive.

Ramadi had a pre-ISIS population of about 450,000, which by December 2015 had been reduced to between 10,000 and 75,000 civilians held hostage by an estimated 400 to 600 ISIS militants. Six days of coalition air strikes reduced many suburbs to rubble, before the ISF moved in, clearing paths of IEDs. On 28 December, Baghdad announced that Ramadi had been liberated. On 31 December, US authorities announced up to 700 ISIS³ continued to resist inside Ramadi, and a week later, one report claimed that ISIS remained in control of one third of the city. In and outside the city, ISIS attacks continue to kill Iraqi soldiers, (80 in the last week of January), indicating Anbar will take some time to secure.

The Mosul offensive

After Anbar is secured, the ISF will likely focus on Mosul, a city with a pre-ISIS population of up to 2 million, since reduced to between 600,000 and 1 million. Al Qaida of Iraq, the forerunner of ISIS before they split in 2013, and ISIS operated in Mosul for years before ISIS took control of the city in June 2014, causing 70,000 Iraqi troops to withdraw over night. Between 5,000 and 10,000 ISIS currently operate inside Mosul, with more arriving from Anbar⁴.

While people in Mosul have resisted ISIS's brutal rule⁵, surveys conducted in January 2014 and June 2015, found distrust of the Iraqi Government, ISF and Sunni politicians had increased, leading to 55% of those surveyed maintaining life is better under ISIS, 40% wanting ISIS to remain in control because there was no valid alternative, and 60% believing that the US was in collusion with ISIS^{iv}.

US-coalition airstrikes are bombing ISIS in and around Mosul. However, to retake Mosul will entail at least 10 brigades or 30,000 highly trained fighters. It is proposed they will consist of ISF, Sunni Arab units and two Peshmerga brigades, supported by US Special Forces. The Sunnis of Nineveh do not want Shia PMUs to take part in the offensive. In addition, Mosul Dam will need to be protected, and for this, in December Italy announced it would send 450 troops. Sections are already collapsing from poor maintenance.

³ The inconsistency of statistics could be linked to the difficulty in distinguishing ISIS militants from ISIS sympathisers.

⁴ It is estimated that between 19,000 and 30,000 ISIS militants are in Iraq.

⁵ A Nineveh Police report claims that between June 2014 and December 2015, in Mosul, 837 female political representatives and government workers were executed by ISIS for being disloyal, spies or for un-Islamic in their behaviour.



Turkish troops around Mosul

Another significant development occurred on 3 January, with the reported arrival in Bashiqa (17 kilometres north of Mosul city, and 90 kilometres from the Turkish border) of between 150 and 1000 Turkish troops, 25 tanks and many armoured vehicles to reinforce Turkish Special Forces training Sunni Arab militants (Hashd al-Watani) and Peshmerga. It was reported that reinforcements brought the total number of uniformed Turkish personnel in northern Iraq to about 3,000 (compared to US 3,700, and about 2,000 from other members of the US-led coalition, with Iran having 'over 1000'). Unconfirmed on-the-ground reports suggest that Turkey's deployment was far larger, involving up to 1000 tanks and 10,000 troops, which explains Baghdad and Russia's strong response.

Prime Minister al-Abadi demanded that Turkish reinforcements withdraw within 48 hours and asked NATO to apply pressure on Turkey to withdraw all Turkish troops from northern Iraq. Shia PMUs threatened to attack the Turkish troops if they remained. Iraq's supreme religious leader, Al Sistani, requested that no foreign power infringe on Iraq's sovereignty, and US authorities claimed the deployment was not within the activities of the anti-ISIS coalition.

Turkey's political leaders refused to withdraw reinforcements but promised not to send more. On 7 December Russia asked for a closed-door UN Security Council meeting to discuss a response to Turkey's military actions in Syria and Iraq, but the UN declined to issue a statement. On 8 December, the President of Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, denied the KRG had invited the Turkish troops and said the KRG would remain neutral in the dispute between Turkey and Baghdad.

After bilateral talks failed, on 11 December, Iraq again requested the UN Security Council apply pressure on Turkey to withdraw its troops. Throughout Iraq there were protests against the troop presence, and on 14 December, an unknown number withdrew into Kurdistan. On 18 December, US President Obama urged Turkey to withdraw all troops. On 20 December, Turkish authorities insisted that Turkish troops would remain until Mosul was liberated. On 2 January 2016, Baghdad announced that Turkey was continuing to deploy more troops to Bashiqa.

Iraqis of all persuasions question Turkey's intentions, which potentially include:

- Maintaining a strategic position to attack PKK in Turkey and Iraq;
- Preventing PKK, PYD and YPG/YPJ from increasing their influence in northern Syria and Iraq;



- Preventing links and co-operation between Kurdish military forces and between Kurdish political entities;
- Protecting Turkmen interests;
- Preventing Shia militia from playing a role in the Mosul offensive by shaping a Peshmerga-Sunni Arab alliance;
- Creating a buffer zone and providing a counterweight to the growing political influence of Iran by laying the groundwork to become a key stakeholder in Mosul's post-ISIS future, whether Nineveh becomes an autonomous region, or, if Iraq is partitioned, if Mosul becomes part of a Sunni Arab state or if Mosul becomes part of a Sunni Arab-Kurdish state that incorporates the Kurdish and Sunni Arab provinces, which would weaken the power of the Kurds;
- Ensuring that the Kurdistan Region continues to export oil and, in 2016, gas to Turkey, given Russia has stopped supplying gas to Turkey.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Since January 2014 the Kurdistan Region has suffered multiple crises that are likely to escalate to critical proportions in 2016. These crises are (1) the war with ISIS (2) a financial crisis (3) a 35% increase in the population and (4) an internal political crisis.

War with ISIS

By December 2015, the war with ISIS had caused the death of 1,288 Peshmerga, another 62 missing in action and 7,840 being wounded. Peshmerga forces number about 160,000, although only 40,000 are unified within the Ministry of Peshmerga. Others are aligned with two political parties (the KDP and PUK). Most have not received salaries for five to seven months and are under-equipped, yet successfully defend a 1600 kilometre frontline from Shingal to Diyala, which comes under constant attack, partly because air strikes target ISIS on the frontline but not their fortified bases in local villages. Peshmerga and other Kurdish forces retook Shingal in November, and on 16-17 December, with help from 69 Canadian Special Forces and coalition air strikes, Peshmerga foiled multiple attacks by 500 ISIS in Nineveh province, including an ISIS attack on the controversial Turkish training base in Bashiqa. Meanwhile, the Peshmerga have been advancing from the east and north of Mosul, foiling regular ISIS attacks west of Shingal and south of Kirkuk, and have fortified the city of Kirkuk with trenches. In early 2016, they have embarked on another offensive, in co-ordination with Turkmen and Arab tribes, to push ISIS out of Kirkuk province.



