



Kurdish Lobby Australia

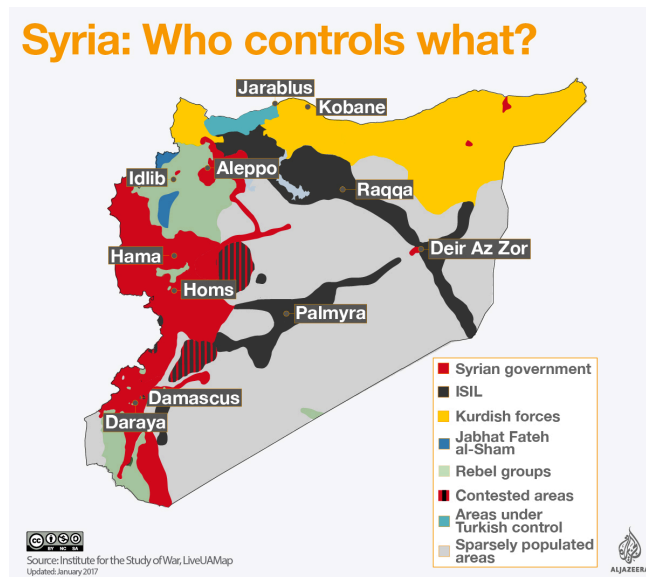


Providing Social Cultural Services

## Statement in support of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and Democratic Federal System Northern Syria being included in all negotiations on Syria

Today, 23 January 2017, Syrian regime officials and a delegation representing 19 opposition militias start talks overseen by Russia, Turkey and Iran in Astana, Kazakhstan, to discuss a permanent ceasefire and humanitarian issues in Syria. These talks precede UN supported negotiations in Geneva to discuss a political solution based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 calling for a new constitution and a transition of power.

### Syria: Who controls what?



In Syria, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are the most effective forces fighting ISIS. They have defended or liberated 29 percent of Syria's populated territory from ISIS. This territory is being run by a federal system of local multi-ethnic democratic administrations. Elsewhere, the Syrian regime and ISIS each control about one third of Syria's populated territory, while opposition militias oversee Idlib province and rural pockets in the north and south. See map.

President Assad repeatedly states he wants to militarily take back all of Syria. Sunni opposition militias want to replace the Alawite regime with a centralised Sunni majority government. Most of these militias favour a government based on Sharia Law. Syrian Kurds and their allies want the opportunity to negotiate a federal system of self-governance that protects the rights of all Syrians, or at least practise this system in an autonomous region. But representatives of the YPG/YPJ, SDF and political parties like the Democratic Union Party (PYD) are being excluded from all talks on a military and political solution. Only Kurds aligned with the Turkish government have been included in negotiations, i.e. those in the Turkey-based Syrian National Council (SNC) and Kurdish National Council (KNC). Meanwhile Turkey is attacking and killing civilians and Kurdish forces in northern Syria with airstrikes, artillery, guns and opposition militias. The Turkish president claims that Turkey will eliminate every Kurdish 'terrorist' inside Syria.

**Kurdish Lobby Australia and the Kurdish Democratic Community Centre of Victoria call upon Australian parliamentarians to ask the following questions from the floor.**

1. What is the Australian Government prepared to do in support of representatives of the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces and Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria being included in negotiations on Syria?
2. What is the government prepared to do in response to Turkey's attacks on Kurdish-led forces and civilians in northern Syria?



kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com  
Sydney



kurdsydney@hotmail.com  
Melbourne

**We ask the Australian Government to advocate for Syrian Kurds and their allies to be included in all future negotiations on a military and political solution for Syria.**

### **Background Information for this Request**

#### Military realities

The Syrian civil war is causing untold suffering and threatens regional and international security. Between March 2011 and November 2016, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 203,097 civilian deaths. Of these, pro-regime forces killed 189,000; opposition militias killed 3,668; Russian forces killed 3,558; ISIS killed 2,998; US-led coalition airstrikes killed 669 and Kurdish-led forces killed between 215 and 512. Between 24 August - 31 December Turkey and Turkey-backed militias killed 277 civilians. In this period, Turkey lost 40 soldiers (and 300 militants) compared to the US losing one soldier since 2014, Russia losing 23 soldiers since 30 September 2015, and Iran losing about 1,000. Otherwise there are four military stakeholders. These are:

- 1. Pro-regime forces** including 125,000 regular army troops and 150,000 pro-regime militants. Among the latter are about 50,000 foreign fighters, including 25,000 Lebanese Hezbollah and 25,000 Iranian-trained militants from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon. Since the fall of eastern Aleppo the Syrian regime controls Syria's five largest cities but does not have complete control over its existing territory, nor does it have adequate forces to launch multiple offensives or significantly expand that territory.
- 2. Sunni opposition militias** numbering between 100,000 and 150,000 fighters in Idlib and rural pockets of Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Daraa and Quneitra. According to the Institute for the Study of the War, only 23 militia groups are 'real' or 'potential' powerbrokers. They command about 90,000 fighters and can be ideologically classified as:
  - Transnational Salafi jihadists (20 percent) e.g. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham;
  - National Salafi jihadists (31 percent) e.g. Ahrar al-Sham;
  - Political Islamists (24 percent); and
  - Secularists (25 percent) unevenly spread, e.g. 4 percent of all opposition militias in northwest Syria and 87 percent of all opposition militias south of Damascus.
- 3. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)** including 45,000 Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), and 15,000 Arabs, Turkmen and Assyrians, with plans to recruit another 10,000 for the Raqqa offensive, which officially began on 5 November 2016. Between 5 November and 19 January, the SDF liberated 3,000 square kilometres, four towns and 127 villages, killing 410 ISIS fighters and losing 43 SDF fighters, including a US serviceman and three YPG volunteers from the UK, US and Canada.
- 4. ISIS**, numbering 30,000 fighters across Syria and Iraq, although possibly reaching 200,000 if local fighters are included. Although ISIS has lost significant territory, it remains capable of launching large offensives, having recaptured Palmyra between 9 – 11 December and attacking Deir Ezzor city since 14 January; conducting suicide attacks in government strongholds of Tartus, Jableh (Latakia) and Damascus, which killed at least 34 people and destroying significant infrastructure, including a gas plant near Palmyra, which supplies one third of Syria, including Damascus.



kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com  
Sydney



kurdsydney@hotmail.com  
Melbourne

### Political developments

Between 23 February and 25 December 2016 the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic negotiated 1,075 truce agreements with opposition militias in Latakia, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Quneitra. These agreements require rebels to disarm in return for amnesty and safe evacuation to destinations determined by the Syrian regime. A truce agreement enabled the withdrawal of opposition forces and civilians in eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city between 14 and 22 December. Many consider these agreements are enforcing demographic changes.

Russian officials met with Syrian Kurds and arranged meetings between them and the Syrian regime to discuss a new constitution and an autonomous region in northern Syria on 17 September and at the end of December at the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia, as well as in Qamishli and Damascus in January. Russian officials request that the Syrian Kurds limit negotiations to an autonomous region in northern Syria. The danger of focusing on northern Syria is that Kurds and their allies will be open to Sunni Arab criticism that they want to separate from the rest of Syria, unless opposition groups are convinced that a federal system would be advantageous for them. Russia supports Alawites maintaining control at the national level. This could be a reward for allowing decentralisation.

At midnight 29 December a countrywide ceasefire was implemented after negotiations between Russia, Turkey, the regime and opposition militias. The ceasefire excludes ISIS and JFS. By early January, Russia announced 104 militias had signed up. Opposition militias' warned that if JFS was excluded the ceasefire would not hold. This was born out. Despite ceasefire violations by all sides in Wadi Barada and eastern Ghouta (around Damascus), east of Aleppo city, central Homs, north of Hama city and Idlib, negotiations will go ahead in Astana. Major hurdles include:

- Assad claims that the oppositions' violations of the last ceasefire force him to militarily take control of the entire country. Russia has yet to prove it has sufficient influence to change this long held position.
- The Saudi and Qatar backers of JFS are not modifying the military actions of JFS. Post-Astana, JFS is preparing for conflict with other militias.
- Opposition militias feel obliged to resist the regime so they have some leverage during negotiations. The problem is that they rely on fresh weapons and ammunition coming in from Turkey.
- A Russian-sponsored UN Security Council resolution demanding a countrywide delivery of humanitarian aid was passed on 31 December, but aid delivery is being prevented by bureaucratic hurdles and pro-regime and opposition forces.
- Iran-backed militias were not signatories to the ceasefire agreements. Turkey demands Iran cease supporting pro-regime militias in Syria, in return for Turkey blocking supplies to Sunni opposition militias. Iran has not complied.
- Turkey failed to get PYD and YPG/YPJ on the terrorist list of the Moscow Declaration, but succeeded in excluding them and the SDF from signing ceasefire agreements.
- Turkey continues to push for a Turkish controlled safe-haven in northern Aleppo, despite Russian, US, Iranian, Syrian regime and civilian opposition to this. Syria,



kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com  
Sydney



kurdsydney@hotmail.com  
Melbourne

Russia and US oppose Turkey taking Manbij and invading northeast Syria. Iran opposes Turkey liberating Raqqa. To 'save face', it appears Turkey is being allowed to advance on ISIS-controlled Al-Bab, where between 4,000 and 8,000 Turkish forces have taken a front line role because of the lack of discipline, divisions and desertions among Turkey-backed militias. In January, Turkish, Russian and US airstrikes have targeted ISIS in and around Al-Bab, with pro-regime forces advancing from the south, creating the potential for conflict between Syria and Turkey.

- Russia supports co-ordinating with the US against ISIS and JFS. Iran opposes this.
- Unless all stakeholders quickly agree on a plan for Wadi Barada and other areas around Damascus, Idlib province, northern Aleppo, Rojava and Raqqa, civil war, enforced demographic changes and scorched earth policies will continue.

Features of the Astana talks that may prevent resolving the aforementioned issues are:

- Talks will not include all external stakeholders, although this could have some benefits. Russia, Turkey and Iran, the UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura and the US ambassador to Kazakhstan will be present. Turkey wanted Saudi Arabia and Qatar to attend and Russia wanted a US delegation. Iran opposed.
- Negotiations will not include all internal stakeholders. The Syrian delegation will include government, military and judicial representatives headed by Syrian envoy to the UN, Bashar Jaafari. Mohammed Alloush will head the opposition delegation. He is a member of the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) and leader in the Saudi-backed Jaish al-Islam, a coalition of 50 Islamist and Salafi movements that want a Sunni Arab Sharia state. Ahrar Al-Islam has refused to take part. The delegation will include eight people representing 19 militias, backed by nine legal and political advisors from the Saudi and Turkey-backed HNC, and Turkey-based SNC. Among these advisors are three Kurds who may not have a direct role in negotiations. Turkey succeeded in having SDF and YPG/J excluded from the talks despite some opposition leaders (e.g. Mahmoud Afandi) requesting they attend.
- The Sunni Arab opposition is deeply divided, militarily and politically.
  - JFS has repeatedly tried to merge groups, but Ahrar al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zink and others have resisted because JFS wants to dominate leadership positions.
  - On 28 December, the FSA announced the formation of the Islamic Authority in Syria, involving 10 – 11 militias with the aim of establishing local administrations.
  - Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafi groups are caught between these merger options and in January announced a preliminary 'third way' involving nine signatories.
  - Divisions are likely to continue with military conflict already breaking out between and within militias. Since late December clashes between JFS and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and between JFS and Ahrar al-Sham have occurred in Idlib and Wadi Barada. A number of JFS and FSA leaders have been assassinated. Ahrar al-Sham is split between hardliners and those who support Turkey.



kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com  
Sydney



kurdsydney@hotmail.com  
Melbourne

The hurdles to overcome in political negotiations in Geneva include:

- Assad claims he is open to all possibilities, except negotiating his presidency. Sunni Arab opposition groups insist Assad must step down. The US, EU and Gulf states may refuse to fund reconstruction until Assad does so.
- Many Sunni opposition groups aspire to a strong central Sunni Arab majority government based on Sharia law.
- The SDF, YPG/J, PYD and their allies aspire to a secular democratic federal system of self-governance in Syria and autonomy in northern Syria. The Syrian regime, Turkey, Iran, the HNC and FSA oppose federalism. The US opposes any unilateral solution. On 10 January, US State Department deputy spokesperson, Mark Toner, said Syrian Kurds must be included at some point. Turkey's response was that if they were included JFS and ISIS should be too.

