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

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Kurdistan: Confronting ISIS.

Why political solutions are necessary to defeat ISIS

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Kurdistan: Confronting ISIS

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An overview of eighteen months of war: June 2014 to November 2015

After eighteen months of war, ISIS remains a ruthless, strategic enemy with state building ambitions. A third of its commanders are ex-Iraqi Baathists not known for jihadi fervor. Veterans of war are supported by an inflow of mercenaries from over 80 countries. Since 29 June 2014, when ISIS announced a caliphate covering 50% of Syria and 40% of Iraq, it has ruled 8 million people by holding cities, towns and villages hostage. In November 2015 a Russian official estimated there were 50,000 ISIS militants in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq. Of these, 30,000 are foreigners. Whilst these figures may include terrorists from other groups, ISIS continues to recruit from within the territories it controls. For instance, an October video showed Arab tribal leaders in Anbar, Nineveh and northern Syria swearing allegiance to ISIS.

ISIS's largest revenue source comes from confiscating civilian assets, often as a punishment for a perceived crime. Other revenue comes from taxation, selling antiquities, drugs and oil. While ISIS does not have an immediate revenue shortage, 63% of all revenue goes to supporting military operations and another 10% into policing. ISIS has even deployed drones and chemical weapons, the latter used on Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq. Little revenue is left for wages and services.

In Mosul and Raqqa there is a growing resistance, while an increasing number of ISIS militants are surrendering to Peshmerga in the province of Kirkuk, claiming they face starvation and fear being killed by other ISIS members. They report an increasing lack of trust within the organisation. In the Kurdish offensives on Sinjar, hereafter called by its Kurdish name, Shingal, and in Syria's Hasaka province in November 2015, a surprising number of ISIS chose to withdraw rather than fight.

While fault lines may be appearing within ISIS, most observers consider the US-led coalition of 67 countries has lacked coherent strategies and resources to defeat ISIS, leading to a stalemate. There have been 7,700 US-led coalition air strikes (of which 5,000 have been in Iraq) and 1,631 Russian air strikes in Syria (as of 28 October and 3 November respectively), but war cannot be won from the air alone. Ground forces fighting ISIS consist of Kurds from four countries, as well as government troops and Shia militia from Iraq, Iran and Syria. There are also UK and US Special Forces undertaking specific sniper, ambush and rescue operations and in October 2015, the US put Special Forces on the ground to assist a coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian forces in Syria and the Peshmerga in Iraq.

The latest efforts by the US-led coalition are the result of ISIS having either retained or expanded their territory since June 2014, except for northern Syria and northern Iraq, both defended by Kurdish forces. Even when there is a coalition victory, as in Tikrit,



internally displaced people cannot return home because ISIS controls the surrounding area. Baiji oil refinery has regularly changed hands. Ramadi has been under ISIS control since May. The coalition's training programs for the Iraqi army, Syrian opposition forces and attempts to form a viable force among Sunni tribes in Iraq have failed to produce results. For example, there were only 130 Syrian Opposition graduates in Turkey. They entered Syria in two batches, and within days, defected or gave their weapons and vehicles to Al Nusra. Iraq and Syria are effectively partitioned; and ISIS has increased its attacks internationally. In early November 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for attacks killing at least 43 people in Beirut, downing a Russian aircraft over Sinai, which killed 224 people and launching multiple co-ordinated attacks in Paris killing 132 people. These high profile attacks are likely to continue, especially if ISIS experiences desertions, withdrawals and defeats in Iraq and Syria.

The US-led coalition has had some successes. In August 2014, US aerial bombardment saved Erbil from ISIS. The US-led coalition helped Kurdish Peshmerga defeat ISIS around Mosul dam (which is now in danger of collapse from lack of maintenance), help free Yezidi trapped on Mount Shingal and maintain a 1,000 kilometre frontline south of Iraqi Kurdistan and the disputed territories. In recent months air support has helped Peshmerga expand territory under their control in the provinces Kirkuk, Diyala and Shingal. In northern Syria, air strikes helped Syrian-based Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces expel ISIS from Kobani, Tel Abyad and Hasaka. On 11 November, air support and US Special Forces helped a coalition of Kurdish fighters cut the highway between Raqqa and Shingal that continues onto Mosul. On 12 November, coalition air strikes helped 7,500 Peshmerga to enter the city of Shingal from three directions. Along with Kurdish Yezidi, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and YPG/YPJ units, they took the city in 36 hours, after carloads of ISIS militants withdrew, despite ISIS commanders threatening execution if any militant did not stay and fight. Aerial bombardments, US Special Forces on the ground and street-to-street fighting led to 'hundreds' of ISIS being killed, and up to 100 ISIS surrendering to Peshmerga. But ISIS left behind IEDs and other explosive devices, which Peshmerga will need to clear before citizens can return home. There is also the need to locate the mass graves and captured Yezidi women and girls. Meanwhile, on 13 November, the recently formed coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian fighters took the city of Houli, also on the highway linking Raqqa and Mosul, supported by coalition air strikes and US Special Forces, and helped by many ISIS choosing to withdraw. However, fierce fighting continues in the surrounding countryside.

Although these offensives and the international reactions to the ISIS attacks in Paris suggest the war is escalating, until November 2015 the war has been undermined by the US-led coalition's apparent lack of resolve and ability to co-ordinate with non-Kurdish forces, Russia and Iran's increased support for the Assad regime, the Gulf states being distracted by war in Yemen, the lack of co-ordination between governments and governments not supporting the most effective ground forces.

How politics is undermining the war against ISIS

Introduction

In exploring how politics is undermining the war against ISIS, we focus on the Kurds, who were left without a nation state in 1923. Kurds comprise about 24% of the population in Turkey; 20% in Iraq; 13% in Iran and 10% in Syria. Since 1923, Kurds have suffered extreme persecution in all four countries. This persecution helped shape their moderate religious outlook, democratic aims and willingness to align with US-led coalitions in 2003 and 2014.

In the current war, it is only the Kurds and their allies that have worked closely with the US-led coalition to protect and expand territory free of ISIS so that people can return home. Kurdish fighters from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey often fight in joint operations, the most famous being the battle for Kobani and opening a corridor to rescue 50,000 Yezidi Kurds besieged on Mount Shingal. More recently, Kurds from all countries have acted in co-ordination to take the city of Shingal and cut the highway between Raqqa and Mosul. Defending the frontline in Northern Iraq, are Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga joined by Kurds from other counties, their distinctive insignia in clear view of US advisors.

In fighting ISIS, thousands of unpaid Kurdish fighters have died or have been seriously wounded. Their sacrifices, and the sacrifices made by their families and communities, are for the protection of local civilians but also help the US-led coalition. Yet, the international community fails to oppose Turkey's military actions against Kurdish forces and civilians in Turkey, Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, even when Turkey's actions are a gain for ISIS. Nor is anyone offering the Kurds political guarantees in their attempts to establish local and regional democratic governments. These and other short-sighted failures to link military and political strategies in view of long term political solutions for countries torn apart by authoritarian governments, sectarianism and ISIS are a recipe for on-going war and future conflict.

Syria

In Syria, the Assad regime has held absolute power between 1970 and 2011. Since the commencement of civil war, the economy has contracted by 40% to 75%, leading to more than 50% of the population living in extreme poverty and the closure of 25% of all schools. For the Middle East and Europe, the war has become the largest humanitarian disaster since World War II, with more than 300,000 Syrians having been killed by war and more than half the country's 23 million people displaced. The biggest obstacle to any political resolution continues to be whether or not President Assad has any role to play in a political settlement.

The many-sided war has divided the country into territory controlled by the regime, ISIS, various Opposition forces and the Kurdish coalition, within which there are further divisions. Russia, Syrian and Iranian forces, Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shia militias fight Syrian Opposition groups. The hundreds of Syrian Opposition groups within the Free Syrian Army, Syrian-based Islamic and international jihadi forces fight Assad, each other and ISIS. This leaves the Kurds and their allies focused on ISIS. Each group is

supported or undermined by different countries fighting a proxy war.

Initially the US was reluctant to help Kurdish forces in Syria. In the five-month siege of Kobani between September 2014 and January 2015, the US delayed air support for 33 days. There were further delays in co-ordinating with ground forces. These delays were due to politics. The US was deferring to the sensitivities of the Turkish government, which was blocking anti-ISIS fighters crossing the border into Kobani, while turning a blind eye to ISIS militants and weapons flowing in. In October 2014, Kurds in 35 cities in Turkey protested these policies. Fifty people were killed in clashes with police.

Since an allied victory in Kobani, US air support has enabled Kurdish and allied forces to expand three ISIS free regions south of the 900-kilometre border with Turkey. By June 2015, the regions extended 600 kilometres along the border, cutting critical ISIS supply lines, except for a 100-kilometre length of border between Azaz and Jarablus and an area north of Aleppo, controlled by ISIS. See Figure 2.

Turkey sees these ISIS-free regions in northern Syria as a security threat. This is because Turkey's President and Prime Minister claim Syrian Kurds are terrorists - no different to PKK, and more dangerous than ISIS.

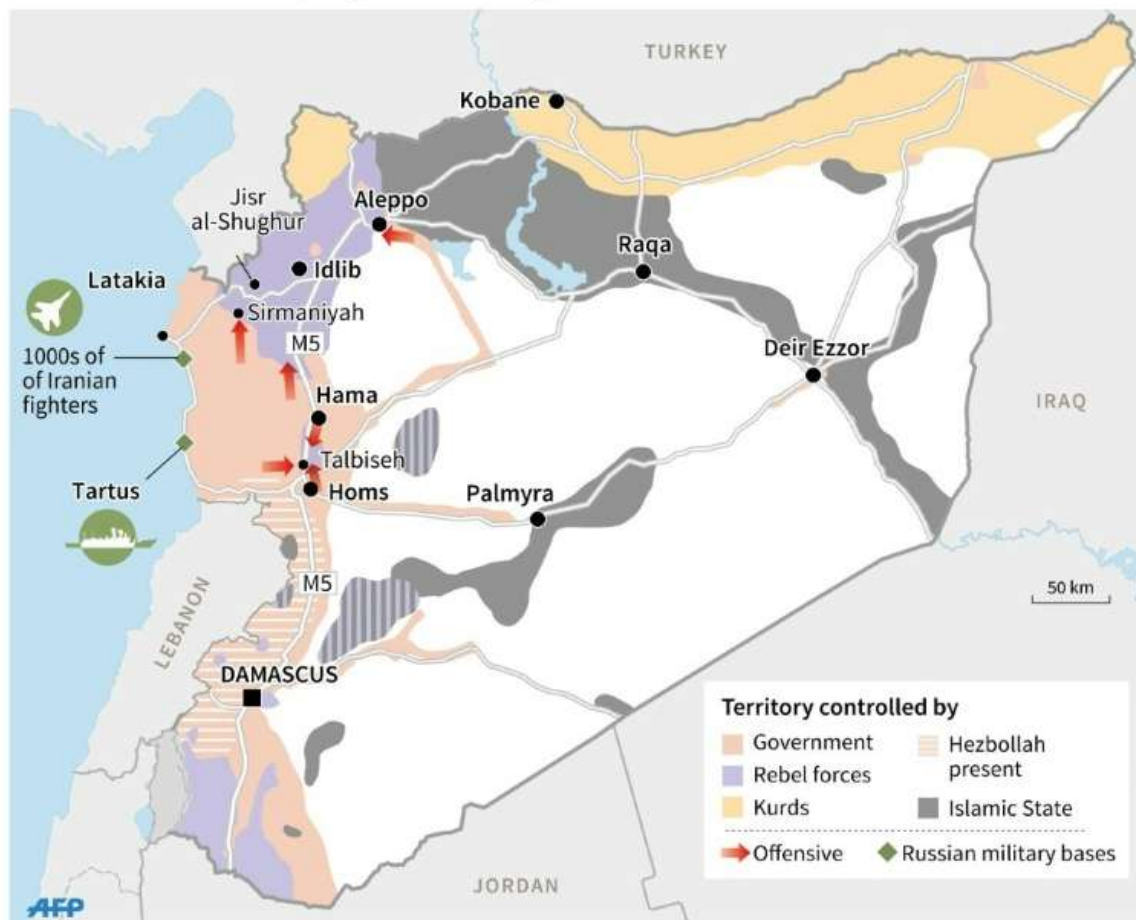


Figure 2: Syrian areas controlled by different factions, October 2015 (AFP)



On 22 July, a month after YPG/YPJ and allied forces defeated ISIS in the town of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi in Kurdish), and 13 months after ISIS took control of Mosul, a US-Turkish agreement was announced. It was heralded as a game changer. Turkey agreed to play a greater role in the war against ISIS by arresting ISIS militants; preventing ISIS using Turkey as a transit route; and allowing US-led coalition aircraft to fly from four Turkish air bases, including Incirlik and Diyarbakir.

The Turkish state embarked on mass arrests and military operations. But instead of ISIS, Turkey targeted Kurds. Claiming to arrest PKK militants, Turkey also arrested 500 members of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) and thousands of Kurdish civilians. Between 24 July and 28 August, Turkey launched three air strikes on ISIS in Syria; targeted Syrian Kurdish forces four times (near Jarablus, Kobani and Tel Abyad), and struck PKK 400 times in Iraqi Kurdistan and eastern Turkey. On 1 August, Turkish air strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan killed 9 Kurdish civilians, wounding tens of others. Iraqi Kurdish villages and farmland continue to be bombed.

Despite the Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq protesting the invasion of Iraqi air space, on 3 September, the Turkish parliament approved a 12-month extension of air and ground operations targeting PKK. President Erdogan claims operations will not cease until every PKK militant is killed or disarmed. On 8 September, Turkish tanks and Special Forces crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan. Meanwhile, Turkey refrained from striking ISIS again until 14 October.

On 11 October, the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) announced a new coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprising 25,000 YPG/YPJ and 5,000 fighters from six other groups in the Free Syrian Army, Sunni Arab and Syriac/Assyrian Christian units. On 12 October, the US announced it was abandoning its training of Syrian Opposition forces in Turkey. Instead, the US would train and arm proven allies inside Syria and prepare the SDF for an offensive on the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa. On 21 October, PYD announced the establishment of a multi-ethnic administration in Tel Abyad (consisting of seven Arabs, four Kurds, two Turkmen and one Armenian). It became the fourth autonomous administration in what the Kurds call Rojava in northern Syria.

Turkey reacted angrily to these developments. President Erdogan increased his calls for the PYD and its YPG/YPJ forces to be placed on international terrorist lists, and threatened serious consequences if Syrian Kurds were armed by the US or Russia, if the new Tel Abyad administration was not dismantled and/or if Kurds crossed the Euphrates River for an offensive on Jarablus. These threats have led the US to claim it is only arming Arab and Christian fighters. Even so, all SDF fighters lack weapons suitable for a major offensive.

Since 24 October, Turkey have been conducting daily air and ground assaults on YPG/YPJ in Tel Abyad, Kobani and east of Jarablus. Turkey vows these actions will continue until all its demands are met. So far, Syrian Kurdish forces have not fought back, aware that Turkey would use any retaliation in a propaganda campaign against them.

As usual, the US-led coalition has made no public comment about these attacks on their Kurdish allies, but on 30 October the US announced that up to 50 US Special Forces would join the SDF in northern Syria to advise and assist on a continual basis. In early November, Defence Secretary Ashton Carter promised more US ground forces to make and uphold the peace if these proved necessary. These developments have not stopped Turkey's attacks on YPG/YPJ.

Before ISIS took control, the predominantly Sunni Arab province of Raqqa had a population of about 950,000, with 220,500 living in Raqqa city. It is thought about half these numbers continue to live under ISIS. About 5,000 ISIS militants hold the city hostage. Throughout October, Raqqa was subject to US and Russian airstrikes, and on 31 October, in keeping with the aim of cutting ISIS supply routes between Raqqa and Mosul, the SDF launched its first offensive in Hasaka province, between Raqqa and the Iraqi border, successfully driving back ISIS. In early November reports claimed ISIS leaders were evacuating Raqqa city, and those who remained were conscripting men between 14 and 40 years of age.

While Kurdish fighters are being expected to focus on the Raqqa offensive, the other front impacting Syrian Kurds is Turkey's push for a safe haven north of Aleppo between Azaz and Jarablus. Turkey claims that establishing this safe haven will enable Syrian refugees to return to Syria. What is less discussed, is that the Syrian National Coalition's 'interim' government, based in Turkey, intends to establish a government there. Its president, Ahmed Touma and President Erdogan propose that the Free Syrian Army will protect the safe haven, which will exclude ISIS, Al Nusra and Kurdish forces.

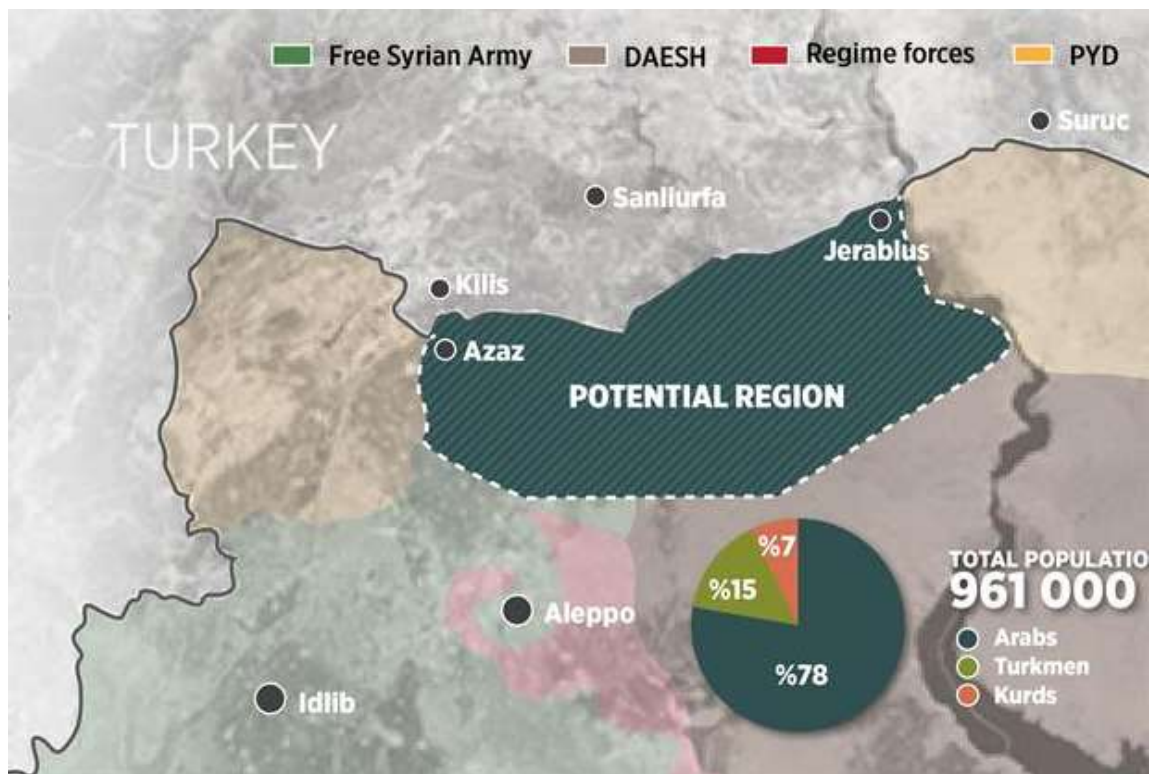


Figure 3: Turkey's proposed safe haven (with ethnic breakdown provided by the Turkish state)



This proposal is in keeping with Turkey's intentions to replace Assad with a pro-Turkish Sunni-majority government and prevent a contiguous Kurdish/allied autonomous region in northern Syria. To date, the US, EU and Russia oppose the safe haven because it would require significant air and ground support, and might remain a haven for ISIS and Al Nusra.

On 30 September, the Syrian war took another dramatic twist, with Russia's intervention using air strikes, long-range cruise missiles launched from warships in the Caspian Sea and artillery. An estimated 2,400 ISIS recruits come from the Russian Federation, where 20 million mainly Sunni Muslims live. Another 7,000 ISIS militants come from former Soviet states, inhabited by millions more Muslims. Russia fears ISIS but has gambled that the risk of ISIS retaliating against Russia's intervention is of less importance than other priorities, one being to protect the Russian naval base at Tartus, and strengthen other naval and air interests in Latakia, all within the Alawite enclave.

Syrian Opposition groups had been making significant gains on the Alawite enclave, even threatening Damascus. Since 2011, the Syrian army has halved in strength, due to deaths, desertions and an inability to recruit. It heavily relies on Hezbollah and Iranian reinforcements. Russia came to Assad's rescue, hitting Al Nusra (known to have a high concentration of Muslims from Chechnya, Dagestan and Central Asia), other Islamic groups and groups associated with the Free Syrian Army, some having received CIA support. Before Paris, about 20% of Russia's airstrikes focused on ISIS targets near Raqqa, Qaryatayn, Palmyra and north of Aleppo.

In the first week, Russian aircraft violated Turkey's airspace twice over Hatay (for some seconds the first time and up to four minutes the second time). Hatay is a Turkish province claimed by Syria. Russian aircraft also entered US drone airspace over Kobani and Raqqa. Many observers thought these actions were testing the rules of engagement, but Turkey and NATO's strong criticism of Russia's incursions are in contrast to the lack of international criticism of Turkey's daily violations of Iraqi air space.

Russia's increased support for the Assad Regime has intensified fighting between the regime and Opposition groups. Forty-one Opposition groups announced a united front. With arms shipped from Qatar and Saudi Arabia via Turkey, they used US anti-tank weapons to blow up 33 regime tanks and armoured vehicles in Hama province between 7 and 10 October. By 15 October, Iranian Revolutionary Guards were sent to help the Syrian army gain territory south of Aleppo. This came with significant casualties, including up to 50 Iranian commanders. In October, with Assad and Opposition forces preoccupied with fighting each other, ISIS advanced to the outskirts of Aleppo city, and took the town of Mahin, east of the strategic highway linking Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. In November, the Russian-backed forces are fighting ISIS for control of the towns of Safira and Sadad, while Opposition forces seized the strategic town of Morek, north of Hama city. The three-way war has resulted a jigsaw of territory changing hands.



The British based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that between 30 September and 20 October, Russian air strikes killed 370 people, including at least 127 civilians, 52 ISIS and 191 Opposition fighters. Between September 2014 and April 2015, Airwars reported that 52 airstrikes conducted by the US-led coalition (US, Australia, Canada, France and the Netherlands) killed at least 459 civilians in Syria, although US officials admit to two civilian deaths. Airwars also claims the US-led coalition has killed about 3,000 ISIS militants in Syria, and more than 12,000 ISIS militants in Iraq: two air strikes for every dead militant.

Tens of thousands of refugees are now fleeing the intense fighting around the besieged city of Aleppo. Most of the 800,000 Syrians, Iraqis and others that have arrived in Europe in the first ten months of 2015 go via Turkey. Many are Syrian men escaping conscription. Turkey is encouraging them to leave. Politically, it gives Turkey leverage with the EU. When the EU offered Turkey a plan worth US\$3.3 billion to establish six processing centres in Turkey and enhance its border protection measures, Turkey scoffed at the proposal. One of Turkey's non-negotiable demands is for Turkish citizens to have visa free access into the EU. Turkey also wants to attend EU Council meetings and move forward the stalled application for Turkey to become a member of the EU.

Turkey's 25 refugee camps pose further dilemmas. For instance, if Turkey provides refugee children an education in their mother tongue, (as opposed to the proposed introduction of an Arabic course in elementary schools in 2016-2017) this has implications for Kurds and other ethnic minorities in Turkey not afforded that right in state schools.

Of the 90% of all Syrian refugees in Turkey who live outside refugee camps, there are some who have brought with them wealth and have established businesses, yet the vast majority struggle to survive. When employed, they receive half the wages of Turkish workers. Language barriers, child labour, homeless refugees begging in the streets, refugee women forced into marriage or prostitution and refugees committing crime are escalating social tensions, while 400,000 Syrian children in Turkey are not attending school. If the Syrian war continues, observers estimate up to 3 million Syrian refugees may wish to enter Europe in 2016.

Iraq

In late September, the US received another shock with the announcement that Russia, Iraq, Syria and Iran had agreed to share intelligence on ISIS. In early October, a joint information centre was established in Baghdad, and Prime Minister Al Abadi announced he welcomed Russia's contribution to the war in Iraq. On 20 October, the US issued an ultimatum that Iraq had to choose between US or Russian support. On 23 October, Iraq reportedly authorized Russia to target ISIS convoys entering Iraq from Syria.

In late October, following the death of a US soldier, who was helping Peshmerga conduct a prisoner rescue operation in the province of Kirkuk, US announced that US Special Forces based on Erbil will continue to actively advise and assist Peshmerga in future offensives. Prime Minister Al Abadi has reportedly refused such an offer for

southern Iraq. Instead, the US announced 3,000 freshly trained soldiers in the Iraq army would join a renewed effort to retake Ramadi. This offensive has been delayed because of ISIS's extensive use of IEDs, inadequate troops and equipment, poor co-ordination with the US-led coalition, and the stringent rules of engagement.

In Iraq, there are many examples of politics undermining the war against ISIS. In June 2014, when ISIS took control of Mosul after Iraq's army deserted Mosul, Kirkuk and other northern provinces, the KRG ordered Peshmerga to establish a frontline of more than 1,000 kilometres to defend the Kurdistan Region and the disputed territories.



Figure 4: Kurdish frontline south of Iraqi Kurdistan and the disputed territories, May 2015

Except in one instance in August 2014, which occurred in the disputed territory of Shingal, and led to ISIS killing 5,000 Yezidi Kurds and capturing 7,000 Yezidi women, the Kurdish Peshmerga have proved a capable force. This is despite fighting with inadequate weapons, vehicles, protective clothing, communications, medicines, food, water and pay. In fact, most Peshmerga pay for their own light weapon, ammunition and travel to the front line.

One reason for the Peshmerga's lack of suitable weapons and other supplies is that most foreign supplies go through Baghdad but Baghdad either stops deliveries or undersupplies the constitutionally recognized force. For instance, between May and September, Peshmerga reportedly received no supplies from Baghdad. In early November, Baghdad stopped two planes from delivering weapons equipped with silencers to Kurdistan. Some countries like Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Croatia are directly supplying Peshmerga but Australian and US supplies go via Baghdad.

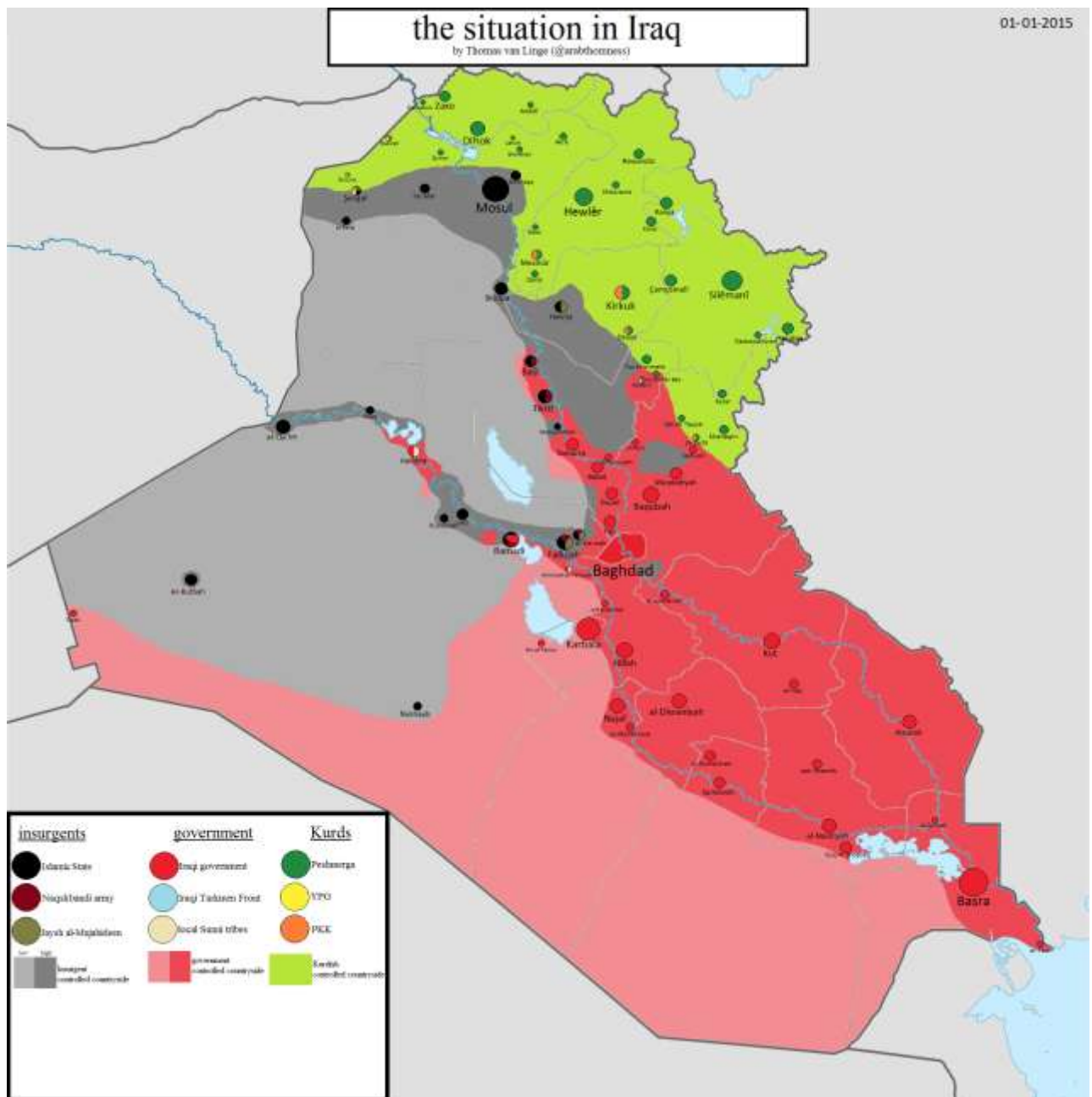


Figure 5: The situation in Iraq, November 2015. (Note: Hewler is the Kurdish name for Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

Peshmerga do not get paid for three or four months at a time. They fight for two weeks, and have two weeks off to earn money to feed their families. The US-led coalition has trained up to 10,000 Peshmerga but US commanders working with Peshmerga say they have no say over the lack of salaries and weapons. Unable to support their families, some Peshmerga are taking their families to Europe.

The Peshmergas' lack of pay is the result of Baghdad refusing to pay them (even when Baghdad regularly paid government workers in Mosul between June 2014 and May 2015) and the KRG being unable to pay them on a regular basis because Baghdad has not provided the KRG its allocated 17% of national revenue since January 2014.

Baghdad's ongoing economic boycott of Kurdistan began in response to the KRG building an oil pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan and exporting oil independently of Baghdad. The KRG claims it was forced to export oil because Baghdad owed the KRG US\$3.5 billion for the period 2010 to 2013.



Figure 6: KRG built pipeline to Turkey

There are many ongoing disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. One dispute is over who should govern the oil rich province of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, which the Peshmerga now protect. Article 140 of the constitution stipulates that a referendum will decide the status of these territories by 2007. But Baghdad prevaricates.

Another dispute is over who has the right to export oil. The 2005 constitution states that the development of the oil industry is a shared power. An agreement in December 2014 required the KRG to pipe 550,000 barrels of oil a day from Kirkuk and the



Kurdistan Region, through the KRG built pipeline to Turkey. In return Baghdad was meant to resume paying KRG's allocated revenue. Baghdad made four part payments, each less than half the monthly requirement, claiming the KRG had not supplied sufficient oil. By June, the KRG had accumulated a debt of US\$22 billion, and resumed independent oil exports. Yet, oil prices had halved, and it was necessary for the KRG to make part payments to some of the 40 oil companies owed an estimated US\$3 billion due to production and risk sharing contracts that require oil companies to be reimbursed for a share in the profits and a percentage of the costs associated with development, exploration, production and marketing. Another problem was that the KRG Ministry of Finance is having difficulties transferring oil revenue from Turkey to the KRG. There is also suspicion that some oil revenue is 'missing'.

The US-Kurdish military alliance and Peshmerga achievements in protecting Kirkuk and other disputed territories, and retaking Shingal, is further alienating Baghdad from the US, as well as Kurds.

Then there is Turkey's war on PKK, which impacts Iraqi Kurdistan on multiple levels. Apart from bombing PKK and civilians in Iraqi Kurdistan, since 29 July, there have been several attacks on KRG's oil pipeline inside Turkey, causing frequent stoppages and repair costs in excess of US\$500 million. In addition, Turkey is intermittently closing the border, through which the Kurdistan region imports food and other essentials, and President Erdogan claims that Turkey will not countenance another Iraqi Kurdistan in northern Syria. These circumstances place the KRG in a politically sensitive position.

At a time when Iraqi Kurdistan is fighting a war against ISIS and hosting 2.25 million refugees and internally displaced Iraqis – comparable to the number of refugees in Turkey, but Turkey has a population of 77 million; Iraqi Kurdistan has a population of about six million – the region is suffering a severe financial crisis.

As well as not being able to make regular payments to Peshmerga and oil companies, the KRG has been unable to pay government workers and contractors. Whilst Arab refugees still being paid by Baghdad are propping up the economy to some extent, local companies are crippled from decreased demand. Foreign companies are leaving, scaling down or not investing. Electricity, water and health services are not keeping up with the 35% increase in the population in both the Kurdistan Region and province of Kirkuk. When the Mosul offensive begins, many more IDPs will arrive.

In early October, and again in early November, teachers and other government workers went on strike and took to the streets protesting over non-payment of salaries, the paralysis of the Kurdish parliament to resolve constitutional matters related to the presidency, and the lack of transparency regarding oil revenue, highlighted when the KRG Finance Minister (from the Goran Party) was told by a Turkish bank that the KRG's oil revenue account was empty. Some protests turned violent and Peshmerga were called away from the front line to protect political offices and media outlets. In response, KRG's President Massoud Barzani, whose tenure came to an end on 20 August but whose party refuses to negotiate a way forward, sacked four parliamentary ministers from the Goran party. The heightened political and social instability in Iraqi



Kurdistan has implications for the war on ISIS.

Political solutions

Political solutions cannot wait until the defeat of ISIS because they will contribute to its defeat. Military and political strategies need to be linked and contribute to long-term political transformations to defeat ISIS and prevent future wars. For instance, if the international community had contributed the equivalent resources to Iraq's political transition as it contributed to toppling Saddam Hussein, ISIS may not exist today. Certainly, the threat of ISIS opens up unprecedented opportunities to review the status quo.

Many argue that the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity and histories of peoples living in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran indicate federal systems of government may be more stable and effective than centralized majority-based governments. Whilst partition may be a valid alternative, it also requires transitions from rigid, corrupt and highly centralized governments to more inclusive, transparent structures that have a clear separation of powers.

Iraq

The people of Iraq voted for a federal constitution in 2005. Only the Kurds demanded federal rights, having established a regional government and an elected parliament in 1992. In the 1990s, the Kurds made many mistakes but these experiences made them determined to establish a stable, inclusive and prosperous region, which they largely succeeded in doing until 2014. In the current 111-member Kurdish parliament there are nine political parties. Members include 36 women, five Turkmen and five Assyrians. Until the influx of refugees and IDPs, people had 24-hour electricity, water and modern internet services. Expanding oil and construction industries led to high employment and rising salaries.

Since 2014, the multiple crises have exposed flaws in the system, which demonstrates why young democracies need ongoing support. An immediate priority is for the international community to ensure Peshmerga receive appropriate salaries, weapons, intelligence and communications equipment, and other supplies like night goggles, bullet proof vests and canned food, and for wounded Peshmerga to receive high quality medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Perhaps the Australian government would consider making direct contributions that do not involve weapons. International expertise and resources are also required to help unify Peshmerga within the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga, whilst maintaining their effective horizontal command structures. Of equal urgency is the provision of humanitarian aid, including winter supplies, and extending health, water and electricity services so the KRG can provide for citizens, refugees and IDPs.

International mediation between Baghdad and Erbil is vital. To solve Kurdistan's financial crisis there are two complementary options. The first is to facilitate Baghdad's constitutional obligations to the KRG, including revenue allocations, and for the allocations to take into account the extra costs associated with fighting a war, servicing



a 35% increase in the population, and supporting security, administration and other services in the disputed territories now protected by Peshmerga and not receiving revenue from Baghdad. The second option is to support economic autonomy for the Kurdistan Region by convincing the Baghdad government to give the KRG the legal right to export oil providing the KRG complies with the federal constitution that stipulates oil belongs to all Iraqis. Facilitating one or both options could be tied to Peshmerga joining an offensive on Mosul, as requested by Baghdad and Mosul leaders, and assuring Baghdad that a stable prosperous Kurdistan would be a national asset in terms of security, water, energy and trade, with Kurdistan becoming Iraq's gateway to Europe.

On its part, the KRG needs to guarantee transparent accounting for the receipt and distribution of all revenue; finalise and pass a regional constitution, supported by legislation and institutional development, that defines the KRG president's role and tenure, and guarantees a separation of powers, minority rights, a viable banking sector and a transparent investment and taxation environment. Of equal importance is the need to tackle corruption, and ensure transparency in KRG's foreign relations. Kurdistan also needs help in streamlining and diversifying its economy. For instance, there is huge potential for investment and employment in agriculture, food processing, tourism, transport and natural resource conservation.

Back in 2005, people in southern Iraq had less interest in forming autonomous regions. Then came the Maliki government's mismanagement and corruption, and Sunni disenfranchisement. In southern Iraq, terrorist activities constantly disrupted daily life. Despite Iraq being OPEC's second largest oil producer, war-damaged infrastructure went unrepaired; households received 2 to 4 hours of water and electricity a day; and unemployment reached 48%.

Since the onslaught of ISIS and the failures of the Iraqi army, living conditions have deteriorated further. That is why Shia militias and ISIS have no trouble recruiting. In July and August Iraqis took to the streets in protests over water and power shortages and political corruption. When the Iranian-backed government in Baghdad denounced the protests, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani called for political reforms. The Iraqi parliament approved the streamlining of ministries and posts; the creation of committees to select senior appointments based on merit, and bringing corrupt officials to justice. But these reforms were announced without any constitutional framework, consultation or implementing procedures. Such shortfalls have enabled parliamentarians, including Vice President Nouri al Maliki, who is closely linked to the Iranian-linked Shia militia, but who would lose his post as vice president and who is known to have embezzled millions, if not billions of dollars whilst serving as prime minister, to claim that most of these reforms are illegal.

Since 2011, 9 out of 14 provinces outside the three provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan and the province of Kirkuk have formally applied, or expressed an intention to become an autonomous region following the Kurdish model. These provinces include the war-damaged, oil-rich Shia province of Basra, and the Sunni provinces of Anbar, Nineveh and Salahaddin. If Sunnis were guaranteed an autonomous region like the Kurds, they would have something worth fighting for. In Basra, the debate is over whether to have an

autonomous region based on a single province or to incorporate other Shia provinces.

For the special case of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, the international community needs to facilitate the formalization of local multi ethnic security and administrative arrangements, define boundaries and determine who is eligible to vote (especially given the numbers of IDPs) in preparation for a UN monitored referendum on whether these territories should join Kurdistan, and if so, whether they should have administrative autonomy.

In Iraq, the biggest obstacle to a more decentralized system of government is that Baghdad has failed to enact Article 118 to enable the processing of an application to become an autonomous region. In fact, Baghdad has failed to enact any article that would enable Iraq to become a functioning federation.

If the international community does not actively support this push towards federalism, Sunni and Shia extremists may decide Iraq's future. Australia considers Iraq important enough to have joined two major military operations in 2003-2011 and 2014-2015. Australia's federal experience could help stakeholders develop the necessary legislation, separation of powers, revenue and resource sharing arrangements and responsibilities for services and infrastructure at the local, regional and federal level.

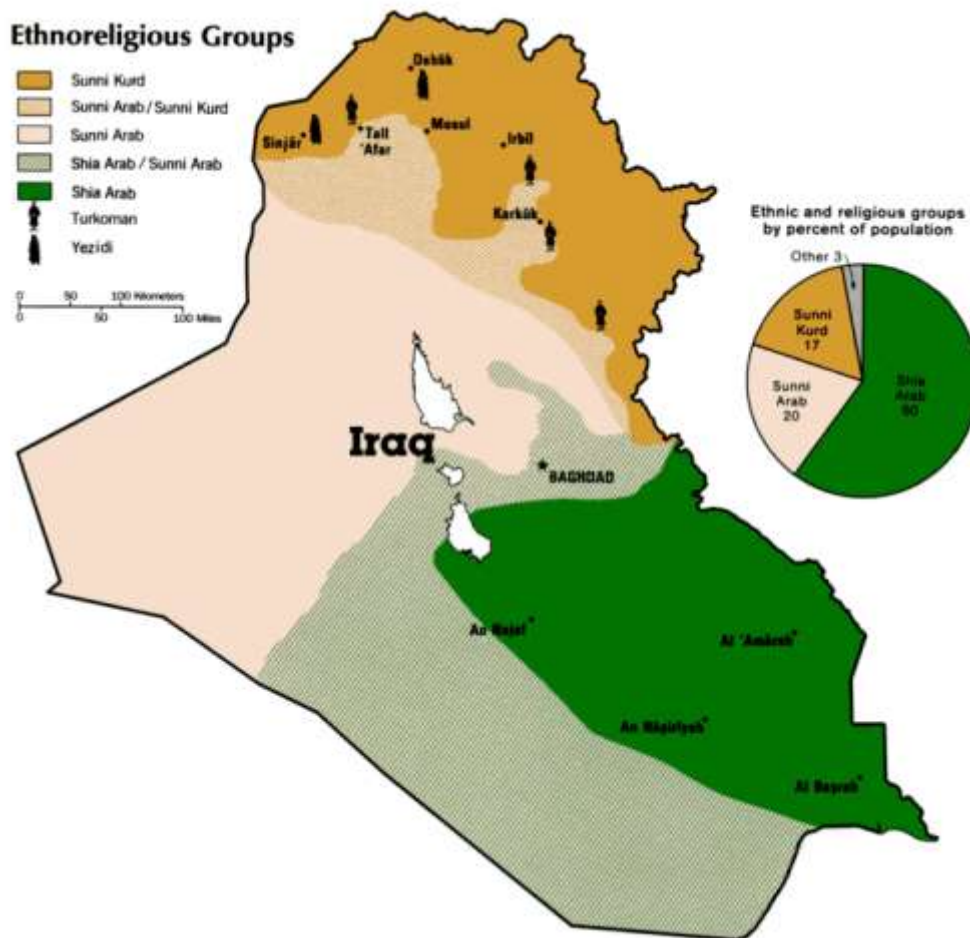


Figure 7: Distribution of ethno-religious groups in Iraq

Syria

For a political resolution of the war in Syria, it is essential to link military and political strategies. The US has asked the SDF to take part in an offensive on Raqqa. For this offensive to succeed the SDF needs to be adequately armed, co-ordinated and paid. Kurds make up a majority of the force. If one political aim is to create credible alternatives to the Assad regime, the four multi-ethnic administrations in Rojava need international recognition and support. If these administrations can function for the benefit of all ethnicities, Turkey's fears of a contiguous autonomous region within a federated Syria might be reduced. However, on 11 November, the US State Department claimed the US does not support autonomy in Rojava.

Although everyone agrees that Syria requires a political solution, President Assad stubbornly claims this is not possible until all terrorists in Syria are defeated. By this he means all opposition groups. To avoid everyone working at cross-purposes, there is an urgent need to enhance co-operation between groups not linked to international jihadism; ease tensions between external players and non-jihadi ground forces and persuade all parties to focus on ISIS.

Evidence suggests that Russia and Iran's support of Assad gives them bargaining power with Assad. On 21 October, Assad met Putin in Moscow and, since October, Russia has announced it is in regular communication with PYD and moderate commanders in the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, FSA commanders deny this, saying they refuse to co-operate with Russia while Russia attacks them. Meanwhile, jihadi groups have added Russia to their list of international targets.

On 30 October and 14 November, the International Syria Support Group that includes EU and UN representatives and foreign ministers from 17 countries, excluding Syria and Australia, but including Russia, Iran and China as well as US, UK, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Lebanon, Jordan, France, Germany and Italy, met in Vienna and agreed that ISIS and other UN designated terrorist groups must be defeated, that it was necessary to distinguish between Jihadi terrorist and 'moderate' Opposition groups, establish ceasefires, facilitate meetings between Assad and the moderate Opposition and ensure that the people of Syria have access to humanitarian aid. It was also agreed that Assad may have a role in a transitional arrangement to avoid the collapse of institutions and preserve the territorial integrity of Syria. Why Assad rather than the regime is essential for these purposes remains unclear. However, Russia, Iran and China have long argued that Syrians must decide their future and in Vienna all agreed that the Syrian people have a right to choose their leadership through transparent, free and fair elections administered under UN supervision, following the writing of a new constitution that protects ethnic and religious minorities.

A major issue is the sequencing of proposals. Iran prioritises the need to identify terrorist groups and groups who have the right to represent the Syrian people and to stop ISIS profiting from oil sales (by identifying who is buying the oil and which banks are retaining and transferring the revenues). In the second meeting, Jordan was tasked to distinguish between terrorist and moderate Opposition Groups. This is no small task.

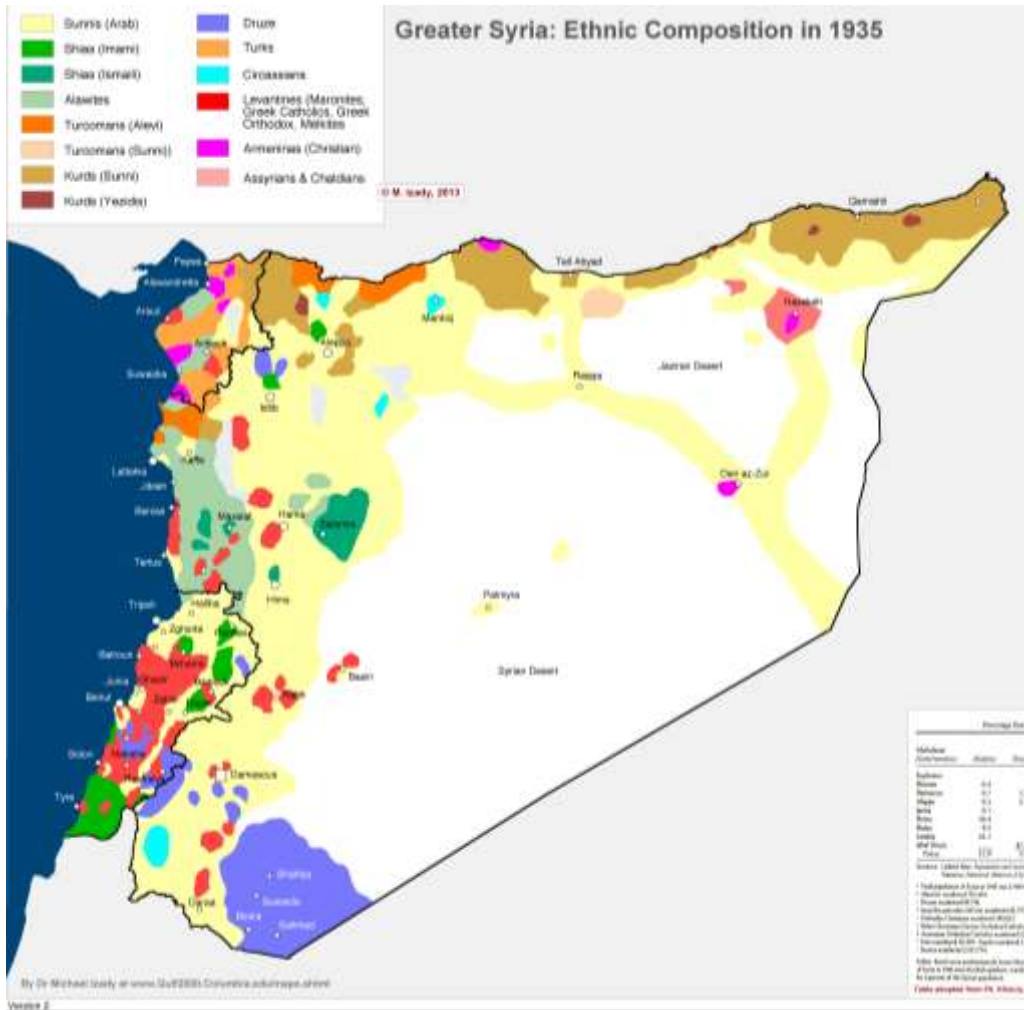


Figure 8: Distribution of ethnic groups in Syria, 1935 (before Arabization)



Figure 9: Provinces of Syria



Whilst everyone agreed that ISIS and Al Nusra are terrorists, 'moderate' Salafi jihadis have split from other Salafi jihadi groups like Ahrar al-Sham (backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar); there is some fluidity of membership between jihadi groups; and since Russia's intervention, previously warring groups are coordinating. Nor is the FSA willing to negotiate with Assad, given many FSA commanders have defected from the Syrian army.

The US is pushing for ceasefires before political negotiations. After the ISIS attacks in Paris, Russia is being urged to stop targeting moderate Opposition groups in view of political negotiations commencing on 1 January. The five permanent members of the Security Council agreed to back ceasefires in areas not under the control of terrorists, although defining such regions and maintaining the peace will be difficult, given different groups fight in any given region.

The optimistic consensus is that political negotiations, a new constitution and parliamentary and presidential elections will take two years. While Russia has proposed that Assad does not oversee the writing of a new constitution, in the second meeting, there was no agreement about whether Assad could stand for re-election. Given Assad's refusal to negotiate with 'terrorists', even Russia may be losing patience with him.

There are a number of ways of dealing with Assad. He could be promised a role in an autonomous Alawite region, subject to elections. People within the regime could be convinced to break away, and if he is unwilling to co-operate, there is always the threat of being tried for crimes against humanity.

Russian officials claim current military actions will last three or four months. During this period, Russia and Assad need to be convinced to stop fighting any opposition group that agrees to stop fighting the regime so all can focus on ISIS. Opposition groups who agree to bilateral ceasefires, if only for the benefit of civilians, are likely candidates for political negotiations. If ceasefires can be maintained in definable regions, this will enable the establishment of humanitarian and trade corridors. These corridors would allow refugees to return home and take part in an international reconstruction effort. For instance, 175,000 people have returned to Kobani, despite 85% of the town's infrastructure having been destroyed by war. Investment in these regions could be tied to local communities establishing pluralist civil administrations, as the Kurds and their allies have done in Rojava. Other possible ceasefire regions could be (1) the Alawite enclave; (2) areas in the south inhabited by Sunni and Druze opposition groups, and (3) an area in Idlib province near the Lebanese border, where outside mediation helped broker a six-month ceasefire, no fly zone, and civilian evacuation. Establishing local administrations would allow leaders to emerge for future elections.

There has been no public discussion about the form of the new government. In a country that is 73% Sunni, 10% Alawi, 10% Christian, and 3% Druze, with ethnicities including Arab, Kurd, Turkmen, Armenian, Assyrian and Roma, a centralized Sunni-majority government, as promoted by Turkey and the Sunni Arab states, may encounter the same challenges experienced by the centralized Shia-majority government in Iraq.



The Kurds and their allies offer a way forward. By not attacking Assad's army they were able to establish three ISIS-free regions in northern Syria by July 2012. In January 2014, a coalition of 40 organisations established autonomous councils in each region: Cizere (in the east), Kobani and Afrin (in the west). In October 2015, a fourth council was established in Tel Abyad. Each council is co-chaired by a man and woman and includes locals from across the ethnic and religious spectrum. Each council has a constitution, government, parliament and court. Local administrative units help councils provide services in towns and villages. Private property is protected, while co-operatives and free enterprise are encouraged. To protect civilians and fight ISIS, 35,000 men and women voluntarily joined or are conscripted into Peoples' Protection Units.

There are many challenges. Some civilians resent being conscripted. Some Syrian Kurdish organisations want an autonomous region or an independent state linked with Iraqi Kurdistan. The PYD and their allies want an autonomous region within a federal system of government in Syria, separate from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Ethnic tensions were also inevitable, given the region's Arabization since the 1960s. YPG/YPJ claim they have liberated 1500 Arab villages from ISIS. On 12 October, Amnesty International released a report claiming YPG/YPJ had forced people to leave villages before destroying their homes. On 16 October, an Assembly of Arab Tribes in Cizere refuted the report based on their local presence and investigations. Like the detailed PYD report released a few days later, the Assembly of Arab Tribes concluded some people had been moved for their own protection and others had fled ISIS. It was ISIS gangs that had destroyed villages and because of ISIS, some villages remained unsafe for civilians. Meanwhile, in Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) some Turkmen and Arabs oppose the new multi-ethnic council. In the Cizere town of Al-Qahtaniya (Tirbespiyê in Kurdish), inter-ethnic and religious tensions were eased and cooperation was enhanced by a three-day workshop in Erbil, organised by the US Institute of Peace.

In future meetings on a political resolution, it is important to establish the status of Rojava and discuss a decentralized democratic federal system of government, as advocated by PYD and its allies. This may also suit Alawites, who would fear persecution from a Sunni-majority government. As has been learnt in Iraq, even if a new constitution defines a federal system, without long term support for democratic institutions at the local, provincial and national level, the likely alternative is one or more authoritarian regimes.

Turkey

The Turkish Intelligence Service claims that more than 3,000 Turks have joined ISIS, and another 1,000 have joined Al Nusra, yet Turkey's role in fighting ISIS is complicated by its fear of Kurds in and outside Turkey. This fear stems from a constitution and political culture rooted in a fierce form of nationalism, where until the 1990s, even using the word 'Kurd' or speaking Kurdish could lead to imprisonment, torture or death.

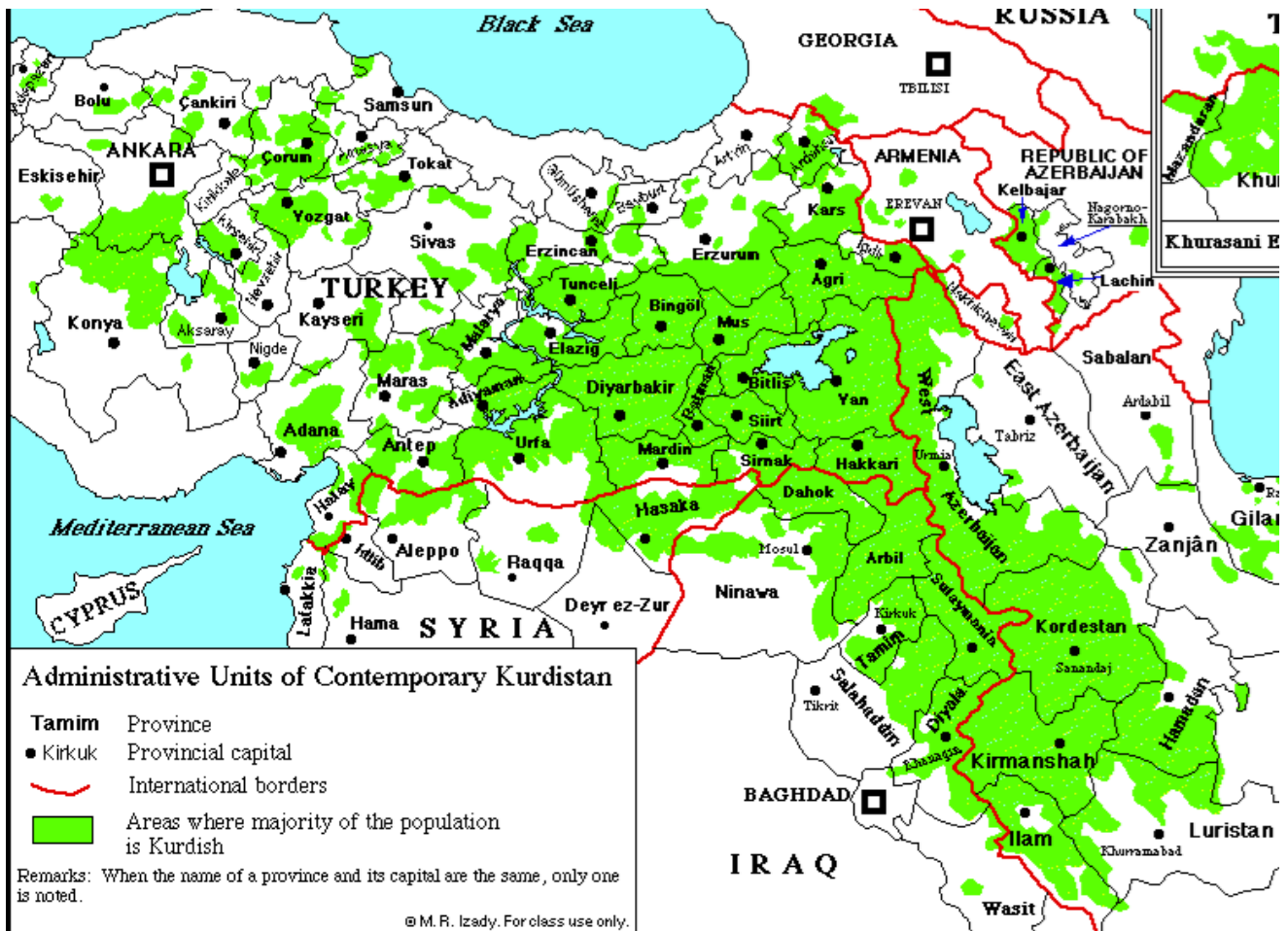


Figure 10: Kurdish provinces in eastern Turkey (Adyaman, Agri, Bingol, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Dersim (Tunceli,)Elazig; Hakkari, Igdır, Mardin, Mus, Sanliurfa, Siirt, Sırnak, Urfa and Van, and parts of Erzincan, Erzurum, Adana, Kars, Konya, and Maras)

Against oppression and assimilation, there were four Kurdish uprisings in the twentieth century. The last began in 1984, in which 40,000 people lost their lives. It came after the 1980 military coup, when 650,000 people were detained and 517 received the death penalty. In 1999, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was captured and put in solitary confinement, where he remains. Between 1993 and 2011, PKK declared eight unilateral ceasefires. In March 2013, after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) announced it would embark on a Turkish-Kurdish peace process, a ceasefire was negotiated between PKK and the Turkish state. The peace process was supported by 70% of the population. It was key to Turkey's future stability, prosperity and democratic development.

In the lead up to the June 2015 elections, Erdogan maintained the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party or HDP was an arm of the PKK. This inspired Turkish nationalists to attack HDP offices and rallies in 250 separate incidents causing the deaths of 37 people. Nevertheless, HDP won an unprecedented 80 seats in a parliament of 550 members, with the Republican Peoples Party (CHP) winning 132 seats and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) winning 80 seats. The AKP was reduced to 258 seats. Having lost an absolute majority, AKP was unwilling to form a coalition government. Instead,



Erdogan called another election for 1 November. He also announced a freeze of the peace process on the basis that PKK had failed to disarm. The Turkish state had failed to negotiate any terms for disarmament.

A trigger for war occurred on 22 July 2015, when youths not affiliated with the PKK killed two policemen. The youths alleged the policemen had ISIS connections and could have prevented the killing of 32 mainly Kurdish youths, who had gathered in nearby Suruc on 20 July to organize relief supplies for Kobani. Instead of going after the youths, on 24 July, Erdogan launched a war on PKK. All international observers agree Erdogan did this for political gain.

By launching a war on PKK, international observers believed the AKP hoped to win over Turkish nationalist votes and discredit the pro-Kurdish HDP, so in the November election AKP could gain a sufficient majority to change the constitution to give President Erdogan extraordinary executive powers. All opposition parties are against this change.

In the weeks following 24 July, there were mass arrests, mainly of Kurds, and attacks on Turkish security forces. The violence was blamed on PKK. The pro-Kurdish HDP and the CHP called for independent investigations into who was responsible for the violence. Erdogan rejected any investigation, despite there being many groups in Turkey outside the PKK capable of using violence for political ends: Kurdish individuals and groups acting independently of the PKK (such as the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons), ultra nationalists, the far left, anarchist, Islamic and jihadi groups, and agents of the state.

Nor is it possible to confirm the numbers that were being killed or wounded, as figures vary. For instance, according to open news sources between 20 July and 9 October 2015, there were:

- 140 fatalities among Turkish security forces, of which 55% were caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). However, PKK claim to have killed over 500 security force personnel.
- 1,740 PKK fatalities according to the Turkish state Anatolian news agency. Other sources indicate PKK likely sustained 250-300 fatalities, about 70% from air attacks, but PKK claims 70 PKK militant fatalities.
- 108 civilian fatalities according to a Human Rights association, although others claim this figure was higher, and on 10 October this figure doubled.

The 1 November election campaign was conducted in a climate of war. There was strict media censorship, government attacks on media outlets and arrests of people speaking or writing against Erdogan or the war. These people were accused of being terrorist sympathisers or insulting the president. Security forces established security zones in Kurdish suburbs and towns, imposing curfews. Daily violence occurred between security forces and Kurdish civilians or PKK.

Despite the HDP Co-Chairs, Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, calling for PKK to enter an unconditional ceasefire, a criminal investigation was launched against them for



“insulting the president”, “inciting people to take up arms” and “condoning a terrorist organisation”.

On 17 August, the PKK leadership claimed they would accept a bilateral ceasefire with US mediation and guarantees. By this time, Turkish security forces were burning and bombing Kurdish villages, orchards, livestock and forests, using tanks, as well as fighter jets and helicopters to drop cluster bombs and bombs of sulphur and phosphorus.

By late August, 127 security zones in Kurdish towns and suburbs had been imposed by Turkish authorities. Inside these security zones, no-one is allowed to enter or leave. Hundreds of soldiers, police and special operations teams, including snipers, arrive in tanks and armoured vehicles, blockade a suburb or town, and cut water, electricity and telecommunications. People are subject to curfews, house-to-house searches and arbitrary arrests in their homes, at work and in the street. Security forces bomb or shoot at houses, shops, offices, health clinics, cars and ambulances. Protesters or anyone breaking the curfew, including three children on their way to buy bread, are shot. The wounded and ill are not allowed medical treatment and the dead cannot be buried. Children are prevented from going to school. Schools close and teachers from western Turkey leave the zone. In one security zone, the 120,000 residents of Cizre were subject to a 24-hour a day curfew for nine days. People could not leave their homes and ran out of food and water. The Turkish state claimed they killed 32 PKK in Cizre. HDP claims the state killed at least 23 civilians. When journalists and politicians were finally allowed to enter Cizre they witnessed a war zone.

In response to these actions by Turkish security forces, youth belonging to a Kurdish youth association that acts independently of the PKK but follows PKK ideology, resisted, digging trenches and setting up blockades to prevent security forces entering an area, and declaring self government in 15 towns and suburbs. The resulting clashes with security forces lead to many deaths, which could explain the disparity in figures for PKK fatalities. Local councils in the towns of Cizre, Silopi, Sirnak, Yuksekova, Semdinli and elsewhere, supported the actions of these ‘youngsters’, leading to dozens of Kurdish mayors and officials being suspended from their posts, remanded in custody and charged with breaking the unity of the state.

PKK’s strategy was to attack security convoys on roads linking military bases to security zones. One attack near Yuksekova on 6 September, killed 16 soldiers and 12 policemen. The state media went ballistic. In the following days, Turkish nationalists, including an AKP youth group, stoned, vandalised and torched 128 HDP offices, and attacked non-state media outlets. Nationalist attacks on Kurdish civilians, businesses, homes, buses, cars and ambulances continued in different cities, while security forces stood by and watched. Few suspects were arrested, and those who were arrested, were usually released within days.

To protest these actions by the Turkish state, two HDP parliamentarians, Ali Haydar Konca and Muslum Dogan, who had been appointed Minister for EU Affairs and Minister for Development, resigned from their posts in late September. One incident provides an example of the state’s brutality. In the first week of October, a 24-year old

Kurdish filmmaker and brother-in-law of an HDP deputy, was shot in a street of Sirnak by a special operations team. He fell to the ground. They stamped on his head, then dragged him through the streets behind a military vehicle. When civilians took him to hospital, a hospital staffer brought out a stretcher. She was beaten, arrested by special operations and taken to the local police station. The man died in hospital. It was all caught on video.

A peace march in central Ankara was organised by trade unions, medical associations and political parties including the HDP, to protest the war between the state and PKK. On 10 October, people arriving at the rally were surprised by the lack of police checkpoints and police. Two explosions killed more than 100 people and wounded another 516. Many people are still missing. Eyewitnesses claim police suddenly appeared and attacked people, who were helping the wounded, with tear gas, water cannons, batons and bullets. Police also delayed ambulances from entering the area. Like the Suruc attack on 20 July, no-one claimed responsibility for the explosions.

The state issued an immediate ban on all radio and television broadcasts about the massacre. On the day of the massacre, the PKK leadership announced a unilateral ceasefire on all offensive actions until 1 November, in support of HDP and the elections. Rather than consider a bilateral ceasefire, Turkey's president and prime minister repeatedly alleged that a 'terror cocktail' of PKK, PYD, Syrian intelligence and ISIS were responsible for the Ankara bombings, overlooking the fact that PKK and PYD are at war with ISIS. These allegations continued even after Turkish officials announced the identity of two ISIS suicide bombers. One was Yunus Emre Alagoz, the older brother of Seyh Aburrahman Alagoz, who allegedly detonated a bomb that killed the 32 youths in Suruc on 20 July. Yunus was also a friend of Orhan Gonder, who allegedly set off a bomb two days before the June election at HDP's electoral rally in Diyarbakir, killing four people. The other suicide bomber was identified as a member of the same ISIS cell. These and other individuals were on a National Intelligence watch list that had been distributed to all police in June, with a request they be arrested. Not one was arrested, despite some parents pleading with police to arrest their own children.



Figure 11: Bodies of victims are covered with flags and banners as a police officer secure the area after the explosion in Ankara. *Photo: Burhan Ozbilici/AP*



Within days of the bombings, reports claimed security forces and foreign embassies were warned three days in advance of an impending bomb attack in Ankara. Tens of thousands of striking workers and protesters marched in multiple cities across Turkey, accusing the State of being complicit. The big question, even for MHP, which opposes a peace process, was why Turkey's huge intelligence service and security forces are incapable of stopping serial carnage at peaceful pro-Kurdish gatherings. The reasons may never be established because a confidentiality order was filed by the Bureau of Crimes to restrict evidence so lawyers of victims and suspects cannot access documents. A confidentiality order had likewise been implemented on evidence gathered after the Diyarbakir and Suruc attacks.

The human rights abuses in Turkey are reminiscent of the 1990s, but in contrast to the 1990s, they are occurring in towns and cities, and many Turks, including some soldiers, question the necessity of war. Nor is PKK calling the shots. Kurdish youth, betrayed by the political process and proud of Kurds defeating ISIS, are taking action.

After the Ankara bombings, HDP called off all election rallies. A week before the election, the state took complete control of television stations and newspapers critical of the AKP. On 1 November, in the midst of an ailing economy, war, media censorship and the inability of any opposition party to conduct a credible campaign, AKP's claim that only AKP could bring stability and prosperity to Turkey convinced nearly 50% of voters, including some Kurds who feared the declarations of self rule as much as the curfews and clashes with security forces. On polling day, amidst accusations of fraud (blank forms being signed and results being reported before votes were counted) and intimidation (in eastern Turkey, military vehicles blocking roads and masked security personnel at polling stations not allowing people to vote, intimidating others and detaining international observers), AKP gained 317 seats, enough to form a majority government. CHP won 134 seats and the HDP won 59 seats. The MHP won 40 seats.

Even AKP supporters hoped for a return to peace, but on 5 November Erdogan promised that PKK would be annihilated. PKK called an end to its unilateral ceasefire. Post-election, although there have been an increasing number of arrests of ISIS suspects, there is a continuation of air strikes on PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan and eastern Turkey, and new curfews in suburbs of Diyarbakir, Cizre, Silvan, and three towns in Diyarbakir province, with soldiers, police and unidentified people shooting anything that moves, bombing houses, clashing with members of the PKK youth group and killing civilians. Ziya Pir, the elected HDP Member of Parliament for Silvan, reported that when he asked a Ministry of the Interior official to intervene he was told, "We will wipe these three neighbourhoods from the map." However, on day 12 of the siege, a mass protest in Silvan caused Turkish troops to withdraw to a base in the city's centre.

In the November election, the AKP fell 13 seats short of being able to call a referendum to change the constitution. Erdogan is proposing that if no parliamentary coalition can be formed to demand constitutional reforms, a referendum will be called on changing the constitution to give the president executive powers. HDP also wants constitutional reforms, but for a different purpose, claiming reforms must increase democratic processes and address Kurdish concerns.



Figure 12: Fires lit by Turkish security forces, Silvan, 12 November 2015

Turkey's preoccupation with fighting Kurds in three countries, and its support for Al Nusra in Syria, if not ISIS, is a gain for ISIS. Yet Turkey is not publically criticised because Turkey belongs to NATO. The coalition wants to use its air bases and the EU wants a refugee agreement.

As a matter of urgency, we call on Australia to use its close relationship with Turkey and the US, and its role in the UN, to raise the need for Turkey to address the human rights abuses and the lack of judicial transparency and media independence. It is imperative that the international community facilitate negotiations for a lasting ceasefire and viable peace process, the latter requiring constitutional reforms. Reforms could include provincial governors being elected rather than appointed, for police and other security forces to be recruited from local populations, and for mother tongues to be taught in state schools.

Given that President Erdogan, AKP and CHP refuse to directly negotiate with 'terrorists', it is essential that negotiations involve multiple stakeholders - political parties, NGOs, academics and religious organisations. Yet PKK is vital to a ceasefire and peace process.

PKK has evolved, as did the PLO and Sinn Fein. Like the HDP, it is asking for regional autonomy within a democratic federal system of government in Turkey. PKK's vision for regional autonomy includes political, economic, cultural and security matters. A federal system may better serve a country comprising 14 ethnic groups (Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Azerbaijanis, Chechnans, Circassians,



Georgians, Greeks, Laz, Roma and Syriacs), and where 72% of people are Sunni Muslims, 25% are Alevi and 3% are either Christian, Jewish or Yezidi, although one third of the population could be described as secularists.

In August, the Australian government relisted the PKK as a terrorist organization. In September, Kurdish Lobby Australia submitted a presentation to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) arguing that without independent investigations, PKK cannot be held responsible for all the violence attributed to it by the Turkish state, and that PKK is the only organisation on Australia's terrorist list that is asking for increased democracy, and has proved an effective, reliable ally in fighting ISIS.

The international community have a number of bargaining tools to facilitate a ceasefire, peace process and constitutional reforms. Turkey's entry into the EU could be linked to political milestones, the first being a bilateral ceasefire with PKK. Delisting the PKK as a terrorist organisation could be linked to PKK upholding this ceasefire. If Turkey continues down the path of authoritarianism and war, then it is time to reassess its likelihood of becoming an EU member, and its suitability as a member of NATO. If the international community does not support a peace process between Turkey and Kurds in and outside Turkey, then Kurds have every reason to feel betrayed.

Iran

Iran is playing a major role in the war against ISIS. It has demonstrated considerable success in training, equipping and leading Shia militia against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Iran is well placed to work with the US and others to support functioning federations in both countries.

However, Iran has an alarming human rights record. For instance, the death penalty has increased from 100 per annum a decade ago to an estimated 800 to 1000 in 2015. Kurds make up 50% of all executions, although they comprise about 13% of the population. The Kurdish region remains poverty stricken and heavily militarized. Kurds are politically oppressed and discriminated against in all government institutions.

After the signing of the Iran nuclear deal, President Hassan Rouhani visited Iran's Kurdish region for the first time on 6 July. He promised infrastructure improvements and announced that the Iranian government cares for Kurds in and outside Iran, and helps Kurds defeat ISIS. Nevertheless clashes continue between the Iranian army and Iranian Kurdish militants, who are demanding autonomy within a federal system of government.

Australia is supporting an international campaign against the death penalty. This issue and other human rights issues, as well as educational, language and political discriminations faced by Iran's ethnic minorities could be raised with the Iranian ambassador and at international forums.

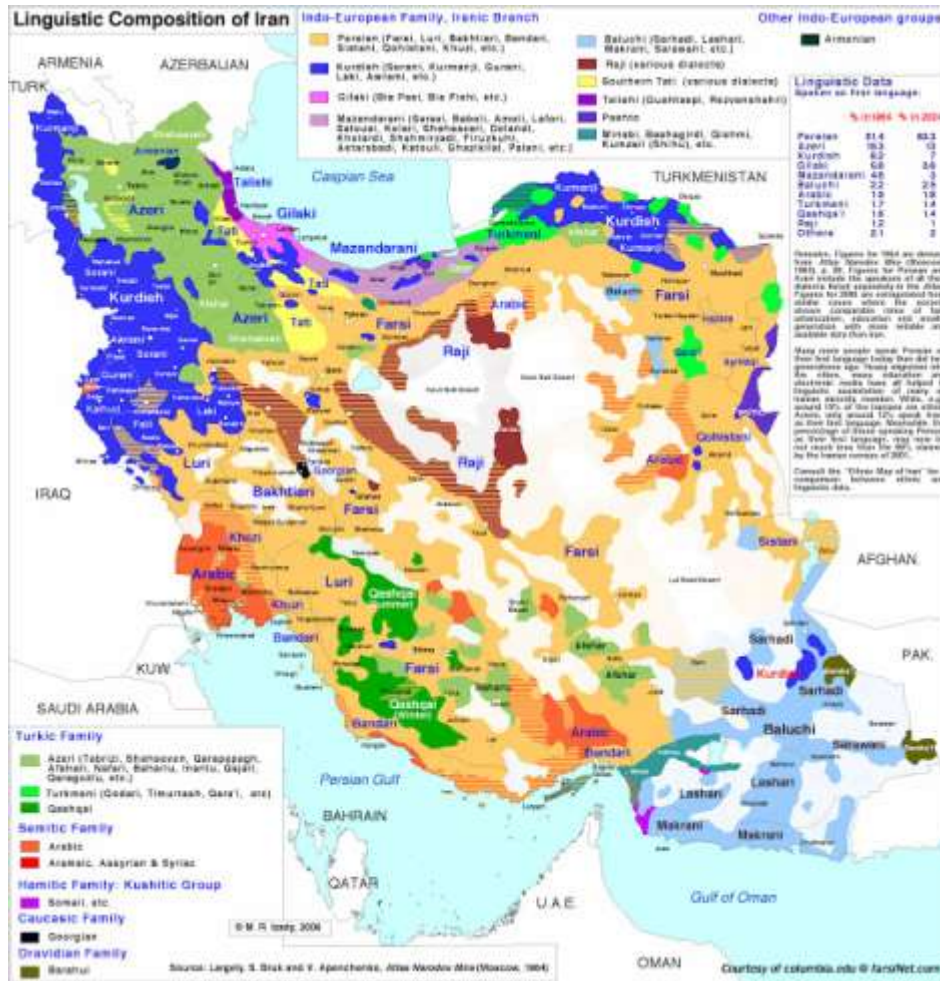


Figure 13: Distribution of ethnic groups in Iran. Kurds (bright blue) live in the provinces of West Azerbaijan (c. Urmia); Kurdistan (c. Sanandaj); Kermanshah (c. Kermanshah); Hamadan (c. Hamadan); and Ilam (c. Ilam), and Northern Khurasan (in north east).

Conclusion

The sacrifices and achievements of Kurdish forces against ISIS are helping the international community fight ISIS. Despite the US – Kurdish military alliance, there are no political guarantees for Kurds. What Kurds fear most is that after ISIS is defeated, they will be bypassed in favour of the status quo: incompetent, oppressive, highly centralized and corrupt governments that provide few economic opportunities, all of which create the breeding grounds for resistance, terrorism and war.

On 10 September, US intelligence experts predicted that within a decade or two Syria and Iraq would be divided into Alawite, Sunni, Shia and Kurdish states. In October, retired Turkish Major General Armagan Kuloglu claimed that Kurds will get a semi-autonomous region or an independent state in Syria, like the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

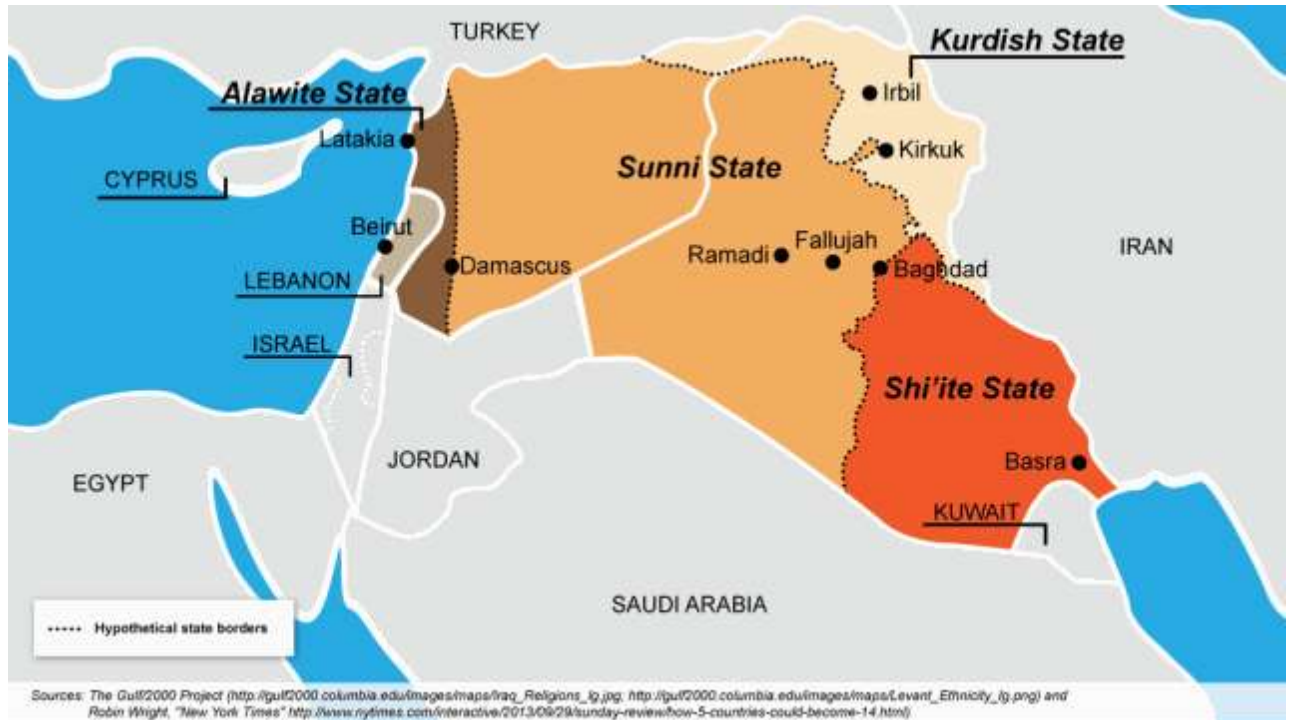


Figure 14: One proposal for partitioning Iraq and Syria (once again, shortchanging Kurdistan).

Many Kurds dream of an independent nation state, but they know to achieve this, they need support from the international community. Lacking any guarantees, Kurdish leaders talk of democratic federations within each nation state they live – ones that provide them autonomy in politics, culture, economics and security. These kinds of loose federations need international support in terms of mediation, planning, resources and time. Linking aid and investment to political milestones is one tool that could help the process. Given the importance of Kurds in the geopolitics of the region, we suggest the Australian government should consider a Parliamentary Friendship Group, and a special envoy or high commissioner to focus on Kurdish issues within the broader political transformations that are required in the region.

Australia has been militarily involved in the region since World War I. It has been politically involved since 1919, as a member of the League of Nations and the UN. Australia has contributed to agricultural development in Iraqi Kurdistan since the 1970s. In 1991 we took part in Operation Habitat and Australian construction and oil companies now operate in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2014, despite war with ISIS and a trade embargo with Iran, Australia's wheat exports to Iraq and Iran were valued at AUD\$600 million. Our exports to Turkey were valued at AUD\$496 million. We have experience in federalism. As a non-imperialist, we are well placed to contribute to a more sustainable future in these countries, but only if we recognise that a transition from autocracy to democracy needs nurturing over decades.

Acronyms

- AKP Justice and Development Party, founded in 2001 and in power in Turkey since 2002.
- FSA Free Syrian Army, formed in 2011 by commanders who defected from the Syrian Defence Forces. Includes Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Druze and Kurds. In 2012, reorganized with 2/3 of the new leadership associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. By 2013, fragmented and losing territory to Al Nusra and others.
- HDP Peoples Democratic Party in Turkey, a pro-Kurdish party that ran in the June 2015 elections. In the previous election, HDP members ran as independents.
- KRG Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq
- PKK Kurdistan Workers Party founded in Turkey in 1978 and commencing an armed struggle in 1984. Classified a terrorist organization by US and Australia, but not Russia or the UN.
- PYD Democratic Union Party, a Kurdish-based party in Syria illegally founded in 2003.
- SDF Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Kurdish, Arabs and Assyrian forces established in October 2015
- YPG People's Protection Units, formed in 2004 by the PYD in Syria (Mainly Kurdish, With Arabs, Turks and Western individuals, as well as Assyrian/Syriac Christian units)
- YPJ Women's Protection Units, formed in 2012 by the PYD in Syria.

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