Knowing Peshmerga remain undersupplied, and in view of the Mosul offensive, US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter and Chief of Staff General Joseph Dunford have advocated that the US bypass Baghdad if Baghdad continues to be sectarian in supplying weapons, equipment, medicines and salaries. On 2 December, US heavy weapons and armoured vehicles arrived in Kuwait, awaiting delivery to Peshmerga, and on 10 December, the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee passed a measure calling for the US to directly supply arms, training and medicines to Peshmerga, to which the Baghdad government objected. While the Kuwait supplies await delivery, Germany announced in December that it will ship 4,000 G-36 assault rifles, 200 Milan anti-tank missiles and five armoured personnel carriers directly to Peshmerga forces. For the first time, Russia also supplied light weapons to Peshmerga via Baghdad.

An Amnesty international report in January 2016 concluded Peshmerga were responsible for destroying Sunni Arab villages around Jawala, Sinjar (Shingal) and Makhmur and were preventing Sunni Arabs returning home. The report was naive in its understanding of the war, lacked impartial evidence and provided no eye witness accounts to support its conclusions. For instance, the report admitted that IS, Shia PMUs and Peshmerga operated around Jalawla. The Arabs that testified it was Peshmerga who destroyed their villages had not witnessed Peshmerga doing so. Around Shingal, the report alleged PKK, YPG and Yezidi militia destroyed Arab homes under the watch of Peshmerga. No Peshmerga or Peshmerga commander was interviewed for the report, and local Arab tribal leaders, as well as a Ministry of Peshmerga refuted its findings. It is the second Amnesty International report critical of Kurdish forces, the first focused on northern Syria, which has been refuted by Sunni Arab and Kurdish leaders.

Financial crisis

The KRG continues to suffer a severe financial crisis. Baghdad has not paid the KRG its allocated revenue since January 2014. Nor has Baghdad paid the disputed territories such as Kirkuk, leaving the KRG responsible for services and administrations. Kirkuk has not received its allocated revenue from Baghdad for 2.5 years, despite Kirkuk producing about 400,000 barrels of oil a day from five oil fields operated by Iraq's Ministry of Oil and two fields operated by the KRG's Ministry of Natural Resources.

Although the KRG exported oil independently of Baghdad until December 2014 and has been doing so since June 2015, and has increased its oil exports to 700,000 barrels a day by the end of 2015, the oil is being sold at a discounted rate of US\$20 a barrel; the pipeline into Turkey is intermittently sabotaged, revenue held in Turkish



banks is not being transferred and some oil companies have taken the KRG to court for non-payment of dues⁵. As a result, the KRG claims it has a monthly shortfall of US\$406 million, especially as it spends US\$300 million a month on Peshmerga, the cost of feeding them being US\$200,000 a day. Winter clothing was recently distributed to 50% of the force. In mid-December Kurdistan's Council of Ministers announced it had to cancel the formation of three new brigades within the Ministry of Peshmerga, that were to be trained and equipped by the US, because the KRG could not afford their salaries. In January, the US refused KRG's plea to pay Peshmerga salaries, saying it was the responsibility of the Baghdad government⁶. On 26 January, hundreds of Peshmerga protested in Kirkuk, saying they cannot continue fighting without a salary.

The financial crisis has led to all government workers not receiving salaries for four or five months. In an effort to reduce expenditure, the KRG announced that all government workers' salaries will be reduced by up to 70%. On 30 January, 50,000 protested in Sulaimani over teachers not being paid, and in February police went on strike over non-payment of salaries. Unemployment is at least 25%, leading to 30,000 mostly young people leaving for Europe. Many families are being evicted for non-payment of rent or are going without food. Civilians receive 14 hours electricity a day. One way of overcoming these circumstances would be to encourage the private sector with small business loans.

KRG – Turkey relations

The KRG has good relations with Turkey. Oil is piped through Turkey to Ceyhan, food is imported from Turkey and there are many Turkish construction companies operating in Kurdistan. Yet Turkey is bombing PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, deploying troops and tanks into Mosul and Dohuk, and closes the border with Kurdistan for days or weeks at a time. Since January, it has only allowed 20% of the usual border traffic to cross the border either way. In addition, Kurdistan's international airports are being intermittently closed due to Russian fighter jets and cruise missiles flying over Kurdistan's airspace into Syria. Foreign investment has dried up, and local business revenue is down.

Increase in IDPs and refugees

Kurdistan has a 35% increase in the population due to the influx of two million IDPs and Syrian refugees, with thousands more arriving from Ramadi and Mosul each day. The disputed territories are also experiencing a huge influx of IDPs.

⁶ The US has contributed US\$1.6 billion of the US\$2.3 billion for the Iraqi Train and Equip Fund, which has enabled the training of 20,000 fighters, including Sunni Arabs and Peshmerga.



At least 27 international NGOs are operating in Kurdistan and the disputed territories. The UN and NGOs have built camps; the International Red Cross has provided relief parcels to 210,000 people and tents and other basics to 60,000 people. Oil companies such as Gulf Keystone, Genel Energy, Taqa, Chevron, Hess, Marathon, Oil Search and Western Zagros have pledged US\$15 million, while Kuwait has contributed US\$200 million for food, housing and medical assistance. The US has spent US\$600 million in aid for refugees and IDPs in the whole of Iraq. Australia has announced it will commit AUD\$44 million in humanitarian assistance to Syria and Iraq, to be channelled through UN and other international humanitarian agencies. Some local companies are funding and implementing relief projects, but it is not enough.

Nor is there any plan for the ultimate return of IDPs. An estimated US\$100 million is needed to provide basic services in Shingal before 200,000 civilians can return home. The costs of reconstruction in the disputed areas of Ninveveh, Kirkuk and Diyala will be huge, and again, are likely to be the KRG's responsibility.

Internal political problems

These multiple crises would impact the functioning of any government. In Kurdistan these crises have led to internal political disputes over the election and powers of a president, and the sacking of the parliamentary speaker and four ministers from the Goran Movement. The introduction of parliamentary reforms, including the slashing of administrative expenditure by up to 70% and a proposal to privatise electricity are controversial. In January, the US rejected the KRG's request for a financial bail out, but offered US advisors to help the KRG organise its financial affairs.

Syria

The Syrian Centre for Policy Research claims Syria's five-year war has killed 470,000 people (400,000 by violence and 70,000 from a lack of food and medicines). Another 1.9 million civilians have been injured, while 600,000 civilians are trapped in 16 areas besieged by the government, with another three areas besieged by ISIS and Opposition groups. Forty-five percent of the population have been displaced, and humanitarian aid has only reached 16,000 people because the Syrian government has blocked 77% of UN aid offers.

During 2015, the Assad regime lost 16% of its territory. The regime controlled only 30,000 square kilometres, less than half the territory controlled by ISIS and less than one sixth of Syria^{vi}, and was on the brink of collapse. Then Russia intervened. Now superseding its three to four month projected time frame, Russian intervention has increased tensions with Turkey and helped the regime gain territory in the provinces



of Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, Hamas and Deraa, effectively cutting humanitarian aid and Opposition supply routes. An escalation of Regime offensives backed by Russian airstrikes in Aleppo caused the 1-3 February Geneva negotiations to collapse. Yet a military victory is unlikely for any side, especially with Turkey and Saudi threatening to send in troops and President Assad saying the war will not stop until the regime takes back all Syrian territory. How much leverage Russia has over the Assad regime remains unclear.

In contrast to the civil war, the war with ISIS has seen some progress. The YPG/YPJ and SDF⁷ have succeeded in pushing ISIS out of territory in the provinces of Aleppo, Hasaka and Raqqa, with air support from both the US-led coalition and Russia. Air strikes have also targeted ISIS revenue sources, militants and leaders.

On the political front there were three conferences for Syrian Opposition groups in preparation for negotiations with the Assad regime, due to start on 25 January. But Turkey continues to attack YPG/YPJ and SDF, and has a border embargo on Rojava. It is also preventing refugees from entering Turkey, although granting Syrian refugees inside Turkey the right to work. But what may be a game changer in Syria's civil war, the war with ISIS and political negotiations, is the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey.

Turkey's downing of a Russian plane

On 24 November, nine days before Turkey deployed troops to Iraq, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24, which was conducting air strikes in the region between Azaz and Jarablus, and targeting Turkey-supported Turkmen, Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham forces. On Syrian soil, Turkmen killed one of the two Russian pilots that had ejected from the plane and also shot down a Russian rescue helicopter and killed its pilot.

Two days after the incident, Russia deployed S-400 air defence missiles at the Hmeymim airbase in Aleppo, announced sanctions on Turkey⁸ and claimed it had

⁷ At the time of its formation in October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces comprised seven militant groups: 25,000 Kurdish PYG/PYJ and 5000 Arab militants from the Euphrates Volano (a joint Kurdish-Arab force), Sanadid (Arab) Forces, the (Arab) Al Jazira Brigades, the (Arab) Jaysh al-Thuwar, which includes US-backed FSA groups, the Syriac (Assyrian Christian) Military Council, and the Seljuk (Turkmen) Brigade. More groups have joined, bringing the force to an estimated 40,000 militants under a seven-member command structure.

⁸ Russia imposed an import ban on Turkish foodstuffs valued at US\$1 billion, a ban on all charter flights between Russia and Turkey, restrictions on Turkish transport and construction companies operating in Russia; the cessation of visa free access for Turks into Russia, and the cessation of talks on constructing a new gas pipeline and Turkey's first nuclear power station.



evidence that President Erdogan and his family were profiting from an oil and weapons trade with ISIS. Russia intensified airstrikes on Turkmen, Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham operating around Azaz and Afrin, and in late November, supported SDF in fighting these forces, one aim being to lift the siege of Afrin, which has been in place since November. The siege prompted a call from President Massoud Barzani for Afrin to receive international humanitarian aid.

Turkey targets Syrian Kurdish forces and civilians

Since 26 October, Turkish security forces inside Turkey have been attacking YPG/YPJ and the SDF. In November alone, the YPG reported 13 attacks on YPG/YPJ. Turkey is also blocking aid, fuel, medicines, food and building materials destined for Kobani and other areas in Rojava, and Turkish snipers have shot and killed civilians trying to cross into Turkey, including a young boy and girl.

On 10 December, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, asked why was Turkey attacking Kurds in Syria, which are a US ally in the war against ISIS? Lavrov reminded the international community that Russia and the UN do not classify PKK as a terrorist organisation and announced Russia is willing to arm the YPG/YPJ and SDF via the Assad Regime. Lavrov also suggested that Kurds and their allies, backed by US air strikes, could seal the border, given that Turkey's huge armed forces have failed to do so.

ISIS – Kurdish fronts

Since November, ISIS has also been attacking YPG/YPJ and the SDF, and in January heavily shelled Kobani from Jarablus. Back on 23 December, supported by US-led coalition airstrikes, the SDF began a major offensive along the eastern side of the Euphrates River, south of Jarablus. It took three days for the SDF to clear 100 villages and capture the hydro-electric dam near Tishrin, cutting off a major ISIS route across the Euphrates, before moving to the western side of the river. In doing so, they crossed Turkey's 'red line'.

On 27 December the SDF entered Tishrin (115 kilometres east of Aleppo, 70 kilometres south-west of Kobani and 105 kilometres west of Raqqa). Within a day the SDF had cleared the town, killing 219 ISIS militants, while 'thousands' more, accompanied by their families, evacuated towards Raqqa. The dam's management was handed over to the Kobani Energy Council. On 1 January, in an effort to break the siege on Afrin, the SDF took villages south of Azaz from Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, although the siege continues, with Al Nusra regularly shelling Afrin. Back in December, US-led coalition airstrikes pounded Manbij, 40 kilometres south of Jarablus, and on 6 January SDF began a campaign against ISIS in Manbij.



Turkey sent trucks of weapons to Azaz for Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, which include Turkish Islamists, Syrian Turkmen and Turkish ultranationalists (the Grey Wolves). It was reported that Turkish Special Forces are also operating in Azaz. On 6 January, Turkey warned US General Joseph Dunford that it was unacceptable for the SDF to remain on the western side of the Euphrates and that a Kurdish-dominated autonomous region jeopardises the territorial integrity of Syria. On 20 January unconfirmed reports suggested that Turkish troops had moved into Jarablus, with no hindrance from ISIS, and Turkey shelled the wheat siloes of Gire Spi (Tel Abyad), which YPG/YPJ had freed from ISIS in mid-2015. After US Vice President Biden's visit to Turkey, on 26 January, YPG/YPJ and SDF began an offensive on Jarablus, and successfully took the Menagh airbase. In early February Turkey began firing on this airbase, Erdogan announcing that the US must choose between Turkey and Rojava. If the US and Russia continue to support the Kurds, Erdogan claims Turkish troops will take control of the region, even if they have to fight Assad, Russia, ISIS and the Kurds.

In western Syria, with US-led coalition air and ground support, the SDF made advances in Hasaka and Raqqa provinces. Between October and December 2015 the SDF liberated 1000 square kilometres, many villages and the city of al-Haul in Hasaka province, forming local civilian councils in the liberated areas. Since late November, the SDF has been demining areas in preparation for an offensive on the Hasaka city of al-Shaddadi, an ISIS hub for training recruits and distributing weapons, equipment and militants. By late December, with support from Russian and US airstrikes, SDF was fighting ISIS within 40 kilometres of Raqqa. A late December clash in Raqqa province, between Kurdish fighters and local Arab militants, prompted the Raqqa Tribes Shura Council to request that the administration of Tel Abyad be handed over to them. This highlights some of the dangers of Kurds fighting ISIS in Sunni Arab territory. Also in December, the US Secretary of Defence, Ash Carter, said the US was yet to determine whether the SDF was capable to take and hold Raqqa, especially as now the SDF is fighting on a 600 kilometre frontline between Afrin and Hasaka.

Although officially denied by Russia and the US, on 18 January Russian soldiers and engineers arrived in an airport near PYD-controlled Qamishli and on 21 January, the YPG controlled airport near Rmeilan in Hasaka province was handed over to the US to support the SDF. The US has at least one training facility in Rojava.

Political negotiations

On the diplomatic front, between 8 -10 December, three conferences were held simultaneously in Damascas, Riyadh and Derik (in Hasaka province), each intent on



uniting Syrian Opposition groups in view of commencing UN-supported political negotiations in January. The Damascus conference was organised by the Assad Regime. Fifteen to 17 Syrian-based 'patriotic opposition' groups⁹, as well as non-revolutionary civil society leaders and government-linked leaders from the Alawite, Christian and Druze communities attended.

The most publicised conference was held in Riyadh, supported by Saudi Arabia, US, France and UK. One hundred and sixteen delegates, including 15 militia representatives attended. Participating in the conference were two of the strongest Salafi militias: al Qaida-affiliated and Turkey, Saudi and Qatar-backed Ahrar al-Sham (which fights alongside Al Nusra and Jaish al-Fatah) and Jaish al-Fatah, or Army of Conquest. They were joined by the Islam Army, also known as the Victory Army, a coalition of Al Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and others formed after Russia began airstrikes on 30 September), and Asala wa-Tanmiya Front. These groups want a Sunni Arab Salafi government based on Sharia law, in contradiction to the UN-endorsed plan for a secular state of Syria. Others who attended represented several Western-approved Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition and the Jordan-based Southern Front. With the Syrian National Coalition objecting to the PYD, YPG/YPJ and SDF being invited to the conference (on the basis they do not fight the Assad regime), the only Kurds who attended were those in the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition. History repeated itself, with Rojava Kurds likewise having not been invited to Geneva I and II, although representatives were invited to Geneva III on 28 April 2015.

Despite the attendance of powerful Salafi militias, and the final declaration stipulating conditions unacceptable to Assad, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, welcomed the Riyadh conference outcomes. The most important outcome was the selection of 34 representatives (11 from militia, nine from the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition, five from the more moderate National Co-ordination Body, and 9 'independents') to prepare for negotiations. However, most of the 34 representatives were Sunni Arab men, with only two women, two Turkmen, two Christians, one Kurd, one Alawite and one Druze among them. From these 34 representatives, 15 were selected for the High Negotiation Committee (HNC), to engage in negotiations, headed by ex-Syrian Prime Minister, Riyad Hijab, who defected in 2012.

⁹ Among them were the Solidarity Party, the National Youth Party, the National Democratic Action Body, National Coordination Body, Building the Syrian State Movement and two secular reformist parties.



The conference declaration agreed to an UN-supervised political process, as outlined in Vienna, which includes negotiations with the Assad government, but preconditions for negotiations were that the international community 'force the Syrian regime' to release thousands of political prisoners, stop bombing civilian areas and lift blockades on humanitarian aid. The declaration requested that ceasefires be linked to the creation of a transitional government, and that President Assad and his closest colleagues step down before any transitional government was established. Salafi groups objected to the word 'democracy', although the final statement expressed commitment to 'a democratic mechanism through a pluralistic system that represents all segments of the Syrian people'. The Syrian state would retain sovereignty over all Syrian territory, but on the basis of administrative decentralization. The Syrian state would control all armed forces, although the formation and structure of the state's military and security institutions had to be reorganised. (On 22 December an Assad spokesman announced that Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces would have no place in a future Syria. From the Kurdish point of view, the right to have local security forces is important, and one which the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has set a precedent.) When it came to signing the Riyadh declaration, only one representative from Ahrar al-Sham signed. The declaration was rejected by Russia and Iran because it set preconditions that would not allow negotiations to proceed.

As a result of not being invited to Riyadh, PYD and SDF held their own conference in Derik (the Kurdish name for al-Malikiyeh) in Hasaka province on 8-9 December. In attendance were 103 representatives from the multi ethnic Rojava administration (Democratic Autonomy Administration TEV-DEM), Rojava Political Consultation Party Group and Initiative of Syrian Women (a network of civil society organisations), as well as three Kurdish organisations¹⁰, seven Arab organisations¹¹, two Assyrian organisations¹² and the Tal Abyad Turkmen Community, plus independents, prominent religious and tribal leaders, writers and journalists.

¹⁰ Yekîtiya Star, Progressive Democratic Party of Syrian Kurds and Kurdistan Freedom Party.

¹¹ Arab National Council, Syrian Democratic Community, (Arab) Syrian National Democratic Consensus Committee for Democratic Change (which also attended the Riyadh conference), (Arab) Cairo Congress Dialogue Committee - Law – Citizenship – Rights Movement (QMH) (which had withdrawn from the Riyadh conference), Honor and Rights Agreement Community, Wheat Wave Movement (Teyar El-Qemih), and the Democratic Modernity Party.

¹² Syriac Women's Union and Democratic Assyrian Party.



The main focus was establishing a decentralised secular democratic political system for Syria that respected the different ethnicities, religions and political affiliations. In contrast to the Riyadh conference, the consensus was 'If the regime is part of the problem, it is also part of the solution.' The conference agreed to form a political wing of the SDF called the Syrian Democratic Council, consisting of 43 representatives. On 12 December it was announced that it would comprise 13 members from the Democratic Autonomous Administration, three members from the Political Consultation Board of Political Parties, two members from the Wheat Wave Movement (Teyar El-Qemih) and one representative from the Arab tribes, Kurdish tribes, Turkmen, Assyrian, Arab, Syriac and Êzîdî communities, Jabal Arab, and other organisations in attendance, as well as four independents. From these people, nine were elected to form a Joint Co-ordination Board, which was to be co-chaired by an Arab, Haytham Manna from the Law – Citizenship – Rights Movement (QMH) and a Kurd, Îlham Ehmed, from the Democratic Autonomy Administration TEV-DEM.

On 16 December, and frequently thereafter, Russian leaders spoke in support of the PYD and Syrian Democratic Council attending political negotiations. Several reports claimed the US also supported the presence of PYD co-chair, Saleh Muslim, and the SDC co-chairs. Manna suggested the Riyadh HNC and Syrian Democratic Council form a united delegation or find another way for both bodies to participate in negotiations.

As the Riyadh HNC continues to demand the implementation of ceasefires and lifting of sieges to allow humanitarian aid into Opposition held territory, and the release of political prisoners including 3,000 women and children, before any negotiations can commence, it is important to understand the difficulties in achieving a patchwork of ceasefires, let alone a general ceasefire, as advocated by the UN Envoy for Syria.

Firstly, with about 800,000 civilians under siege, the promise of humanitarian aid in return for a ceasefire is a big incentive for local Opposition groups, whose members fight for 3-4 days, then return to their families for 3-4 days. However, the delivery of aid is a concern for the regime, as along with aid comes UN observers, who can gather evidence for crimes against humanity.

Since September 2015, there have been three negotiated ceasefires. The first was an Iran and Turkey-brokered ceasefire to enable 130 Al Nusra militants and hundreds of civilians to evacuate the Zabadani area of Damascus in exchange for 400 Shia civilians sympathetic to the regime living in two towns besieged by Jaish al-Islam to be evacuated to Turkey, which took effect on 28 December. Even so, Madaya, near



Zabadani, remained under siege from July until January, with people dying from malnutrition and starvation. In the second week of December, a UN brokered truce between the regime and FSA fighters enabled 700 FSA fighters and their families to withdraw from Homs, while others remained until the government released prisoners, but the ceasefire broke down within a week, with the regime conducting two attacks on the city. Another UN-brokered deal between the regime and ISIS was meant to enable the evacuation and safe passage to Raqqa of between 2000 and 3000 ISIS militants, ISIS allies and other civilians from the Palestinian area of Yarmouk in southern Damascus. ISIS called an end to the agreement after a Russian airstrike killed Zahram Alloush, leader of Jaish al-Islam, on 25 December. Even if a ceasefire is negotiated, there is no guarantee it will be maintained, especially given the fluidity between militias, such as unpaid FSA joining Al-Nusra. Nor is there any guarantee of other promises being fulfilled, or that evacuating militants and civilians will be allowed to return home. If a ceasefire succeeds, the establishment of multi-ethnic multi-religious administrations is essential in view of a political transition, and in providing alternatives to the Assad regime and Salafi administrations.

Leading up to the Geneva negotiations, on 10 January, a group member of Jaish al-Islam coalition, Failaq al-Sham, announced it was withdrawing from the Riyadh HNC. The Riyadh HNC labelled the PYD, PYG/PYJ and SDF as terrorists and traitors, and objected to their presence at Geneva. Russia, Germany and Syria advocated for their inclusion. On 20 January, Mohammad Alloush, the new leader of Jaish al-Islam, was selected as the top negotiator. Like other Salafi groups, Jaish al-Islam is pushing for a Salafi Arab state and in territory under its control, religious minorities have been driven out, women are forced to wear the hijab, schools are segregated and there is no effective administration.

25 January came and went without an agreement as to who would attend. On 27 January the UN issued invitations to 15 representatives from the Riyadh HNC and 12 'independents'. The Kurdish co-chair of PYD, Salih Muslim, and the Kurdish SDF co-chair, Ilham Ahmed, were not invited. The other SDF co-chair, Haytham Manna, received an invitation but withdrew as a result of Salih Muslim, Ilhan Ahmed, another four Kurds and one Turkmen in the SDC not being invited. Turkey had threatened to boycott negotiations if they were invited.

On 29 January the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced that talks had begun with 12 regime representatives, headed by the permanent representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari, and the Foreign Minister, Walid al-Muallem. On 30 January, Russia and Syria repeated their opposition to Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam participating in negotiations, on the



basis they were terrorist organisations who co-operate with al-Nusra. On 31 January, Bashar al-Jaafari announced that Syria would not accept a federal system of government or any autonomous regions like Rojava, and an ISIS attack killed 50 people in Damascus. On 1 February the UN special envoy to Syria announced negotiations had officially started in separate rooms, although the Riyadh HNC and regime representatives had not agreed to negotiate. As a gesture of goodwill the regime announced humanitarian aid would be delivered to four besieged areas. On 3 February, negotiations were suspended following news that a major offensive on Opposition groups in Aleppo had successfully cut off their supply line from the Turkish border.

With Turkey, Saudi and Qatar determined to see the end of Assad; Russia and Iran maintaining elections should decide Syria's next president, and the US proposing to reduce Assad's powers and empower the transitional government until elections, the worst outcome for Syrians would be having to choose between the Assad Regime and a Turkey, Saudi and Qatar-backed Salafi government ruling over a country that has been completely destroyed and demoralised.

Turkey

Since November, the international community has largely ignored, and has refrained from taking any action in response to Turkey's increasing polarisation, intensified military operations against Kurdish militants, collective punishment of Kurdish civilians, increased crackdown on dissent, and its military actions in neighbouring countries, although international spokes people were quick to express sympathy for victims of another suicide attack in Istanbul.

Alleged ISIS attack in Istanbul

The 12 January terrorist attack in Istanbul was significantly different from the ones attributed to ISIS in Suruc in July and Ankara in October, although in all three attacks ISIS has not claimed responsibility. The January attack targeted foreigners, killing 10 Germans. It was executed with a grenade rather than professional bombs and the identity and ISIS connections of Nabil Fadli, the Saudi-born Syrian identified as the ISIS suicide bomber, is far from being established. For instance, one wonders why a suicide bomber would report to the Immigration General Directorate on 5 January. To blur the situation further, government sources have conjectured Fadli was an ISIS subcontractor for 'secret powers'. Although ten ISIS suspects have been charged for plotting the Istanbul attack and since the attack, Turkey has been targeting ISIS with artillery fire in northern Aleppo and around Mosul, President Erdogan's speeches continue to focus on PKK, thus avoiding awkward questions about the capability or willingness of Turkish security forces to contain ISIS, why there as so few checkpoints



on Turkey's roads to the Syrian border, and why ISIS militants receive medical aid in Turkish hospitals, and are allowed to manage training camps, offices and warehouses on Turkish soil. Even ISIS militants who are detained are usually released within days.

War and collective punishment in eastern Turkey

Turkey's war on PKK, collective punishment of Kurdish civilians, and vilification and arrest of Kurdish politicians, mayors and officials has intensified. Such actions helped AKP win an outright parliamentary majority in the 1 November elections by appealing to nationalists, after which, most people hoped peace would return, but on 4 November and many times since, AKP leaders have reiterated that Turkey will squash all resistance in Kurdish areas and kill every last militant, promising to crush the will of the people and enforce peace. In response, on 5 November, PKK called an end to a one-month unilateral ceasefire. In addition, Erdogan continues to push for constitutional changes to allow him executive presidential powers so that he can overcome 'strife among (a separation of) powers and the chaos engulfing Turkey.

Civilians are the collateral damage. The Human Rights Association of Turkey claims that since 24 July, 56 curfews have been imposed in 7 Kurdish cities and 20 townships across seven Turkish provinces, affecting 1.3 million people. Two hundred thousand people have been displaced from these war zones. Four hundred thousand students have not attended school for five months. Human Rights organisations claim that between 24 July and 23 January, state forces have killed 230 Kurdish civilians, although others claim the figure is more like 500+ civilian deaths. An armed force statement released on 31 January, announced that since 14 December, the state had killed 649 PKK militants in Cizre, Silopi and Sur, with 236 security personnel having been killed in the clashes. Most of these 'PKK militants' are Kurdish youth. Government sources claim security forces and airstrikes have killed a total of 3,100 PKK in Turkey and Iraq since July 2015. PKK claims only 220 PKK guerillas were killed in 2015, citing 321 ground operations, 1514 clashes and 465 airstrikes^{vii}.

Places like Cizre, Silopi, Nusaybin, Yuksekova, Semdinli and Sur (a district of Diyarbakir or Amed in Kurdish), which declared autonomy in August, have been subject to repeated sieges and curfews. No one is allowed to enter these areas. Electricity, water and telecommunications are cut, and people suffer food shortages. Ground forces, tanks, armoured vehicles and helicopters patrol streets and shoot at buildings and vehicles and anyone breaking the curfews, even if they are trying to tend the wounded or collect a corpse. People are being subject to house-to-house searches, arrest and extrajudicial killings inside their homes. Ambulances are blocked from tending the wounded and businesses are forced to close.

A new black-clad, balaclava-faced security force, called 'Allah's Lions' and shouting 'Allah Akbar' are policing besieged areas. Kurdish civilians and other security forces have no idea who they are but some speak Arabic and Chechnyan. They are known for their brutality, although all security forces are making no distinction in killing militant youths, unarmed babies, mothers and old people. There have been no investigations into any civilian deaths^{viii}.

In response to the Turkish government's military operations, militant youths belonging the urban-based Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, or YDG-H, which upholds PKK aspirations for democratic autonomy, have built trenches and barricades and armed themselves with Kalashnikovs and hand grenades, to protect the districts under siege. It is these youths with whom the security forces clash. The Kurdish youths say they will only stop resisting if Ocalan orders it, but Ocalan is silent. He has not been allowed visits from non-family members since 6 April 2015, and family have not been allowed to visit him since September 2015.



Members of the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, or YDG-H, Sur, December 2015

On 28 November, another voice for peace and democracy was silenced, when unknown assailants killed the Kurdish human rights lawyer, Tahir Elci, in Sur. In October, he had been arrested and charged with 'spreading propaganda for a terrorist organisation' after claiming that PKK was an armed political movement. The prosecutor investigating the assassination came under fire at the site and was prevented from conducting further investigations. With tens of thousands of people protesting and mourning Elci's assassination, on 2 December another 24-hour

curfew was imposed on Sur. After nine days 20,000 civilians evacuated Sur when the curfew was lifted for 17 hours, before being reinstated.

From early December, Turkey seemed to be preparing for full-scale war. The government ordered all teachers and civil servants to leave Cizre and Silopi and for all doctors and health workers to remain. Half the population of Cizre and Silopi either chose or were forced to evacuate. On 14 December 24-hour curfews were reinstated in Cizre and Silopi, and on 17 December, curfews were reinstated in the towns of Nusaybin, Farqin and Lije.



Turkish commandos positioned in Kurdish neighbourhoods, late 2015. (Photo: Anadolu Agency)

By 14 December, 10,000 Turkish troops led by six generals, tanks and armoured vehicles surrounded Cizre (pop. 100,000), Silopi (pop. 80,000) and Sur (pop. 120,000), and patrolled the streets, destroying the barricades and trenches built by militant youths to protect the districts, and shooting anyone who broke the curfew. On 5 January, three women (two Kurdish politicians and a civil rights activist) were shot dead by security forces inside a Silopi house. Under curfew, people hid in freezing basements, without electricity and often without food and water, as nearby buildings were reduced to rubble. Security forces removed some corpses in the street and people went on hunger strike, after their applications to have the bodies returned through official channels failed.

On 25 January Turkish jets bombed Cizre. At least 33 people, including 21 who had been wounded by Turkish security forces, hid in a basement. They were trapped in this basement for 13 days, after security forces demolished the entrance. In the first

10 days, seven died from their wounds and another 15 were in a critical condition. Police detained 11 women attempting to march to the basement in protest. Ambulances were denied access on multiple occasions. On 9 February, security forces bombed the area, killing 70 to 90 people, including those inside the basement. The government claimed all who were killed were PKK terrorists.



Turkish tanks in Cizre, December 2015



The destruction of Sur, the 7,000 year old centre of Amed/Diyarbakir by Turkish security forces, December 2015

At the end of January, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, called for an investigation into Turkish security forces shooting a group of unarmed civilians holding up white flags and pushing a cart of corpses in Cizre, which was caught on video by a journalist, who now faces prosecution. Two in the group were killed and another nine were wounded, including the journalist.

Back in October, trials commenced for 152 elected Kurdish mayors and officials who have been charged with 'breaking the unity of the state', etc.. On 10 December, more Kurdish leaders were arrested and detained for 'opposing the law on meetings and demonstrations'. In early January, 13 officials received prison sentences ranging from 8 to 15 years. Erdogan demanded they be treated as if they were PKK terrorists. Their cases are being taken to the Court of Appeal. So far 31 Kurdish officials have been imprisoned, and all 152 have been replaced with state appointed administrators and bureaucrats.

Thousands of people continue to protest against the 24-hour curfews in Sur, Silopi and Cizre, which are now entering a third month. Each time they are subject to water cannons and tear gas, and sometimes, artillery fire.



Protesters in Sur, December 2015





People marching to Cizre and Silopi in protest of the sieges and curfews, December 2015.



In Ankara, Istanbul and other cities, women, unions and pro-Kurdish political parties held numerous protests against what was happening in Kurdish cities. On 11 January a petition protesting the war that was signed by 1,128 academics from 89 Turkish and overseas universities was published (after which, additional signatures brought the total to 2,000). Thirty-nine signatories were temporarily detained, several were removed from their posts, and all signatories are being investigated for allegations of ‘terrorist propaganda’, ‘inciting people to hatred, violence and breaking the law’ and ‘insulting Turkish institutions and the Turkish Republic.’ Erdogan accused the academics of ‘treason’ and ‘undermining Turkey’s national security’. Outside Turkey, demonstrations against Turkish state violence were held outside the European Parliament in Brussels, and in Germany, Scotland, US and Australia, but all the EU and US could manage to say was that Turkey needed to develop a ‘proportionate



response' when fighting terrorism, and that Turkey's treatment of academics was 'worrying'^{ix}.

Every day, Turkish leaders accuse HDP parliamentarians of being criminals, terrorists and traitors. On 23 December, HDP co-chair, Selahattin Demirtas, met the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, in Moscow, and told him that the Kurdish people have no choice but to resist dictatorship, that their demand for democratic autonomy is reasonable. Afterwards, the AKP government excluded the HDP from meetings to discuss constitutional reforms. On 28 December, authorities opened a second investigation into Demirtas, charging him with crimes 'against the constitution and its functioning', in addition to charges laid down in July, for which Demirtas could receive 24 years imprisonment. This can only occur if Erdogan manages to convince parliament to lift parliamentary immunity for elected representatives. Fortunately, the main opposition party, the **Republican People's Party (CHP)** is against this. On 31 December, HDP submitted a complaint against President Erdogan and others to the Ankara office of the Chief Public Prosecutor accusing them of inciting hatred and animosity, and limiting freedoms. In January the European Court of Human Rights rejected a submission by five citizens from Diyarbakir (Amed) to impose an injunction on Turkey to lift curfews and stop actions that do not meet international standards. Demirtas is now preparing to take demands for Kurdish self governance to the UN, arguing that Turkey has ratified the UN Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which includes an article on self-determination.

Meanwhile, PKK mainly operates outside the cities. Between late July and 31 December 2015, it claimed to have killed 1557 soldiers, police and special forces by attacking bases, checkpoints and convoys travelling to and from the security zones. Otherwise, some PKK have come into the cities to advise and train militant youths, and some have stayed. At the end 2015, PKK leaders announced that while PKK continues to demand democratic autonomy inside Turkey, unless the state is willing to enter a ceasefire and political negotiations, they will need to make some tough decisions. PKK has at least four options: continue to advise and train urban youth and then leave; stay and fight; spread the fight to western Turkey; or renounce armed struggle. Since July 2015, the only attack inside a city for which PKK has claimed responsibility occurred on 14 January, when a bomb and missile attack destroyed a five storey Police Headquarters in Amed, killing one policeman and five civilians and wounding another 39 people. PKK apologised for the civilian deaths.

There are 5 million Kurds in Istanbul alone. On 23 December, a Kurdish militant group called Freedom Falcons (TAK), over which the PKK has no control, claimed



responsibility for four mortar attacks at Istanbul's second international airport that killed one person and damaged five planes. Afterwards, TAK declared war on Turkey, claiming PKK are too humanist. While PKK is reluctant to endanger civilian lives in case it damages its increasingly favourable international profile in fighting ISIS, on 30 December, the co-chair of the Union of Kurdish Communities (or KCK, an umbrella organisation to which PKK belongs) issued a statement threatening that events may force them to consider a revolutionary resistance unless the AKP government restarts the peace process.

A roadmap to peace

On 18 December, Co-chairs of DTK (the Democratic Society Congress, a Kurdish umbrella organisation), and pro-Kurdish political parties including HDP, held a joint press conference in Amed and renewed their call for political negotiations. On 26-27 December, DTK held an assembly at which HDP co-chair, Selahattin Demirtas, outlined the options: an independent state, or a federal state, cantons or autonomous regions within Turkey. The assembly's published Declaration provided a clear 14-point framework for democratic autonomy, which was offered as a basis for discussion. The 14 points were:

1. Formation of autonomous regions to involve several neighbouring provinces in consideration of cultural, economic and geographic affinities.
2. Governance of all these autonomous regions and cities by self-governance bodies elected from assemblies formed on a democratic essence, and within the scope of basic principles of Turkey's new democratic Constitution; with representation of autonomous regions at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey) ...
3. Ending of ... tutelage by the centralized administration ... and the ... elimination of the authority to discharge the elected from position.
4. Securing the participation of town, neighbourhood, village, youth's, women's and faith groups' assemblies within autonomous regions ...
5. Advancement and expansion of democracy, equal representation of women in assemblies, all decision-making mechanisms and stages of self-governance ...
6. Participation of youths in decision-making and self-rule mechanisms.
7. Arrangement of education by self-administrations; Provision of education in all mother tongues ...; Amendment of the curriculum in line with the new democratic constitution, universal values, human rights, local history, cultural and social distinctions; Recognition of [official] languages other than Turkish.



8. Provision of opportunities for work and studies in the fields of language, history and culture; Organisation of places of worship as autonomous institutions.
9. Provision of healthcare and medical services by autonomous administrations.
10. Re-arrangement of the judicial system and legal services in accordance with the Autonomous Region Model.
11. Authorization of autonomous regional administrations for the operation and supervision of land, water and energy sources, and production sharing; ... in all areas such as agriculture, husbandry, industry and trade in accordance with the general democratic constitution principles; Backing, promotion and donation for ... initiatives in this regard.
12. Provision and supervision of land, air and sea transport by autonomous administrations;
13. Arrangement of traffic services by local authorities in accordance with the related central institutions. Assignment of local budget to autonomous regional administrations for the provision of cited services; Reliance on woman-oriented budgeting; Collection of some taxes by self-governance units in devotion to the agreements and principles of equity decided with the central and other local administrations; Granting by the central government of a share from the total tax revenue to local administrations; Realization of necessary precautions by the central administration to eliminate the difference in the level of development in local regions.
14. Establishment of official local security units under the governance of autonomous regional administrations, [with co-ordination] between local and central units of security and defence^x.

The AKP government did not see this declaration as an opportunity to open dialogue. Instead all signatories were labelled 'separatists' and 'traitors', the government warning that the war on separatists will intensify, and that it will never negotiate with PKK or any organisation associated with it. This includes HDP and other political parties, and many Kurdish mayors and officials. Instead, the government announced in February that it will discuss solutions with pro-government village guards/militia, tribal and religious leaders.

The main opposition party, the CHP, had a more measured response to the declaration, saying it was in favour of autonomy being granted to all provincial governments, but was against regional autonomy. It was also against provinces having their own security forces, but to undermine the credibility of CHP, in January



an investigation was launched against its leader, Kemal Kilicdarglu, for 'insulting the president'.

On 19 January, the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu claimed security operations were near complete, but that the state would change locations of administrative centres, increase the security presence in eastern Turkey and pay local village and town elders (mukhtars) to pass on intelligence. When all operations were completed, Davutoglu promised a massive reconstruction program for Sur, Silopi and Cizre. Yet just as the AKP government has changed its approach to Kurdish issues since 2014, so too the mood is changing for many Kurds in the face of relentless security crackdowns. Ever more Kurds are asking, 'If we are paying such a high price to democratise Turkey, why not fight for an independent state?'

Turkey's foreign relations

Turkey's 'Islamisation' is outside the scope of this report, but not its foreign relations. While President Erdogan has long held ambitions for Turkey to become a regional player throughout North Africa and the Middle East, Turkey's foreign policies since 2011 have escalated tensions with Syria, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, UAE, Russia and its allies in Central Asia, as well as the EU and US-led coalition, although with the exceptions of Russia and Iraq, all have only offered soft responses to what is happening inside Turkey. Too many countries want something from Turkey. The US wants Turkey's air bases and for Turkey to contribute more to the war on ISIS. The EU wants Turkey to stop refugees fleeing to Europe. In 2015, one million refugees arrived in Europe, 800,000 coming from Turkey, with 3,700 dying along the way. Half were from Syria. The EU offered three billion Euros to support Syrian refugees living in Turkey, provided Turkey prevents refugees from leaving for Europe. Turning a blind eye to Turkey's approach to human rights, freedoms, democracy and Islamisation, the EU has offered Turkey visa free access into Europe by the end of 2016, and the revitalisation of the EU membership process if Turkey stems the flow of refugees. But this cynical transaction is unlikely to come to fruition. The European Commission wants EU and Turkish representatives to make decisions regards how funds will be spent. Turkish authorities want to make all decisions. Nor has Turkey provided plans to check the departure of refugees, who are continuing to die in the Aegean Sea. Instead, Turkey has closed its borders to refugees fleeing the recent offensives in Aleppo.

Iran

In 2015, Iran had the world's highest execution rate, which included a disproportionate number of Kurds. Most are accused of drug trafficking. Others who receive prison sentences are union leaders, journalists, human rights activists,



lawyers and scientists. Just as in Turkey, Iran does not allow state schools to teach the Kurdish language, and Kurds are discriminated against in entering university, in employment, housing and politics. There are no Kurdish governors in the four Kurdish-dominated provinces. Kurdish activists and journalists face arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Seventy percent of the Kurdish workforce earn less than the official poverty level.

On 26 February Iran will go to elections for the 88-seat Assembly of Experts and the 290-seat parliament, of which 285 seats are elected. In the Assembly of religious leaders, six positions are reserved for Kurdish clerics, while 1400 Kurdish candidates are running for 38 reserved seats in parliament. The number of candidates seeking approval to run in these elections is unprecedented, as people sense it is a time for change. The fairness of these elections will be one barometer of Iran's future, but with the lifting of sanctions, the international community needs to bring pressure on the government to address human rights issues.

Conclusion

The Kurds of Turkey, Syria and Iraq are being courted by Russia. It is Russian spokespeople who are speaking up against Turkey's human rights violations, invasion of Iraq, attacks on Kurdish forces in Syria, the right of Kurds to be part of political negotiations and the US-led coalition's support for Syrian jihadi groups. After the Persian Spring of 2009 and Arab Spring of 2011, President Obama assured the people of the Middle East that the US was on their side, but the UN as well as the US and its allies appear to have abandoned the Kurds of Turkey, politically betrayed the Kurds of Syria, and done little for the Kurds of Iraq. Instead, the UN, US and its allies continue to support autocratic regimes and do not appear to have an integrated approach for easing tensions and bringing about effective governance.

As the British journalist, Giles Fraser, lamented in *The Guardian* in reference to the war with ISIS, 'We can't win if we don't know what winning looks like.' The Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran advocate a system of multi-ethnic multi religious democratic federalism. If this cannot be achieved, then the international community needs to consider a federal independent Kurdistan. Whatever political transformation is decided upon, it will require extensive negotiations, mediation and long-term support, and in war damaged areas, an economic plan linked to political milestones.

Climate Change negotiations and the international agreement in Paris, in 2015, offer some insights into successful diplomacy. Before the Paris conference, there were years of diplomacy, during which time major players announced their commitment



to mitigate global warming. Willing, determined, visionary and powerful people were prepared to work hard for an outcome; resources were provided to support the diplomatic process; the conference negotiations were well organised and inclusive, and the result was binding but flexible and something that can be built upon and checked. Another essential condition for difficult negotiations is the recognition that the alternatives to an agreement are far worse than compromising on what is agreed upon. However, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran have yet to arrive at this point.

On 21 December, the outgoing head of the UNHCR, Antonio Guterres, warned that if the wars in Syria and Iraq do not end and political solutions are not found soon, these countries may cease to exist. He likened the situation to the military conflicts in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. One hundred years after Picot and Sykes sketched the proposed division of the Ottoman Empire, which the League of Nations refined, leaving Kurds without a nation state, President Massoud Barzani announced that Kurdistan could hold a non-binding referendum on independence in 2016. Historical and ongoing divisions within the Kurdish politic have been a principle hindrance to independence, but all peace-loving civilians living in the Middle East deserve international support for beneficial political transformations, whether this involves redrawing borders or developing functioning federations within current borders.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Souflon group

ⁱⁱ Viewpoints: How to defeat Islamic State. (1 December 2015) BBC.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34921216>

ⁱⁱⁱ The countries listed in this coalition are Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Turkey, Chad, Togo, Tunisia, Djibouti, Senegal, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Gabon, Guinea, the Palestinians, Comoros, Qatar, Cote d'Ivoire, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Maldives, Mali, Malaysia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Yemen.

^{iv} <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/islamic-state-new-inside-views>

^v On 29 November, a tribunal of the London Court of International Arbitration (LCIA) ordered the KRG to pay the UAE-listed Dana Gas consortium \$1.98 billion within 28 days. The KRG Ministry of Natural Resources claimed the tribunal had not heard the KRG's counterclaims, which the tribunal noted was more than US\$ 3 billion.

^{vi} <http://ekurd.net/islamic-state-lost-14-territory-2015-12-22>

^{vii} <http://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/hpg-releases-balance-sheet-of-war-for-2015>

^{viii} For personal accounts of civilian deaths, go to HR Watch Report: Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths, 22 December, 2015,

<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>

^{ix} Except for some German politicians, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch in New York, and the EU and US State Department calling on all parties to exercise restraint, international leaders have been silent about what is happening in Turkey.

^x <http://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/declaration-of-political-resolution-regarding-self-rule>