What happens in Idlib, northern Aleppo and Raqqa is critical. Idlib is a province of about 2.5 million people mostly administered by opposition militias that have introduced Sharia Law since early 2015, including about 10,000 JFS and 10,000 Ahrar al-Sham. Throughout 2016, thousands of other opposition militants and civilians arrived in Idlib, including an unknown number from eastern Aleppo. About 50,000 opposition fighters are in Idlib.

In northern Aleppo, between 24 August and 30 December, Turkey claims to have killed between 291 – 306 YPG and 1,294 – 1,362 ISIS fighters. Despite Russia and the US repeatedly warning Turkey it was unacceptable for Turkish forces to take Al-Bab and Manbij, Turkey advanced on both towns, attacking ISIS and villages liberated by SDF-led fighters. Since 10 December Turkish forces have been trying to enter Al-Bab. On 22 December ISIS killed 14 Turkish soldiers and wounded another 80, in addition to killing 35 militants. On 11 January, Turkey's Defence Minister, Fikri Isik, announced Turkey would send civil servants to Al-Bab in view of rebuilding the town. After liberating Al-Bab, Turkey wants to advance on Manbij, which the SDF liberated in August.

Turkey opposes the SDF liberating Raqqa. On 30 November Major General Rupert Jones, deputy commander of the 68-member international coalition, claimed, 'As they [the SDF] liberate cities and villages, they set up local councils to re-establish governance and maintain security. This is the same formula the SDF successfully used to liberate and re-establish governance in Manbij, Hasakah and other areas.' Abu Issa, Commander in Chief of Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa, an Arab unit that fought alongside Kurds in Kobani and Tel Abyad, claims that the SDF has agreed to restrict its role to 'overseeing the city's security until a civil council, a police force, judiciary and a military force are formed to protect and govern [Raqqa].' Then it will be up to the people of Raqqa to decide their future.

### Northern Syria

In 2016, Turkey attacked Afrin, Kobani and Cizre in northern Syria 191 times, killing about 120 civilians. Turkey is building a wall on the Syrian side of the border and has amassed tanks, armoured personnel carriers and soldiers on the Turkish side. On 27 – 29 December, a 165-member assembly representing the ethnic and political groups in northern Syria met in Rmeilan, Hasakah province, to finalise a constitution for the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria. See map on following page.

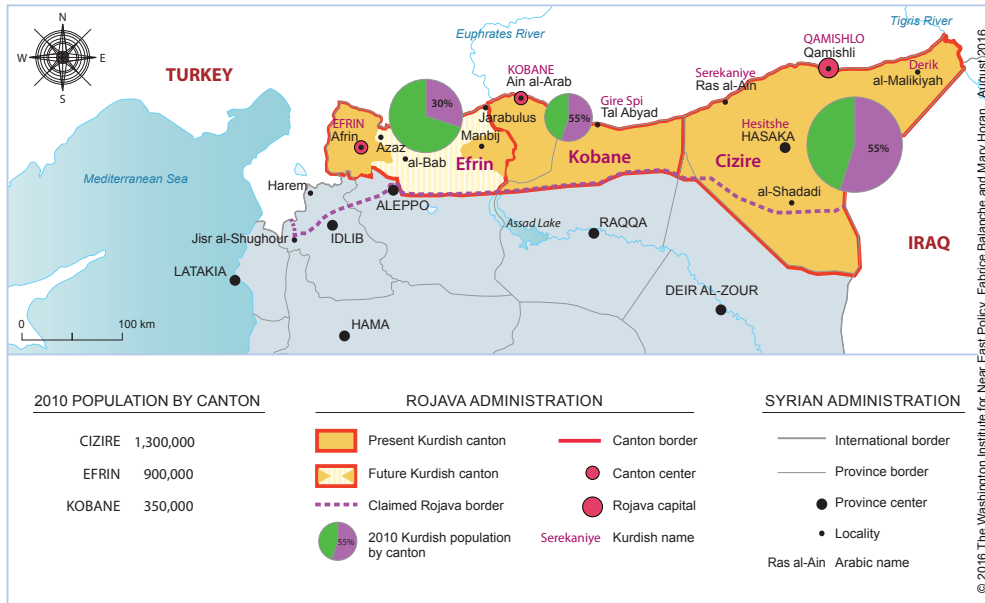


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Sydney



kurdsydney@hotmail.com  
Melbourne

### Rojava: Population and Future Administrative Organization



Source: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy>