

## Kurdistan: Confronting ISIS

### Why political solutions are necessary to defeat ISIS

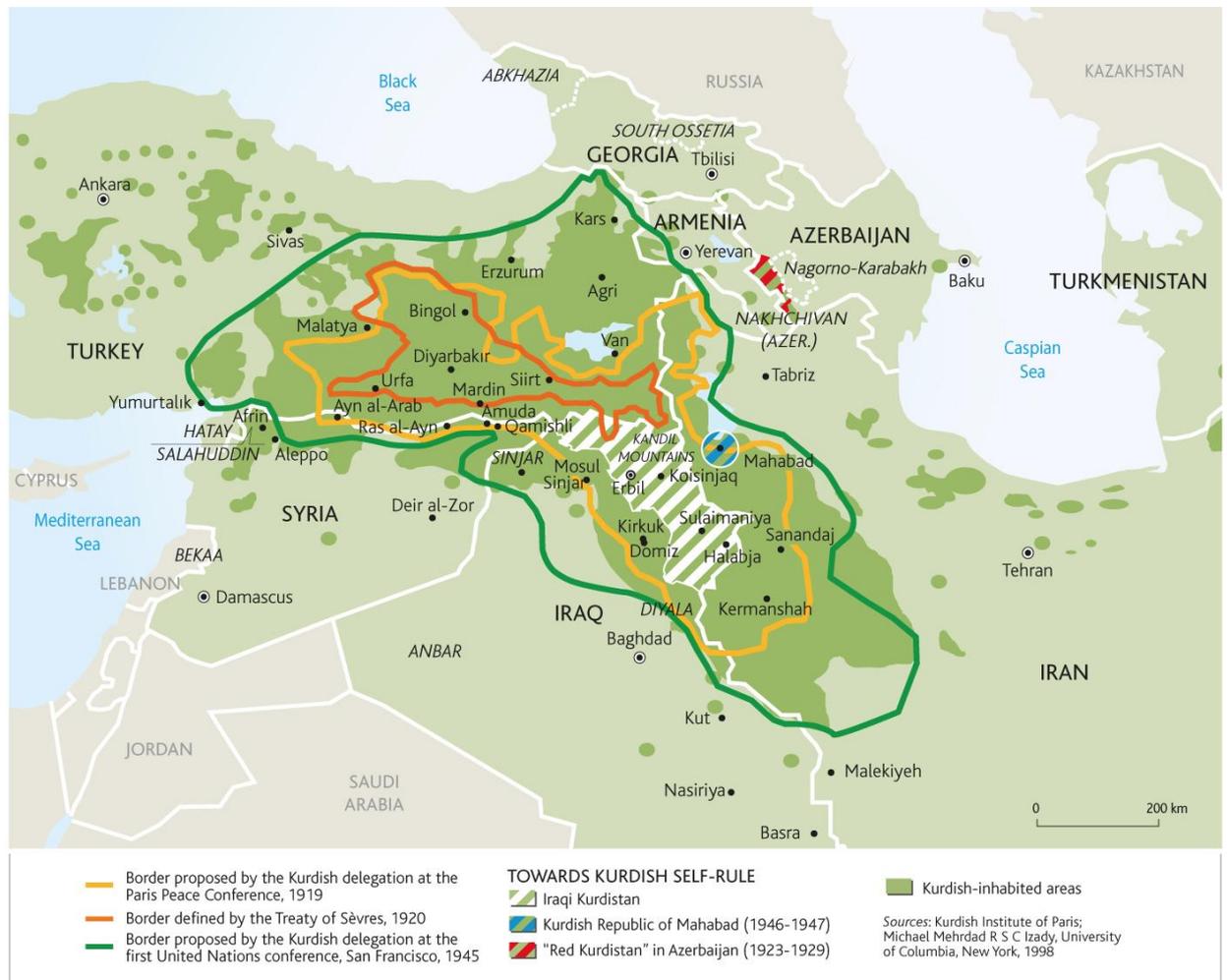


Figure 1: Map of Kurdish claims to territory 1919 - 1945

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Based on Kurdish Lobby Australia Presentation to Parliament House, Canberra, 27 May 2015, titled:

## Kurdistan: Confronting ISIS Why political solutions are necessary to defeat ISIS

Sponsored by the Honourable Mr. Laurie Ferguson, the Honourable Mr. Russell Broadbent and Senator Richard di Natale.

### Introduction

ISIS is proving a ruthless strategic enemy with a global reach. It comprises veteran leaders, one third being Iraqi Baathists, and mercenaries from more than 80 countries. In 2014, ISIS announced a caliphate over areas of Syria and Iraq inhabited by some 6 million people. Whole cities are being held captive. There are minimal services and crops are not being sown.

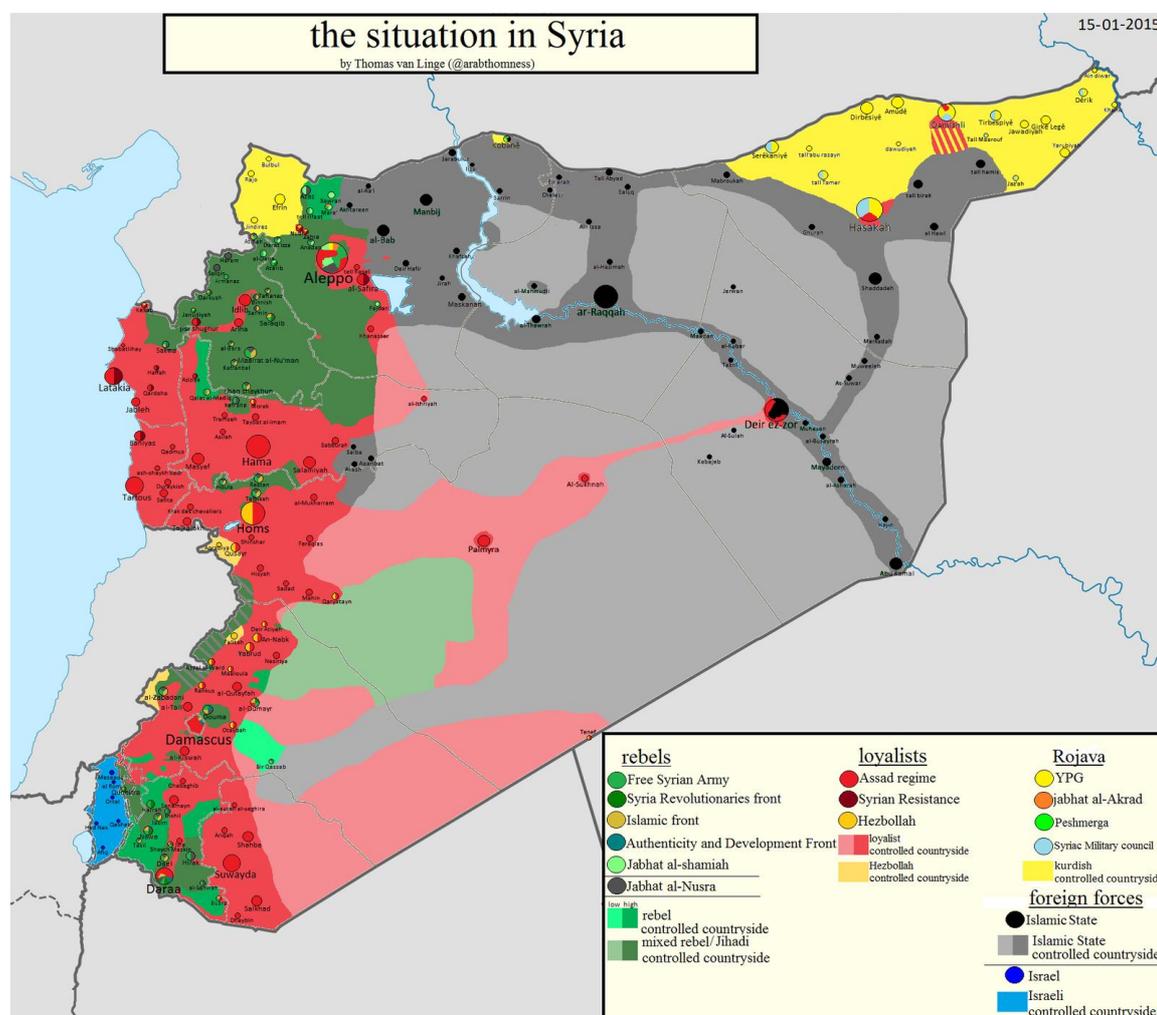


Figure 2: ISIS controlled territory in Syria



Figure 3: ISIS controlled territory in Iraq

Against ISIS is an array of ground forces: Kurdish from four countries; Shia and Sunni militias, and the armies of Syria, Iraq and Iran. A US-led coalition of 32 western and Arab countries is conducting a limited air campaign in Iraq and Syria and supplying weapons and military training to Iraq. We argue this is not enough. The air campaign is far more limited than that waged in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Yet it is having some effect.

In August 2014, a US aerial bombardment saved Erbil from ISIS. In 2015, the US-led coalition helped defeat ISIS in Kobani and continues to aid Kurdish forces defending the oil rich province of Kirkuk.

While spokespeople concentrate on military strategies or the lack thereof, few are publicly talking about non-military solutions. Yet governments are not co-ordinating with other governments or supporting some of the most effective ground forces. That is why, to defeat ISIS, political responses are as crucial as military ones.

In exploring the options we focus on the Kurds, who have proved reliable allies since 1991.



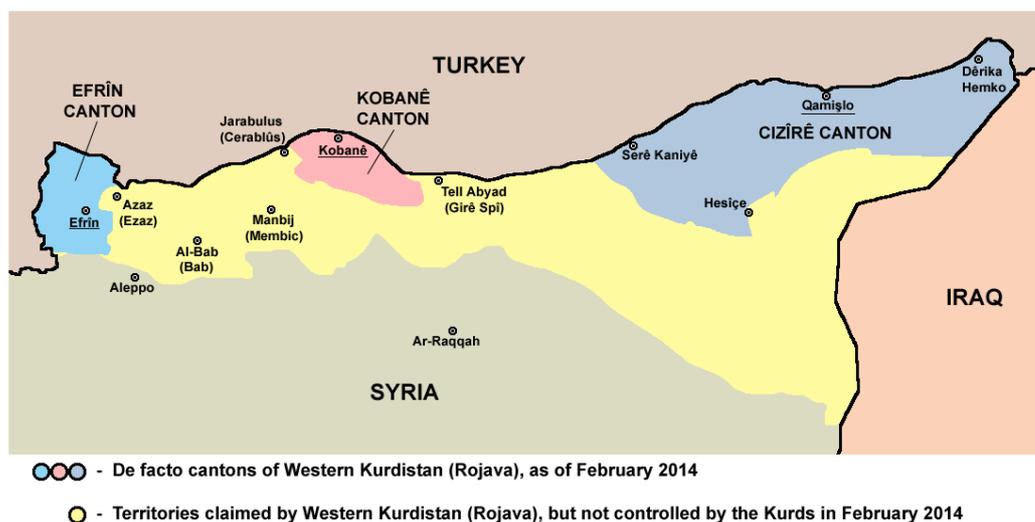
Figure 4: Four countries in which the majority of Kurds live

Kurds were left without a nation state in 1923. They now number some 40 million people, comprising 20-30% of the population of Turkey; 17% of the population of Iraq; at least 10% of the population of Iran and at least 9% of the population of Syria. The twentieth century was the worst in Kurdish history. Kurds suffered persecution in all four countries. Ironically, this same persecution helped shape their moderate religious outlook and democratic values.

### How politics is undermining the war against ISIS

One example of politics interfering with the war is the 112-day siege of Kobani, where 547 Kurdish fighters were killed and many more seriously injured. When the air campaign started on the thirty-third day of the siege, ISIS had entered Kobani and the Syrian Kurdish forces had only two days of food and ammunition left. Then there were delays in co-ordinating with ground forces. These delays were due to politics. The US wanted the Turkish Government's agreement before helping the fighters. That agreement was not forthcoming.

Figure 5: Rojava (Northern Syria)



Syrian Kurds are now being excluded from the coalition's training program for Syrian opposition groups. This is because the Turkish Government labels the Syrian Kurds as terrorists, claiming they answer to the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK. Syrian Kurdish leaders deny this. They claim to be independent of the PKK. However, they acknowledge a wish to foster relations with all Kurdish parties, as well as the USA and Europe.

In Iraq, there are many examples of politics undermining the war against ISIS. In June 2014, when Iraq's army deserted Mosul and ISIS took control, the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, ordered Peshmerga to establish a frontline of over 1,000 kilometres to defend the Kurdistan Region and what are known as the disputed territories. In this endeavour, more than 1,500 Peshmerga have been killed, and more than 5,000 have been injured.



Figure 6: Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the disputed territories

Except in one instance, which occurred in the disputed territory of Shingal (Sinjar), and led to ISIS killing 5,000 Yezidi Kurds and capturing 7,000 Yezidi women, the Kurdish Peshmerga have proved a highly effective ground force. This is despite them having inadequate weapons, vehicles, protective clothing, communications, food, water and pay.

Most foreign supplies go through Baghdad. The KRG claims it is lucky to receive 10% of weaponry supplied to Baghdad, and only after long delays. Meanwhile, Baghdad equips Shia militias, even though Shia militias are financed, trained and supplied by Iran and commanded by Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

The use of Shia militias and the Kurds' lack of supplies are due to politics. Article 121 of the constitution recognises the Kurdish Peshmerga and other security forces. However, Baghdad is reluctant to supply weapons or pay the Peshmerga because of ongoing disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. One dispute is over who should govern the oil rich province of Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Article 140 of the constitution stipulates that the status of these territories will be decided by referendum by 2007. But Baghdad prevaricates.

Another dispute is over who has the right to export oil. Article 112 is open to interpretation. After Baghdad repeatedly failed to pay KRG's constitutionally allocated budget before 2014, the KRG began exporting oil independently. In retaliation, Baghdad cut all revenue to the KRG from January to December 2014.



Figure 7: KRG built pipeline to Turkey

An agreement in December requires the KRG to pipe 300,000 barrels of oil a day from Kirkuk and another 250,000 barrels per day from the Kurdistan Region. This oil goes to Turkey through a KRG built pipeline.

In return Baghdad is meant to resume paying the KRG 17% of Iraq's annual revenue. Since January 2014, Baghdad has made four payments, each less than half of what the KRG should receive each month. In contrast, Baghdad regularly pays government workers in ISIS controlled territory.

Denying revenue to the KRG and Peshmerga impacts the Peshmergas' capacity to fight ISIS, and the KRG's capacity to provide for refugees and citizens.

Despite Baghdad withholding revenue, the KRG has accepted more than 1.5 million refugees from Syria and southern Iraq. This is a 28% increase in the population. Many more will come, given the fall of Ramadi and the future battle for Mosul. These refugees are in urgent need of direct humanitarian aid.

Because of Baghdad's economic boycott, citizens are also facing rising poverty. Government workers and contractors are not being paid. Kurdish companies are crippled from decreased demand. Foreign companies are leaving, scaling down or not investing. To keep afloat, the KRG is borrowing money.

Before 2014, Kurdistan's economic success did not reflect well on Baghdad. Kurdistan was peaceful. People had electricity and water. Modern internet and mobile services, and expanding oil and construction industries led to high employment and rising salaries. This contrast with conditions in southern Iraq, where terrorist activities disrupted daily life. Despite Iraq being the second largest oil producer in OPEC, war-damaged infrastructure went unrepaired; households received 2 to 4 hours of water and electricity a day; and unemployment was 48%.

### **Political solutions**

So what can be done? Firstly, military strategy needs to be linked to political strategy.

A few countries like Germany have directly supplied weapons to Erbil. In May, the US House of Representatives passed a bill to directly supply Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni militias and withhold supplies from Baghdad until there is 'political reconciliation'. We see the bill as a step in the right direction. However, we suggest weapons should go to non-partisan forces that answer to an elected government and adhere to codes of conduct, as do the KRG's Peshmerga.

Baghdad and the governor of Mosul have asked the Peshmerga to join an offensive on Mosul. Mosul's Sunni residents do not want a repeat of Tikrit or Ramadi. They fear Shia militias. The KRG has agreed to commit Peshmerga, despite this further stretching the under-resourced Peshmerga. Worse still, local Sunni Arabs will be caught in the crossfire. This is political dynamite for the Kurds. Before Kurds take part in a Mosul offensive, Baghdad should be pressured into fulfilling its constitutional obligations to the KRG.

There is an urgent need for political solutions. These cannot wait until the defeat of

ISIS, for they will contribute to its defeat.

The international community needs to ask itself, does it want to continue to support the status quo in the Middle East, or contribute to the development of democratic processes and prosperity? Certainly, the threat of ISIS opens up unprecedented opportunities for reviewing the status quo.

Iraq, Syria and Turkey will now be considered in turn, as all these countries are key to defeating ISIS.

### ***Iraq***

The Iraqi people voted for a federal constitution in 2005. Only the Kurds demanded federal rights, having established a regional government and parliament in 1992. In the 1990s, they made many mistakes but the experience helped them after 2003. In the current Kurdish parliament of 111 members there are nine political parties. Members include 36 women, five Turkmen and five Assyrians. Even so, there are many issues that need addressing.

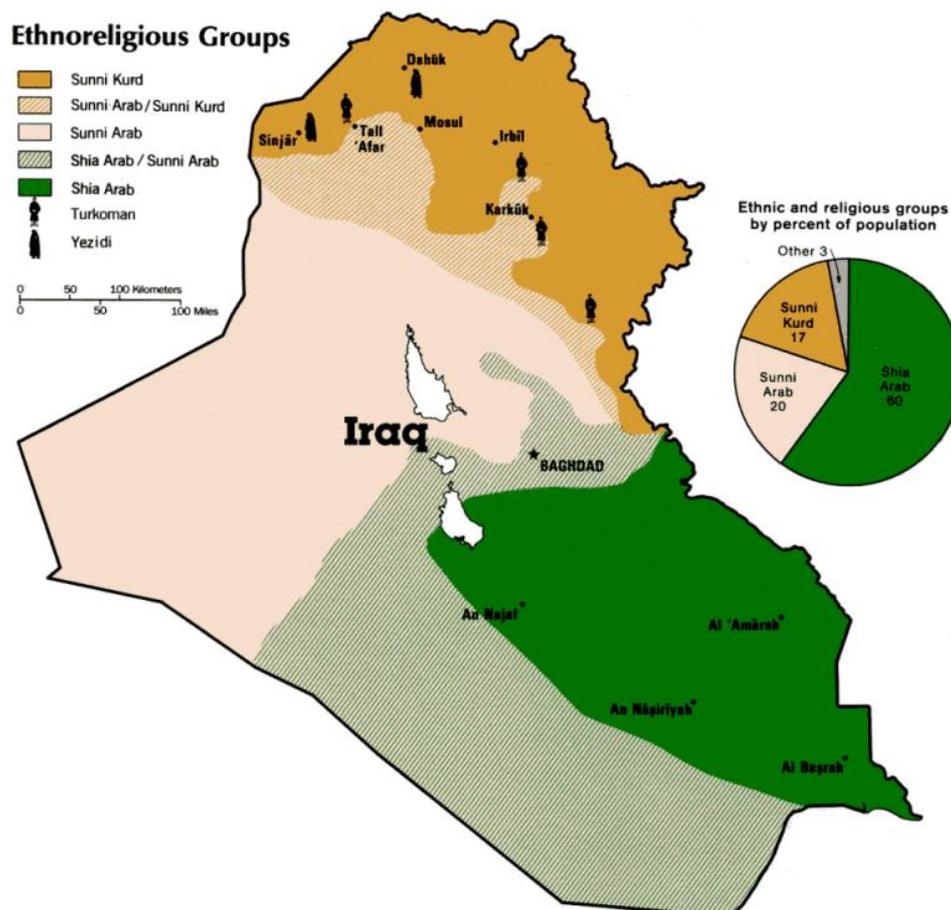


Figure 8: Distribution of ethno-religious groups in Iraq

In 2005, compared to the Kurds, people in southern Iraq had less experience in organizing political parties and less interest in a federal system. Then came the

Maliki government's mismanagement, typified by Sunni disenfranchisement; the onslaught of ISIS, and the failures of the Iraqi army. Throughout Iraq, people are now talking of forming autonomous regions following the Kurdish model. Article 119 in the constitution outlines how this can be done. For example, the war-damaged, oil-rich, Shia province of Basra has recently applied to become an autonomous region. Arabs in Anbar and Ninevah have also expressed a wish to form an autonomous region.

If the international community turns a blind eye to this push towards federalism, extremists could decide Iraq's future.

Australia's federal experience could help stakeholders negotiate power and resource sharing arrangements, and develop the necessary requirements for good governance at the local, regional and federal level.

### **Syria**

The same applies to the failed state of Syria. Since 2011, a coalition of 40 organisations has established three autonomous regions in the Kurdish areas of Northern Syria: Cizere, Kobani and Afrin (Refer to Map of Rojava, p. 7). In January 2014, a council was established for each region. Each council has a constitution, government, parliament and court. Each is co-chaired by a man and a woman and includes people from across the ethnic and religious spectrum. Local administrative units help these councils provide services in towns and villages. Private property is protected. Co-operatives and free enterprise are encouraged. This Movement regards grass roots democracy in the three regions as a step towards a democratic federal system of government in Syria.

Such efforts need international support. Syrian Kurdish politicians were excluded from two UN conferences focused on finding political solutions for Syria, but have been invited to a third. Syrian Kurds should be part of the coalition's military training program. Direct communication and supply links are intermittent but not enough. There is an urgent need for humanitarian corridors to be established to supply aid and resources for rebuilding destroyed towns and villages, and re-establishing industry, especially agriculture.

Turkey needs to be reassured that these developments are in its best interest. For instance, providing humanitarian corridors into Syria will enable refugees to return home. After all, ISIS recruits, supplies and oil freely cross the Turkish-Syrian border. If ISIS is to be defeated, this border traffic needs to stop.

## Turkey

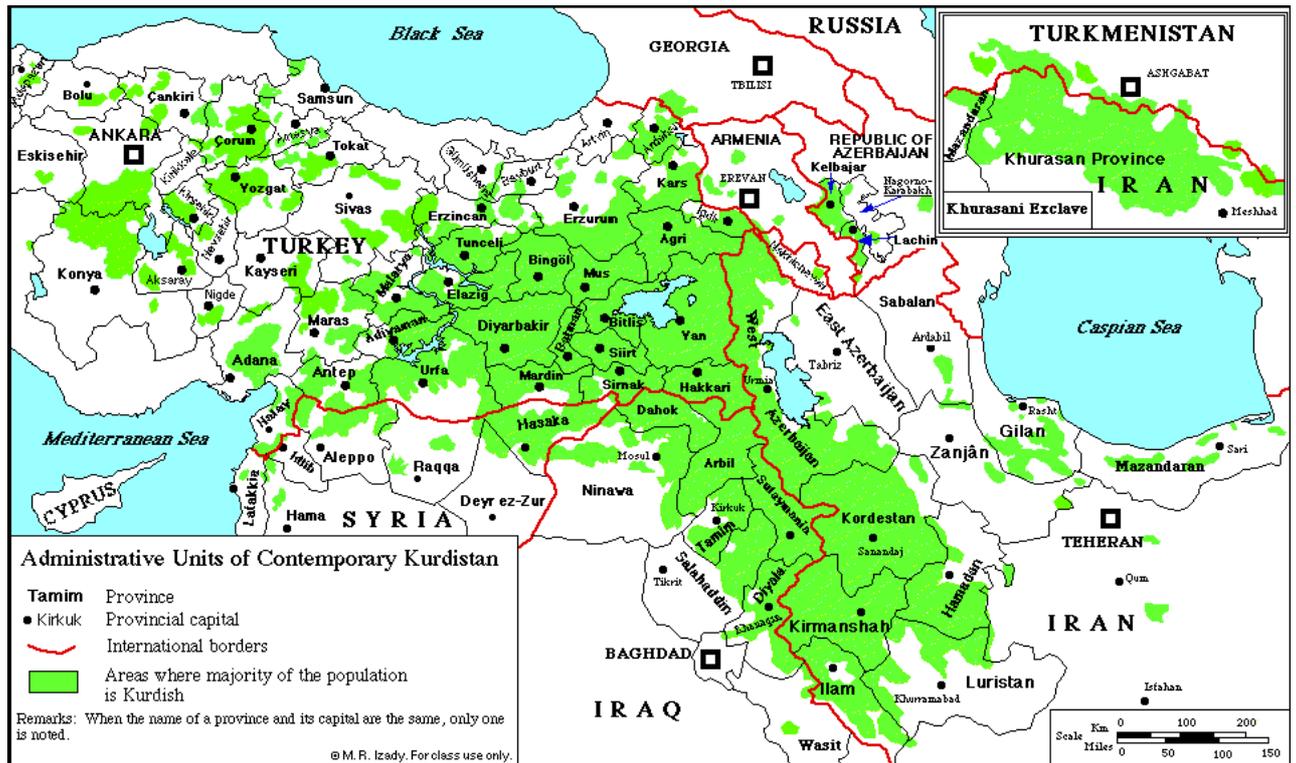


Figure 9: Kurdish areas of Turkey

Turkey could play an important role in defeating ISIS, but there are complications. Turkey wants to defeat the Assad Regime more than it wants to defeat ISIS. Many of Turkey's policies are influenced by a fear of its large Kurdish population. This fear stems from a constitution and political culture rooted in a fierce form of nationalism. Until the enactment of reforms by the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, using the word 'Kurd' could lead to imprisonment and torture. Kurdish regions remain economic backwaters with a heavy military and police presence.

Against this oppression, there have been four Kurdish uprisings since 1923. The last began in 1984. This came after the 1980 military coup, when 650,000 people were detained; 517 received the death penalty; and hundreds more died in suspicious circumstances. In the armed struggle 40,000 people lost their lives. In 1999, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was put in solitary confinement, where he remains. Between 1999 and 2003 the PKK declared and upheld a unilateral ceasefire. In March 2013, a ceasefire was negotiated after the AKP announced a Turkish-Kurdish peace process. This peace process is key to Turkey's future stability, prosperity, democratic development and foreign policies, including its border policies.

It is vital that the international community supports the peace process. Actionable steps need to be defined. The PKK has asked for independent monitors, but President Erdogan rejects this. Such matters could be raised with the Turkish ambassador and at international forums.

The PKK is a major stakeholder in the peace process. The organisation has evolved, as did the PLO and Sinn Fein. It now supports political negotiations to achieve regional autonomy, improved democratic processes and for Turkey to adopt a federal system of government.

In Turkey's elections on the 7 June a pro-Kurdish party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, which includes candidates from across the ethnic and religious spectrum, won 80 seats in the 550 member Turkish parliament by advocating policies that included support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process and opposition to President Erdogan's push for greater presidential powers.

Turkey is at a crossroad. Erdogan's rhetoric is becoming increasingly authoritarian and erratic. Recently he denied that Turkey has a Kurdish problem. In the AKP election manifesto, no mention was made of the peace process. If the peace process falters it will impact the war against ISIS and the future of the region.

## Conclusion

Kurdish forces from Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran are co-ordinating their fight against ISIS. All are proving to be able and determined fighters. Their sacrifices and achievements are helping the international community contain ISIS. What Kurds fear most is that if and when ISIS is defeated, they will be forgotten. They will be bypassed in favour of the status quo: incompetent, oppressive governments. It is oppression, and the lack of economic opportunities, that creates the breeding grounds for resistance, terrorism and war.

Most Kurds dream of an independent nation state but they know to achieve independence without war, they need support from the international community and agreement with neighbouring countries. Lacking these pre-conditions, Kurdish leaders talk of democratic federations or confederations.

The future of the Middle East should not be left to big business, oppressive governments or extremists. The international community must come on board. Australia has been militarily involved in the region since World War I until the present day. It has been politically involved as a member of the League of Nations and the UN. We were part of Operation Habitat in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991. Throughout the 1990s Australia sold wheat to Iraq. Australian construction and oil companies are in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Australia has contributed to agricultural development since the 1970s, right up until 2014. We have experience in federalism. We are well placed to contribute to a more sustainable future in the Middle East.

The transition from autocracy to democracy is a long and tenuous process. It needs nurturing. It is time for the international community to gather the political will to listen, learn, negotiate and act. It is time to link aid and IMF/World Bank type investment to political milestones, and think in 20-year time frames. The alternative could be decades, if not centuries, of war.

