



Kurdish Lobby Australia

## Background Report VI: 4 September 2017

# Post-ISIS States

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## Acronyms

Asayish	Kurdish police
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
DBP	Democratic Regions Party (Turkey)
Gol	Government of Iraq
HDP	Peoples Democratic Party (Turkey)
HNC	High Negotiation Committee
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
JFS	Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly called Al-Qaida/ Al-Nusra
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran)
KNC/ENKS	Kurdish National Council (KDP-linked coalition of parties)
KPC	Kirkuk Provincial Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PMUs	Popular Mobilisation Units or Hashd al-Shaabi
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Turkey)
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's units in Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)

Note: 'Militia/s' refers to groups; 'militants' refers to individuals.



## Overview

### The current situation

The war against ISIS and the Syrian civil war have reduced major cities to rubble and killed more than 600,000 people compared to an estimated 200,000 people killed by war and terrorism in Iraq between 2003 – 2011. Contributing to the extent of material damage and the numbers killed are a deadlocked UN Security Council, and Russia and the US-led coalition choosing to wage war from the air whilst using nation state and non-state actors on the ground to protect and project their interests.<sup>1</sup>

The West is winning the war on the ISIS caliphate. Since the height of the caliphate in mid 2014, the war has killed up to 70,000 ISIS members, including all ‘first level’ leaders. By August 2017, ISIS had lost 73 percent of its territory in Iraq and 58 percent of its territory in Syria, with 5.5 million people being liberated. ISIS is experiencing a reduced inflow of foreign fighters, a sharp decline in revenue and media output, and increased numbers surrendering, being executed by other ISIS members, or defecting to the more embedded Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), formerly called Al-Qaida/ Al-Nusra, and its coalition, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. However, funded by donations, extortion and buying legitimate businesses ISIS will likely carry on an insurgency.

The West has been less successful in preventing international terrorist attacks inspired by a militant interpretation of Wahhabi ideology. Terrorist attacks have led to Australian casualties across the world: in Bali, Jakarta, New York, Baghdad, Mumbai, London, Tunis, Nairobi, Riyadh and Barcelona. To gain media coverage and remain relevant, ISIS will continue to encourage attacks on westerners using suicide bombers, guns, knives and by weaponising vehicles. While there is growing concern that ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq are returning to Europe and Asia<sup>2</sup>, an even more worrying trend is the number of terrorist attacks carried out by in-country self-radicalised individuals and groups. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague found that 73 percent of the 65 attackers responsible for 51 successful acts of jihadi terrorism in Europe and the US between June 2014 – June 2017 came from the country in which they committed the attack; only 18 percent had been to Iraq or Syria; and only 43 percent had a clear operational link with a terrorist group. To reduce the threat of international terror, ISIS ideology and strategies need to be challenged and the sources of discontent addressed.

The war on ISIS is responding to the caliphate’s military overreach but as ISIS territory diminishes and the Assad regime gains ground against opposition militias, multiple stakeholders are contesting who will control what territory. There are seven flash points. In Syria these are:

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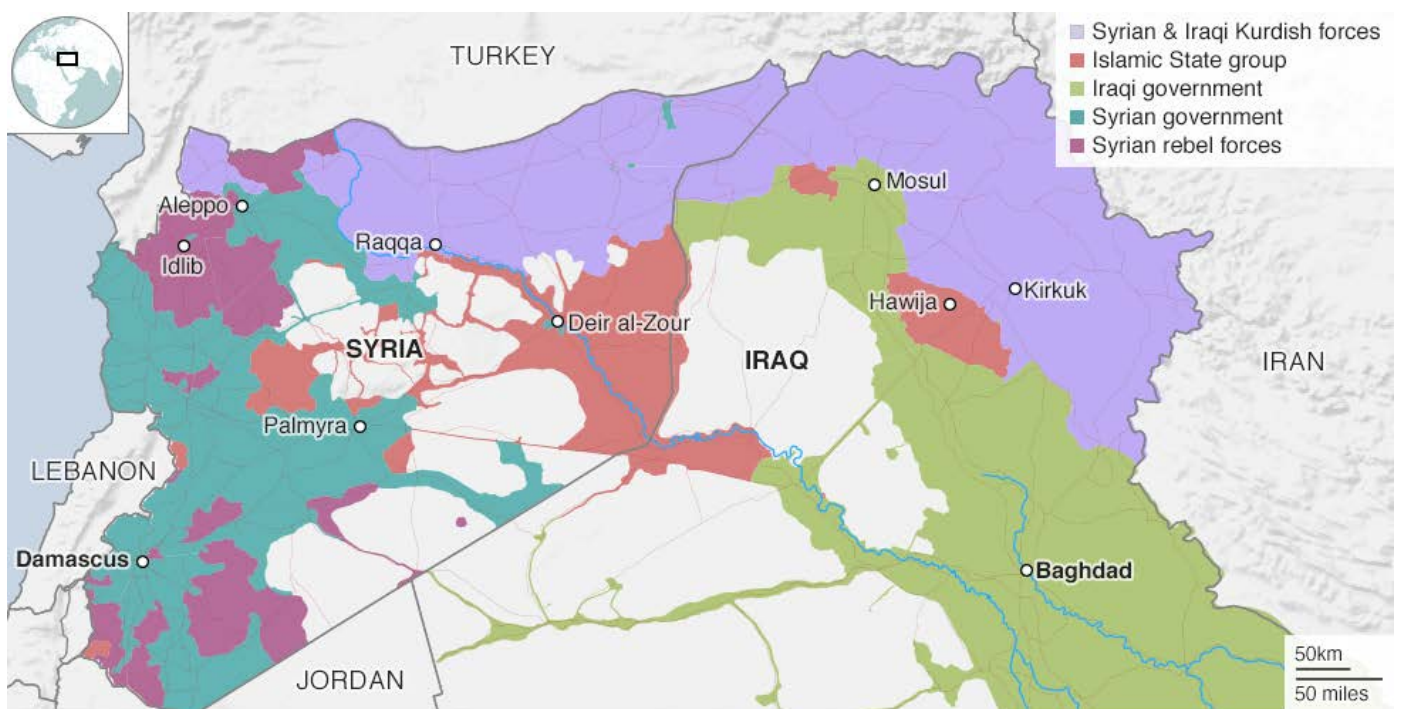
<sup>1</sup> There are an estimated 4,000 Russian military advisers and police and 2,000 US-led coalition military in Syria and between 6,000 – 8,500 US troops in Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> About one third of an estimated 5,000 ISIS fighters from Europe have returned home.

1. Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces bordering Iraq;
2. Southern Syria bordering Israel, Jordan and Iraq;
3. Kurdish-held northern Syria bordering Turkey and Iraq; and
4. HTS-held Idlib and neighbouring Turkey-held northern Aleppo bordering Turkey.

In Iraq the most contested territories are:

5. Nineveh province bordering Syria;
6. The disputed province of Kirkuk; and
7. Anbar province bordering Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.



Source: IHS Conflict Monitor (17 July 2017)

Figure 1: Who controls what territory in Iraq and Syria

US President Donald Trump campaigned on a quick defeat of ISIS and the US not getting involved in nation building. Since coming to office in January, Trump has signed off on major decisions that appear to lack an overall strategy, in contrast to Iran’s coherent plan of expansion. These decisions were to:

- Delegate decisions to the Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis and the Pentagon regarding troop numbers and rules of engagement, with tactical decisions devolving to battlefield commanders, all of which have been effective in killing both ISIS and civilians, and leading to confrontations with (pro) Syrian regime forces and a SU-22 jet fighter between 18 May and 18 June;



- Conduct missile strikes on a Syrian airbase in response to a chemical explosion in April;
- Directly arm the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) to liberate Raqqa and rural Deir Ezzor despite Turkey's objections;
- Reaffirm a US-Sunni Arab alliance at the expense of Iran, with Trump announcing on 21 May the sale of \$110 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia (which Congress later passed), and that 55 Muslim-majority states had agreed to provide 34,000 troops to combat terrorism in Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup>
- Call on Congress to approve 'temporary intermediate staging facilities, ammunition supply points and assembly areas' in Iraq and Syria as outlined in a White House policy statement on 11 July; and
- Cut support to Arab militias fighting the Assad regime, given efforts had failed to produce a functioning force that achieved results, and some US supplied weapons had ended up in ISIS' and Al-Qaida's hands.

Each decision has major consequences. The cutting of supplies to dozens of opposition militias in Syria could entrench Assad's power and/or force the few remaining moderate militias to join jihadi extremists. Trump's reaffirmation of a US-Sunni alliance in Riyadh exacerbated the historical but complex Sunni-Shia divide, and within days, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states and Egypt cut diplomatic, travel and trade ties with Qatar, accusing Qatar of being too close to Iran and supporting terrorist groups like (Shia) Hamas, and the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Sham. Turkey was caught in the split, with Qatar financing Turkey-backed militias in Syria, and Turkey having troops in Qatar. But with Qatar hosting the second largest US military base in the Middle East, including the US Combined Air Operations Centre for fighting ISIS, the US set about mending the rift, and on 14 June signed a \$21 billion arms deal with Qatar. This ad hoc transactional diplomacy reinforces the status quo.

If the Middle East and the Maghreb are to become stable, and the world freed of Wahhabi-inspired terror, the status quo needs an overhaul. The failed states of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia, and the failing state of Turkey could lead to scenarios more dangerous than ISIS. These countries bulge with a population of weaponised youth that are more educated and connected than ever before but continue to lack economic, political, legal and cultural rights.

Spearheading challenges to the status quo are Kurdish aspirations for democratic federalism in Turkey, Iran and Syria and independence in Iraq. In the first 1.5 years of the war on ISIS, Kurdish non-state actors from all four countries did most of the

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<sup>3</sup> Within 19 days of the Riyadh meetings, ISIS (inspired) Sunni networks perpetuated the Manchester and London attacks, and attacks in Iraq and Tehran killing 118 people. Nor was it a coincidence that on 19 June, Iran launched seven ground-to-ground ballistic missiles from Kurdistan of Iran, one hitting an ISIS centre in Deir Ezzor (i.e. a distance of 700 kilometres) and allegedly killing 360 ISIS members, with the action also being in retaliation for two ISIS attacks on Iran on 7 June.



fighting. By mid 2017, they had defended or liberated 18 percent of Iraqi territory and more than 20 percent of Syrian territory. Yet for all the blood spilt on behalf of people in the region and the world, Kurds fear that military support will not translate into political support.

## **Ways Forward**

Those who contributed to the status quo in the Middle East – its artificial borders, autocratic governments, and the advanced technologies these autocrats use to maintain power, are currently fighting wars without a post-war plan. It is history repeating itself. Cold War power plays led to the rise of Islamism and Islamic states like Iran, while oil makes every ‘enlightened’ Western leader a bedfellow of Saudi Arabian monarchs, the chief propagators of Wahhabi ideology around the world, including Indonesia. Yet, how the international community faces the challenges after the defeat of the ISIS caliphate and de-escalation of civil war in Syria will be critical to winning the hearts and minds of Muslim people everywhere.

The devastation of war wrought in Iraq and Syria provides opportunities to rethink and for those responsible overtly, covertly, directly, indirectly, historically or currently for the status quo to take some responsibility. Ideally, the UN needs to emerge from its paralysis and support nations as well as nation states. Ideally, the international community needs to develop incentives and disincentives to curb the expansionist policies of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and to stabilise and rebuild Iraq and Syria, by collaborating with internal stakeholders to devise ways to protect communities, share power and resources and develop functioning economies.

A world that faces so many global challenges requires collective action led by people of principle grounded in knowledge of local realities. One of the greatest foreign policy successes of the US was the Marshall Reconstruction Plan launched on 8 April 1948 and ending in 1952, overseen by US Secretary of State George C. Marshall. To get support for the plan, Marshall appealed to both humanitarian principles and self-interest. The plan aimed to help countries affected by war, prevent another war in Europe, curb the threat of communism and foster international trade. It involved \$17 billion of US assistance (the equivalent of \$1 trillion in 2017) for 18 European countries, the chief beneficiaries being UK, France and Germany. Over four years, the money was used to purchase US goods – food and fuel and reconstruction materials - so countries could rebuild and modernise. Other funds were for technical assistance and loans to businesses. Linked to milestones, the plan’s success depended on the co-operation of in-country political and business leaders. A plan on this scale is needed to rebuild Iraq and Syria, but such a plan must aim to empower citizens and communities and avoid strengthening authoritarian governments and modern forms of imperialism, such as the reach of transnational corporations.

If the ultimate goal is to create a more peaceful, sustainable and prosperous world in which citizens thrive irrespective of their ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status, then all decisions and actions should support this goal. Diverse approaches can



aspire to the same goal. For those who do not share this goal, the scope of disincentives has increased exponentially in this interconnected world.

A massive international long-term commitment is required to rebuild Iraq and Syria. China is promising large investments, included a One Belt One Road infrastructure project, and Russian, Iranian and Turkish companies are lining up in view of potential profits. Unfortunately, these countries lack expertise in democracy, human rights and open economies. If the international community wants to use this window of opportunity to develop institutions, civil society and vibrant economies, with funding sources including the likes of transnational oil companies, the public and private sectors of different countries must become involved. The UN and international NGOs can play critical roles if humanitarian aid delivery is integrated into reconstruction and development to avoid short-term fixes. However, governments cannot leave all the work to institutions that have their own agendas and transparency issues. Nor can funding be left to the World Bank and other institutions that work through national governments, for this mode of operation reinforces a self-serving elite. Instead, a co-ordinated effort must involve the delegation of tasks to multiple players. Those who have power, knowledge, skills and resources in the public and private sectors of different countries need to work in patient collaboration with those in need: in-country individuals (youth, women and professionals included) and communities, district and provincial levels of government, the private sector and NGOs, to prioritise, plan, fund, implement local projects linked to milestones that measure progress on predetermined outcomes. This is not about nation building. It is about all stakeholders developing trust, networks and capacity over time to transparently address a specific need for a given location at the appropriate level to achieve effective sustainable outcomes, with all projects being subject to independent evaluations. With the right support, Iraq and Syria could potentially follow in the footsteps of post-war Germany and Japan! Such an effort would counteract the ISIS narrative that the West is against Islam, and the international narrative that the West's interest in the Middle East is primarily about oil and arms sales.

Australia has much to offer in the processes of stabilisation, reconstruction and development in Iraq and Syria, given Australia's international relations, arid climate, and experience in peace-making, peace-keeping, water resource management, energy, agriculture, mining, oil, small business, service delivery, social democracy, federalism and the separation of powers. At different times Australia has taken a lead in international affairs – making important contributions to drafting the UN charter, or under the chairmanship of Australia's Foreign Minister, Dr HV Evatt, the UN Special Committee recommending the establishment of the new state of Israel, or in determining the rules of engagement and leading INTERFET to protect the East Timorese after they voted for independence in 1999. Hence, Australia has played a significant role in the establishment of two nation states since World War II. The Australian Government could also play a critical role within the international community in advocating and providing:





1. Support for the relevant stakeholders, including the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, to be included in planning post-ISIS security, humanitarian aid/reconstruction, IDPs, political reforms and transitions in Iraq and Syria;
2. Transparent, impartial and collaborative public and private sector funded initiatives targeting specific needs in specific locations linked to milestones on the path to sustainable outcomes designed to generate checks and balances, a diffusion of power and a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities in stabilising and rebuilding Iraq and Syria;
3. Support for the Government of Iraq (GoI) to adhere to a strict timetable in implementing the Federal Constitution of Iraq, and if the government fails to do so, for Iraq to become a confederation or several independent states;
4. Independent of (3), support for the right of citizens, including the people of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and disputed territories, to hold a referendum on independence; and support for negotiations between the KRG and GoI in view of a mutually beneficial creation of an independent Kurdistan;
5. Recognition of governing structures other than national governments when the national government has lost legitimacy and there is evidence that heads of government have overseen war crimes and crimes against humanity. In view of this general principle, recognise the legitimacy of the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria and other functional civil administrations in Syria, and support representatives of these structures to be part of a political transition, with opportunities to discuss different forms of decentralisation, federalism and degrees of autonomy;
6. Support for a ceasefire in Turkey and internationally monitored negotiations to address religious, cultural, legal and political minority rights in Turkey. A step-by-step approach would involve the release from prison and reinstatement of all elected parliamentarians and mayors; the release of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan; the replacement of state appointed provincial governors with elected governors; and negotiations on a new constitution that values diversity and a separation and devolution of powers. Australia could unilaterally provide an incentive to the PKK to enter negotiations with multiple parties by reviewing the classification of PKK as a terrorist organisation based on the impartial collection of evidence from diverse sources related to the military and political actions of both the PKK and the Turkish state.
7. Support for Iran giving ethnic and religious minorities at least the same rights as the Shia Persian majority, and support for the election of provincial governors and the removal of the death penalty for political prisoners and



those charged with blasphemy and drug-related crimes if not other crimes, linking reform milestones to the removal of economic sanctions.

Kurds in four countries advocate some form of federalism being a way of addressing the distribution of power and resources, including minority rights. Federal systems have proved suitable for ethnically diverse and/or geographically dispersed populations and are modern versions of the way societies were historically organised in the Middle East. In rebuilding Iraq and Syria, and influencing the trajectories of Turkey and Iran, focusing on local initiatives could create islands of relative stability, democracy and prosperity. These regions can spearhead broader reforms, as demonstrated in the works-in-progress of the KRI and the Democratic Federal System in Northern Syria.

These assessments and proposals are based on an analysis of issues related to the Kurdistan regions that are contextualised by what is occurring in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran.

## Iraq

### Overview

A US-led coalition liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein only to have Iraq become a vassal state of Iran. Iran's influence on Iraqi politics, military, religious, academic and media institutions, and the economy – Iranian goods and materials fill shops, warehouses and construction sites – is pervasive. The war on ISIS has entrenched Iran's influence.

The war has killed more than 65,000 civilians, internally displaced 3.3 million Iraqis and led to 220,000 Iraqis becoming refugees. The cities of Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah and Tikrit have been left in ruins, while ISIS remains in rural Nineveh and in Anbar (including the towns of Qaim, Ana and Rawa), and in the Kirkuk district and city of Hawija, 130km southeast of Mosul, from where ISIS regularly launches suicide attacks. In May, attacks killed 86 civilians in Baghdad alone.

In the lead up to Iraq's provincial elections and national elections scheduled for April 2018, Iran is moulding Iraqi politics by supporting pro-Iran factions led by ex-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and various Hashd al-Shaabi leaders, whilst encouraging Iraqi Shia political parties to regroup along non-sectarian lines to gain the endorsement of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and counteract the Sunni push for autonomy and the Kurds push for independence. However, Shia leaders like Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Moqtada al-Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim are attempting to take a more independent line. To counteract Iran's influence, Prime Minister Abadi and Moqtada al-Sadr's visits to Saudi Arabia have resulted in Saudi Arabia promising to invest in Iraq and open border crossings closed since 1990. Hence, both the



provincial and national elections will be hotly contested even in Shia provinces. Many question whether Abadi will remain prime minister, despite him being a less divisive figure than Vice President Maliki, with some predicting that Maliki's faction in the Dawa Party will regain power.

Iran seeks further entrenchment in Iraq by insisting the 60-odd Hashd al-Shaabi militias, also known as Popular Mobilisation Units, formed in 2014 to fight ISIS, remain strong and independent of the Iraqi Security Forces. This would lead to a parallel force like the Hezbollah in Lebanon or the powerful Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran-commanded Hashd al-Shaabi leaders publicly criticise their nominal Commander in Chief, Prime Minister Abadi, and some have disobeyed Abadi's command not to enter Syria. Inside Iraq, some Hashd al-Shaabi units have carried out war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting Sunni Arabs, and throughout the country units have established checkpoints, at which they regularly frisk people, demand a 'tax' and block trucks from continuing to their destination. The US, Moqtada al-Sadr and Hashd al-Shaabi leaders loyal to Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani want Hashd al-Shaabi integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces. On 20 July 1,000 militants were accepted by the Ministry of Defence, but there are more than 100,000 Hashd al-Shaabi militants. To further cement military ties, on 23 July Iran and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding on military co-operation.

Sunni Arabs have become increasingly marginalised before and during the war with ISIS. This has led Sunni Arab leaders to form new political parties and demand a Sunni Arab autonomous region. But Sunni Arabs are divided, some allying with Shia parties, some with Turkey and some with Kurds. For instance, meetings held on 8 – 9 March in Turkey to discuss a post-ISIS political road map failed to reach a unified position, despite only representing 25 percent of the Sunni Arab leadership. Similarly, the dysfunctions and intransigence of the Gol have contributed to the Kurds' push for an independent Kurdistan.

Post-ISIS, the Gol faces immense military, legal, economic and social challenges, with a potential for the situation to become as complicated as Syria. The worst case scenario is military conflict between multiple parties, especially in Nineveh, Kirkuk and Anbar, whether between external states such as Turkey and Iran, or US and Iran (most likely through proxy forces), or between an external state and non-state actor, such as between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Sinjar and the KRI, or between an external state actor and an Iraqi force, such as between Turkey or US against Hashd al-Shaabi,<sup>4</sup> or between internal stakeholders.

For instance, Turkey threatens a ground offensive on the PKK and Hashd al-Shaabi in Nineveh and regularly conducts airstrikes targeting the PKK in the KRI. On 25 April, Turkish airstrikes targeted the Sinjar district for the first time. The airstrikes killed six

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<sup>4</sup> Friction between the US and Hashd al-Shaabi has already occurred. Hashd al-Shaabi protested over the Gol commissioning US companies to secure roads from Baghdad and Basra to the Terbil crossing into Jordan, and to rebuild the roads, bridges, gas stations and rest areas. Significantly Basra Provincial Council was not informed of the plan.



Kurdish Peshmerga, one *Asayish* (Kurdish police), one Yezidi fighter and one civilian, and wounded nine others. Turkey claimed to have neutralised 40 'PKK' fighters in Sinjar (and 49 'PKK' in Syria). In May, Turkey's airstrikes in the KRI killed one civilian and injured five, and on 16/17 June, following more airstrikes on the PKK, Turkish troops crossed the border and fought PKK between Amedi and Zakho. PKK claimed to have killed 22 Turkish soldiers between 17 – 20 June, before the soldiers withdrew into Turkey. On 5 August PKK captured two National Military Intelligence (MIT) officers travelling on Turkish diplomatic passports in the KRI. The PKK alleges they were planning to assassinate PKK leaders.

Potential conflict between internal stakeholders includes fighting between Iraqi Security Forces and Hashd al-Shaabi, or either of these forces against Kurdish Peshmerga, or between Hashd al-Shaabi militias loyal to Iran and those loyal to Grand Ayotallah Ali al-Sistani, or between Turkey-influenced Peshmerga and Iran-influenced Peshmerga.

In full knowledge of these scenarios, and the likelihood of an on-going ISIS insurgency, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis announced that US troops would stay in Iraq to train, advise and assist Iraqi Security Forces. Kurds and Sunni Arabs welcomed the announcement but Iran and Iran-linked Hashd al-Shaabi leaders oppose an on-going US presence, as does Moqtada al-Sadr, claiming the US supports Sunni Arab interests. In July, Prime Minister Abadi announced that a reduced number of foreign military advisers will be drawn from a range of international forces.

In a country with a poor judicial system, justice and reconciliation will be major challenges. Families of ISIS fighters and other civilians suspected of some connection with ISIS have been brutalised by Hashd al-Shaabi around Tal Afar, and in Anbar and Salahadin provinces and by some Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul. Thousands of families with suspected links to ISIS have been placed in special camps on the edge of towns and former neighbours say they are not welcome home. Then there are the thousands who are in prison awaiting trial. Most have not been to court although 88 were put on trial for the massacre of 1,700 soldiers at Camp Speicher near Tikrit, with 63 of these receiving the death penalty in 2016 – 2017. Captured foreign ISIS fighters will also face the death penalty, although their consulates may work for their release to face justice in their home countries. In an Iraqi Criminal Court in Qaraqosh, 30 kilometres south of Mosul, five judges and three public prosecutors hear 60 cases a day of atrocities committed by ISIS, alleged co-operation with ISIS and victim compensation. In court, 70 percent of local ISIS plead guilty, often claiming they were forced to join ISIS to support their family or protect their community. Those deemed guilty are sent to Baghdad to await trial.

In the KRI, Christian and Yezidi organisations guided by international experts are gathering evidence on ISIS atrocities. They hope to establish a special tribunal to prosecute ISIS militants under Iraqi law, because the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction in Iraq. But these groups and the KRG are receiving no co-operation from the GoI, when international donors insist a tribunal has to be a pan-Iraq



initiative. The Gol's lack of co-operation may be related to concerns about the Hashd al-Shaabi being implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity, including killings, kidnappings and enforcing demographic changes.

Challenges related to reconstruction include a divided but highly centralised corrupt and patronage-based Gol. There are multiple divisions within the governing National Shia Alliance, between this alliance and other political parties and within political parties that hold seats in a single parliamentary assembly that has no checks and balances and often fails to enact legislation. Despite a federal constitution that stipulates a bicameral system and resource and power sharing, and despite Gol rhetoric to decentralise, powerful Gol ministries go to absurd lengths to maintain power, insisting on complicated budgetary and decision pathways that lead to few projects being approved, even in Shia-majority areas. Many decisions are not designed to build a unified Iraq. For instance, in May the Gol announced it would import wheat to meet Iraq's need of 4.5 million tons annually, while committing to buy only one third of 1.5 million tons of wheat produced in the KRI.

On 22 March 68 foreign ministers of the US-led coalition met in Washington to discuss post-ISIS reconstruction and governance. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claimed the US will work with local leaders and governments to rejuvenate civil society. Prime Minister Abadi spoke of the necessity to decentralise, but also claimed that the Gol would assume control over all territory liberated from ISIS. The Gol is ill equipped to oversee reconstruction. On 1 May UN-Gol meetings in Erbil discussed a five-year reconstruction plan. An official from the Iraq Ministry of Finance, Jaadin Jaafar, estimated that reconstruction would cost \$350 - \$400 billion. Afterwards, the Gol announced a post-ISIS 10-year reconstruction plan of \$100 billion. The Gol is counting on loans and aid from the World Bank and other institutions to make up the short fall, but in May, an Iraq Ministry of Planning official estimated that more than 50 percent of all Iraq's revenues is lost to embezzlement and other forms of corruption. The only light is that Iraq is more advantaged than Syria in already hosting many international NGOs. Yet these NGOs have been unable to cope with the needs of IDPs, let alone the rest of the population, and lack transparency in how they operate, with few independent evaluations being undertaken and those that are conducted not being made public, even to donors.<sup>5</sup>

In all matters, outside stakeholders promote their own interests. Iran wants Iraq as a vassal state, and to have Hashd al-Shaabi exist outside the Iraqi Security Forces. Turkey wants to empower Sunni Arabs and Turkmen to counteract Iran's influence and a move towards an independent Kurdistan. The US wants to curb Iranian influence and along with the rest of the international community uphold a unified Iraq in denial of Iraq being an artificial construct and the Gol's divisive track record.

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<sup>5</sup> For a map of NGOs in Iraq see:

[https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/iraq\\_map\\_05-05-2017.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/iraq_map_05-05-2017.pdf)



## Mosul Offensive and Nineveh Post-ISIS

The offensive on ISIS-held eastern Mosul began on 17 October 2016 and the offensive on western Mosul began on 19 February 2017. On 18 June, Iraqi Security Forces entered the Old City, and on 21 June, ISIS blew up the 850-year old grand Al-Nuri mosque, where Al-Baghdadi had announced the ISIS caliphate on 4 July 2014. On 9 July, Abadi declared Mosul had been liberated. During the nine-month campaign, on 8 April, more than 200 local ISIS fighters surrendered to Iraqi security forces and Peshmerga after being promised a fair trial. On 15 April, ISIS attacked Iraqi Special Operation Forces with mortars containing chlorine, with those affected receiving help from nearby Australian and US advisors.

During the nine-month campaign an estimated 40 percent of the Elite Iraqi Counter-Terror forces were killed. Up to 40,000 civilians were also killed by US-led coalition airstrikes and artillery, ISIS using civilians as human shields, planting IEDs outside houses, or ISIS snipers and suicide bombers targeting civilians trying to escape. For instance, in three days in early June, ISIS killed 204 fleeing civilians. Many commentators criticise the high death toll from airstrikes. These included the deaths of 130 people that ISIS had gathered inside a house on 17 March, and the deaths of 200 civilians killed when a US-led coalition airstrike blew up an ISIS weapon and explosives cache on 24 March. In the densely populated narrow streets of the Old City, 200 – 300 ISIS fighters were dispersed among an estimated 400,000 civilians. ISIS hid in basements and fought the Iraqi forces street-to-street, house-to-house. Civilians faced starvation, dehydration, untreated injuries and fear of being killed or linked to ISIS. In early July, ISIS began relying on female suicide bombers, as well as child suicide bombers, which led to Iraqi forces suspecting anyone escaping the Old City. Reports emerged that there were incidences of Iraqi Security Forces torturing civilians and conducting extra-judicial killings. The US threatened to cut support to implicated units if allegations were substantiated.

Iraqi security forces claim that between 16,500 and 25,000 ISIS members were killed during the campaign, these figures being far higher than the 6,000 ISIS, estimated to have been inside Mosul at the start of the campaign, of whom 20 percent were foreign. The campaign completely destroyed six of 44 districts in eastern Mosul and heavily damaged 15 of 54 districts in western Mosul, with all districts suffering damage to homes and infrastructure (schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, water, sewerage, electricity and communication systems).

In nine months an estimated 920,000 people fled to liberated areas in Nineveh province, the KRI, southern Iraq and northern Syria. By early July, 20 per cent of IDPs had returned home, mainly to eastern Mosul, because of poor camp conditions and pressure to do so, even when their district was not cleared of IEDs. Although the GoI had cut civil servant salaries, it had continued to pay pensions. Often multiple families survived on one pension to pay for food, fuel and white goods trucked in from Erbil, 80 kilometres away. Teachers and health workers were not returning and those that did worked voluntarily. In Mosul's streets graffiti promised revenge on ISIS members and their sympathisers. Of those who have not returned home, 77

percent reside within Nineveh province; 50 percent live in host communities, relying on the generosity of their hosts, and 50 percent live in camps.

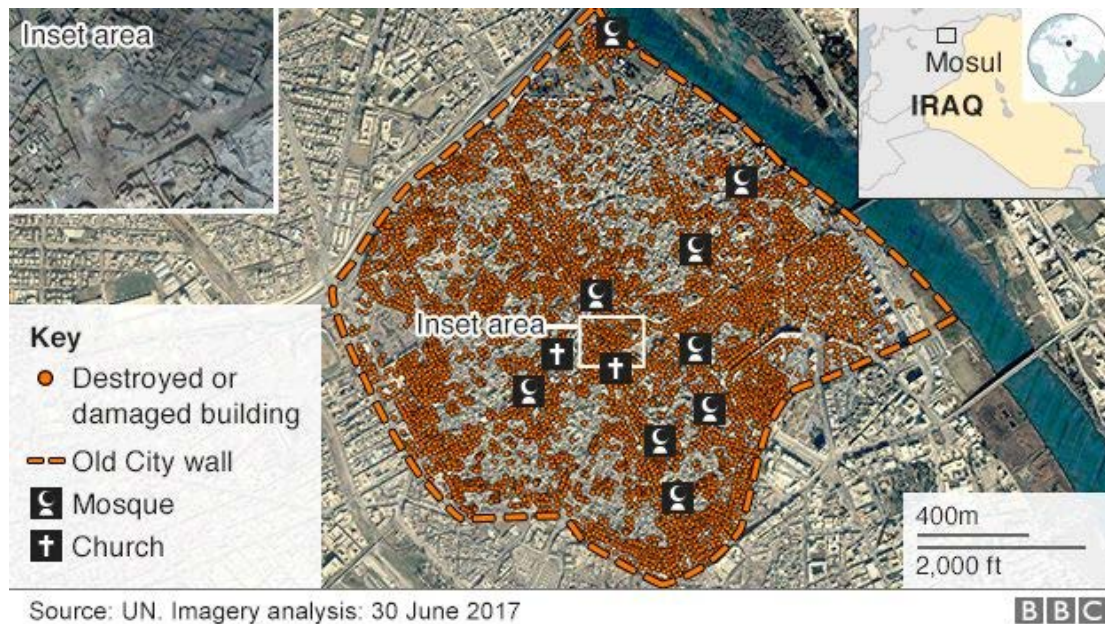


Figure 2: The destruction of western Mosul <sup>6</sup>

Sixty-five kilometres west of Mosul and 150 kilometres from the Syrian border, is Tal Afar, a majority Shia and Sunni Turkmen city, with a population of 250,000 before ISIS took control. Since October 2016, Hashd al-Shaabi maintained a siege on Tal Afar, and by August 2017 there was an estimated 2,500 ISIS, 350 captured Yezidi and 10,000 – 20,000 other civilians inside the city. Five days after Prime Minister Abadi announced victory in Mosul, ISIS declared Tal Afar an independent caliphate claiming to have executed all local ISIS leaders. At the end of July, Abadi announced the offensive on Tal Afar would involve the Iraqi army, federal police, the US-trained Counter Terrorism Service and Hashd al-Shaabi, thus going back on an earlier promise to Turkmen tribal leaders that Hash al-Shaabi would not enter the city. On 20 August the offensive on Tal Afar began. Peshmerga maintained a line to the north of the city along the border of the disputed territory of Zummar, where they arrested 50 ISIS fighters in the first four days of fighting and killed 130 ISIS in the last three days of August. Peshmerga claimed many women and children from Tel Afar were ‘handing themselves in’. With ISIS putting up little resistance on 27 August Iraqi Security forces claimed Tal Afar was liberated. While this was a speedy victory, the real battle for Tal Afar has only just begun, with Hashd al-Shaabi determined to protect Shia interests in the town.

Back in May, Hashd al-Shaabi moved into Sinjar, (which Kurds call Shingal), a disputed territory on the border with Syria, where Yezidi were massacred in August

<sup>6</sup>Source:[https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/624/cpsprodpb/1BC5/production/\\_96890170\\_mosul\\_damage\\_624.png](https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/624/cpsprodpb/1BC5/production/_96890170_mosul_damage_624.png)



2014. On 12 May 2017 Hashd al-Shaabi launched an offensive to capture the ISIS-held towns of Qairawan in Sinjar, and Baaj to the north of Sinjar, on the border with Syria. On 13 May they captured the road into Sinjar, leading the KRG to demand they not enter Sinjar, in accordance with a pre-Mosul GoI – KRG agreement. On 18 May, the Hashd al-Shaabi captured Sinjar military airbase, and subsequently liberated 50 villages inside Sinjar, helped by Yezidi Resistance Units formed and trained by PKK and YPG since 2014, their salaries being paid by the GoI. On 28 May the Hashd al-Shaabi announced they would stay in villages to protect civilians and on 29 May the Hashd al-Shaabi reached the border with Syria, meeting up with Syrian army units on the other side. By 3 June they had taken Baaj and claimed responsibility for policing the 300-kilometre Iraq-Syria border north of Anbar. Some conjecture their intention is to ensure a supply route to pro-Syrian forces advancing on Raqqa.

Until 2014, both Peshmerga and Iraqi forces were responsible for the security of Sinjar. In June 2014, Iraqi forces withdrew, and in August 2014, Peshmerga forces withdrew, leaving ISIS to commit mass murder and enslave Yezidi women and girls. In November 2015, Peshmerga liberated the majority of Sinjar and now control the town of Sinjar. By then PKK-affiliated Yezidis had formed their own security forces and a political party, the Democracy and Freedom Party, which intends to contest the Nineveh provincial elections. The KRG views the presence of PKK, its affiliates and Hashd al-Shaabi as political and military threats and has repeatedly asked the PKK to leave, but the PKK says they will remain until ISIS is no longer a threat. Yezidi responses depend on their affiliations and on 31 March, seven Yezidi Resistance Unit fighters were killed in clashes with Rojava Peshmerga, the latter trained by the KRG. Hence, the potential for future conflict in Sinjar is extremely high.

Currently operating in Nineveh are the US-trained Iraqi Counter-Terror Services, the Iraqi Army, Emergency Response Division (ERD), 9th Iraqi Army Armoured Division, the Sunni Nineveh Guard (trained by Turkey), Federal Police, Peshmerga to the north and east, the predominantly Shia Hashd al-Shaabi to the west and south, and armed Sunni tribes to the south. All wish to have a say in the future of Nineveh: its security, governance and reconstruction.

The GoI wants to resume control over Nineveh and is demanding that Peshmerga withdraw to pre-ISIS lines, without making the same demand on Hashd al-Shaabi. The UN estimates it will cost \$1 billion to restore basic services to Mosul alone. The GoI and KRG are vying for humanitarian aid. The work of international NGOs could be hindered by who they liaise with in the community and the different armed forces and their checkpoints. An uneven distribution of aid could further destabilise the region. In April, Abadi promised 202 projects for Nineveh. In mid-May the first project was completed: the water treatment plant at Nimrod. Thousands of people earn some income working to re-establish water, sewage and electricity networks but the GoI effort is underfunded, poorly co-ordinated and patronage based. The international diaspora is trying to help. For instance, an initiative by the Association of Iraqi Academics in Australia and New Zealand is gathering support to help replace the 130,000 books destroyed in the Mosul University Library.





In Nineveh, ethnic communities are calling for greater autonomy but are divided in their affiliations. On 5 March, Sinjar Yezidi in the PKK-established Democratic Autonomous Council, the Turkmen Rescue Foundation and Assyrian Christian Al Rafidain Organization proposed autonomous administrations for Sinjar, Tal Afar and the Nineveh plains within an autonomous Nineveh and international protection for at least 10 years. Others in each ethno-religious group want autonomy within an expanded Kurdistan (Christians and Turkmen each have five reserved seats in a 111 seat Kurdistan Parliament) and still others want autonomy under Gol jurisdiction.

Before 2003 about 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq. After 2003 and when ISIS took Mosul in 2014, many moved from the Nineveh plains to Mosul, the KRI or Kirkuk, or immigrated to other countries. About 250,000 Christians remain in Iraq. These identify with 14 Christian denominations (e.g. Chaldean Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian, Armenian and Protestant), and are represented by 12 political parties and seven armed groups, two of which clashed in late July-early August. Hence, reconciliation and negotiations within the Christian community will be required to establish the best way forward.

It is the same for the Yezidi in Sinjar. On 20 August, the PKK-supported Democratic Autonomous Council in Sinjar put forward a road map for democratic autonomy including a hierarchy of peoples' assemblies like those established in northern Syria. The council proposed forming a commission that includes the UN, representatives from the KRG, Gol, PKK and YPG/YPJ to negotiate autonomy. The council also proposed blocking a referendum on independence for Kurdistan and the disputed territories when other Yezidi want to be part of the KRI. Hence, the Yezidi community are caught up in a political rivalry between the PKK and KRG, and must be supported in negotiating their future.

## **Kirkuk**

The oil rich province of Kirkuk is another disputed territory. In June 2014 the Iraqi Security Forces withdrew from the province leaving Peshmerga to defend or liberate Kirkuk from ISIS. Between 2,000 – 5,000 ISIS remain in the Sunni Arab majority city of Hawija and 500 villages in Hawija district, as well as in villages in southern Daquq and around the Kurdish-Turkmen town of Tuz Khurmatu in Salahadin province. Since the beginning of the Mosul offensive more ISIS have arrived and ISIS attacks on Peshmerga, citizens and oil wells have increased. For instance, on 19 June 60 ISIS attacked Peshmerga in Tuz Khurmatu killing one Peshmerga. It was the fifth attack in one week. On 3 July another attack by 50 – 60 ISIS caused injury to three Peshmerga and in mid July ISIS killed four people in a Dubiz village. A number of ISIS attacks have involved ISIS dressed as Peshmerga. Peshmerga lives have been lost to ISIS because of a lack of protective clothing and equipment like infrared cameras and drones.

The strong ISIS presence in Hawija threatens four provinces (Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahadin, and Diyala) but the offensive to liberate Hawija is being delayed. Kurdish



and Arab tribal leaders do not want Hashd al-Shaabi to take part. Hashd al-Shaabi militias insist on doing so and are building up forces in preparation. With so many unresolved disagreements between the GoI and KRG, delaying the campaign gives the GoI leverage over the KRG and the Kirkuk Provincial Council (KPC).

Since a 2016 agreement between the KRG and GoI, 50 percent of Kirkuk's oil revenue goes to Baghdad and 50 percent to the KRG, for which KRG make payments. Despite this agreement and IDPs comprising 25 to 30 percent of the population, the GoI has not provided a budget or petro-dollars to KPC since late 2013, and continues to make autocratic decisions in violation of the constitution. For instance, in February 2017 the GoI signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran to build a pipeline from Kirkuk to Iran, and at the end of July both parties agreed to conduct a feasibility study. This was done without consulting the KPC, which contravenes Article 112 of the constitution, and contrasts the GoI decision to block a KRG proposal to build a pipeline to Iran.

As a consequence, the KPC has become increasingly defiant of the GoI. For Nowroz (Kurdish New Year on 21 March), the flag of Kurdistan was raised alongside the Iraqi flag on all government buildings. The UN saw this as a provocative action. Prime Minister Abadi called it an act of sedition and Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened 'a heavy price' if the flag was not lowered. On 4 April the KPC voted in support of joining the KRI and asked the GoI to enact Article 140 to resolve the disputed status of the province and approve the holding of a referendum in Kirkuk on independence for Kurdistan. A subsequent vote in the Iraq Parliament and a decision by the Iraq Administrative Court ruled against the Kurdistan flag being raised in Kirkuk alongside the flag of Iraq. And this is over a flag, let alone participating in the referendum.

## **Independence for the Kurdistan Region and Disputed Territories**

On 25 September, the people of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and those in the disputed territories who have agreed to holding a referendum in their territory will be asked to vote 'yes' or 'no' to a question put in four languages: 'Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?'

On 30 March, a committee comprising the Patriotic Union Party (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) informed the UN of their intention to hold a referendum on independence in the KRI and disputed territories in 2017, and asked the UN to monitor the referendum. The inclusion of the disputed territories is particularly sensitive. These territories comprise 48 percent of all territory the KRG lays claim to and have an estimated population of 2.7 million people. The territories include the province of Kirkuk, and districts in Nineveh, Diyala and Salahadin. Article 140 of the Federal Constitution stipulates that their status be resolved by the end of 2007 but the GoI has refused to act. The stakes are high. The final border between the KRI and



Iraq (whether or not Kurdistan becomes independent) impacts the stability and prosperity of 50 districts. If Kurdistan gains jurisdiction over Kirkuk and other disputed territories it would control 20 percent of Iraq's oil resources. Yet reclaiming Kirkuk is not about oil. For Kurds it is about history, culture and identity. In 1974 Kurds resumed a war against the Baath regime when Saddam Hussein refused to negotiate the status of Kirkuk.

The KRG asked leaders in each disputed territory to consult their constituents as to whether or not they wanted to hold the referendum in their area. On 29 August the KPC voted again in favour of holding the referendum in Kirkuk, although the Governor of Kirkuk, Najmaldin al-Karim, argues for Kirkuk to have special status in a Federal Republic of Kurdistan, given some Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds want Kirkuk to become its own autonomous region. Sunni Arab leaders in Nineveh are also in favour of holding the referendum but the Iraqi Turkmen Front and the Babylon Movement, the latter a Christian armed militia within the Hashd al-Shaabi, asked to be excluded.

According to KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, between 2002 and 2017 the KRG increased the number of governmental hospitals from 14 to 65; private hospitals from 8 to 55; schools from 3,200 to 6,000; and literacy from 53 to 84 percent. An estimated 16,400 kilometres of road and 200,000 residential units were constructed, 25 percent of the latter being for destitute families. Between 2003 and 2014, conditions in Kurdistan were far better than in the rest of Iraq. It was as if the KRI was doing too well, up until the GoI implemented a financial boycott on the KRI in January 2014. Ever since, the GoI has refused to supply any revenue to the KRG, including Peshmerga salaries<sup>7</sup>, despite Peshmerga fighting a war on ISIS, defending the KRI and liberating 30,000 square-kilometres of territory at a cost of 1,745 Peshmerga lives, and another 10,069 Peshmerga sustaining injuries, and despite the KRI and KRG-controlled disputed territories hosting at least two million IDPs and refugees since June 2014, in contrast to IDPs being refused entry into Baghdad. These and other factors have meant the KRI has gone through three and a half years of hardship, with the KRG currently at least two months behind in paying public sector salaries, including Peshmerga salaries, with these salaries being 40 to 70 percent less than those paid in 2014, and some pensions having not been paid for 11 months. Nevertheless, security in the KRI is better than some European capitals, with only one terrorist incident since 2014, and in 2017, the economy is showing signs of improvement. In early May, the KRG announced it had paid \$1 billion owed to oil companies, claiming this reduced its debt to oil companies by 25 percent. In comparison, the GoI owes oil companies an estimated \$70 billion.

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<sup>7</sup> Since July 2016 the US has provided 36,000 Peshmerga a portion of their salaries at a cost of US\$20 million a month, and has also provided food, fuel and other supplies for another 26,000 Peshmerga, with the US-led coalition having trained some 26,000 Peshmerga since 2014. Financial support was in preparation for the Mosul offensive but is expected to continue. In early May, the US, UK and Germany presented Kurdish leaders a draft plan to build a united Peshmerga force and the US State Department approved the sale of military equipment and training to outfit two light infantry brigades and two artillery battalions.



After G7 leaders met in Italy on 10 – 11 April, they reiterated their call for the territorial unity of a federal Iraq, once again ignoring the fractured realities. In May, the UN envoy to Iraq, Ján Kubiš, declared that the KRI was serious in its intent to hold a referendum because there had been no progress in resolving disputes with Baghdad but the UN announced it would not support or engage with the referendum in any way. In early July, possibly related to capacity more than the referendum, although the timing is noteworthy, the UN World Food Program announced that aid for IDPs and refugees in the KRI would be cut in half.

The Kurds of Iraq had autonomy in the nineteenth century and have wanted independence for more than one hundred years but were denied an independent nation state when the League of Nations determined borders in 1923. Britain also reneged on a promise for autonomy in return for Iraqi Kurds defending Mosul from Turkish forces in the early 1920s. For 11 years (1992 -2003) Kurds used the protection of the no-fly zone to create a parliament and an economy. For the next 14 years they worked hard to create a federal Iraq, but the Kurds (and others) argue that the GoI has failed Iraq: it has not adhered to at least 50 articles in the federal constitution (2005) and has not treated Kurds as partners. Acting President Masoud Barzani promised a referendum after the liberation of Mosul and no doubt wants to be the father of a new nation, but he also knows that once the ISIS caliphate is defeated, Iraq will face enormous problems, especially if Maliki regains power in the April elections, and the international community has a short attention span. Hence, Barzani called a meeting of all KRI political parties on 7 June to set a date for a referendum on independence. All parties attended,<sup>8</sup> except Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group. At the meeting it was decided that a referendum in the KRI and disputed territories would be held on 25 September 2017. Leading up to the referendum, all parties would work to reactivate the parliament, while parliamentary and presidential elections would be held on 1 November to form a new parliament on 6 November. Acting President Masoud Barzani assured the international community that if the referendum approved independence, the KRG and GoI would enter extensive negotiations on all matters. However, negotiations require at least two willing partners, as well as outcomes and the enactment of outcomes.

The only nations who came out in support of the referendum were Israel, South Africa, Russia, Belgium, Hungary, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Australia, the US, EU, UK and Germany question the timing of the referendum and continue to advocate for a unified federal Iraq. Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria oppose the

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<sup>8</sup> The parties that attended the meeting were the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), Kurdistan Communist Party, Kurdistan Toilers Party, Kurdistan Toilers and Workers Party, Kurdistan Development and Reform Party, Erbil Turkmen List, Iraqi Turkmen Front, Turkmen Development Party, Armenian List in Kurdistan Parliament, Assyrian Democratic Movement, Assyrian Chaldean Popular Council.



referendum being held at any time. Only Israel and Saudi Arabia publicly support an independent Kurdistan.

Prime Minister Abadi's response to the referendum is that it is unilateral and unconstitutional; that it adds needless pressure when Iraq is fighting ISIS; the people in an independent Kurdistan would be worse off; and the GoI would not recognise the results. Instead, Abadi promised to open negotiations to settle the disputed territories, oil, water, debt, customs duties (trade between the KRI and the south having ceased) and other issues. However, the GoI refuses any oil agreement that does not require all oil revenue going to the GoI Treasury before being distributed. Some Hashd al-Shaabi leaders called for dialogue and others threatened to expel Peshmerga from all disputed territories. The Iraq Defence Minister Erfan Mahmoud al-Hayali claimed that the Iraq Army would 'deter' any effort to divide Iraq. Peshmerga commanders stated they would defend the KRI and disputed territories from any military threat.

Turkey already has 18 military bases in the KRI and benefits from Kurdistan's oil being exported through Ceyhan, as well as extensive trade and business concerns in the KRI. However, Erdogan vows to thwart any move towards an independent Kurdistan, with Turkey particularly against the referendum being held in Kirkuk. In August, Turkey's energy minister threatened that a move towards independence would harm Ankara-Erbil oil agreements. Well aware of this vulnerability, on 2 June the KRG signed an oil agreement with the Russian oil company, Rosneft, to ensure Kurdistan's oil has a market in Europe, having tried to negotiate a pipeline to Iran, which the GoI rejected. On 17 August Turkey and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on military co-operation, a noteworthy realignment that has implications for Syria as much as the KRI. A week later the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps denied there was any joint operation being planned against Kurds outside Iran. However the statement did not rule out future operations, given that the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, assured the GoI that Iran would help preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, and Iran and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding on 23 July that allowed for joint military exercises and co-operation. This came after reports alleged the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps was recruiting for a possible war on the KRI if independence was declared.

Apart from military threats, Iraq could close the airspace for planes flying in and out of Sulaimani and Erbil International Airports; and Iran and Turkey could cut water flow and food imports into the KRI. The only retaliatory measures the KRG and KPC have at their disposal are to ask all Turkish and Iranian companies to leave; cut water, electricity and oil to the south, and not support Abadi in the 2018 elections. Yet, on 23 August, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, assured Masoud Barzani that Turkey would not close its borders to an independent Kurdistan and some Arab leaders in southern Iraq have claimed the referendum is a signal for other Iraqis to demand their rights, reform the GoI and save a broken Iraq.

The US response was that the US supports a unified federal Iraq although it appreciated the legitimate aspirations of people in the KRI. Some US officials claimed



it is not a matter of 'if', but 'when' Kurdistan will become independent, but all have expressed concern about the timing of the referendum, especially with the on-going war against ISIS requiring Peshmerga-Iraqi Security force co-operation and because the referendum could cause a backlash against Prime Minister Abadi in the 2018 elections. In early July 2017, the Congress House Armed Services Committee released a non-binding draft of the annual defence bill that claimed continued support for Peshmerga was contingent on the KRI remaining part of Iraq. The EU also advises that the KRG negotiate with Baghdad so in July, Barzani told EU representatives if they cannot support the referendum then stay neutral.

Since June, the KRG Electoral Commission has been preparing electoral rolls and 12,000 polling stations, a quarter of them in disputed territories. The diaspora will be able to vote electronically, providing they register between 1 – 7 September. Between 3 – 18 September, people can register as candidates for the parliamentary and presidential elections on 1 November. Yet, it is political disunity within the KRI that could jeopardise the referendum going ahead on the set date and achieving the best possible 'yes' vote.

The Kurdistan Parliament has been inactive since October 2015, primarily because the second largest block in the parliament, Gorran, objected to Masoud Barzani remaining president after his extended second term expired in August 2015 and because Gorran and other parties wanted a parliamentary vote on whether the parliament, not the people, should elect the president. In June 2017, Masoud Barzani pushed for the reactivation of parliament on condition that in the first session, the parliament elects a new parliamentary speaker, deputy and secretary. Barzani also announced he would not stand for presidential elections. Gorran's response was that the presidency issue must be resolved before the parliament is reactivated without any other preconditions. In July, Barzani conceded to no preconditions, proposed Gorran and KDP hold direct talks, and that the presidency was up for discussion. One problem is that if Gorran refuses to recognise Masoud Barzani as acting president, legislation cannot be signed off, while the announcement that presidential elections are to be held on 1 November ignores Gorran's primary concern that the KDP is using the referendum as a political tool to consolidate power. On 10 August a new Gorran leadership argued for the referendum to be postponed or for the referendum and elections to be held on the same day.

One man who wants the referendum delayed is a self-made Sulaimani businessman, Shaswar Qadir. Using his independent TV channel, NRT, he is running a 'No for Now' campaign on the grounds that 'We don't have an economy - we have one oil pipeline. We don't have a judicial system. We don't have a united army. We don't have a parliament.' Others argue that many nation states have been formed before all problems were solved.

On 10 August Barzani told US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the referendum date could only be changed if the US provided guarantees and alternatives for the



future of the KRI. Afterwards, Barzani announced that he or any relative would not stand for the presidency on 1 November. A mainly KDP delegation went to Baghdad for meetings with Prime Minister Abadi, Vice President Maliki, Moqtada al-Sadr and others. Afterwards a KRG spokesperson announced that Kurds would only agreed to delay the referendum if Iraq set a binding date to hold the referendum and agreed to recognise the results, the UN agreed to monitor the referendum, and that negotiations on the disputed territories, oil, debt and other matters produced agreements and these agreements were backed by guarantees from the heads of state of various countries. In contrast, the GoI announced that the KRI should solve its internal problems before talking about a referendum.

All people in Kurdistan agree that parliament must be reactivated to achieve the best results in the referendum, yet Gorran insists that a resolution on the presidency, the payment of public sector salaries and other matters must be addressed before parliament is activated. Other important issues are finalising and passing a constitution and unifying the Peshmerga. These issues cannot be resolved by 25 September.

The challenges are immense but not as immense as the challenges facing central and southern Iraq. At least all the discussion indicates a genuine wish for a democratic Kurdistan as much as an independent Kurdistan. Perhaps the biggest internal test will be how an independent Kurdistan will empower ethnic and religious minorities. To do this, Kurdistan may need to become a functioning federation, as the Kurdish leadership has demanded of Iraq.

## **Conclusion**

From its inception, Iraq was an artificial construct. With GoI dysfunctions and the status of Hashd al-Shaabi jeopardising current and future unity, the overriding question is what form should Iraq take - a loose federation, a confederation or a number of independent states, to best:

1. Avoid civil war;
2. Prevent ISIS attacks and recruitment;
3. Formulate mechanisms to deal with the Hashd al-Shaabi and other militias;
4. Balance Iranian, US, Turkish and Gulf state interests;
5. Develop transparent, accountable and inclusive governance at each level;
6. Reconcile and empower communities, including ethnic and religious minorities;
7. Develop an independent judicial system; and
8. Develop a vibrant private sector.



Using opportunities inherent in post-ISIS stabilisation and reconstruction, if the Gol fails to implement the 2005 constitution<sup>9</sup> within a specified time frame, then the international community must consider alternatives to the current political structure and how power, territory and resources are shared for the benefit of all citizens.

To avoid future military conflict and respond to an ISIS insurgency, Iraq will require an international military and police force to help restructure, train, advise and assist local forces that answer to the appropriate ministry of an elected body. The disputed territories and Sunni Arab areas are in particular need of stabilisation. International forces will need to operate under robust rules of engagement like that of the Australian-led INTERFET peacekeeping operation in East Timor in 1999 – 2000. The composition of these international forces and how they complement the communities in which they operate will be key to their success.

With the US burning bridges with Iran, the US and Russia need to work in partnership as they do in Syria, supported by the international community, to negotiate the status of the Hashd al-Shaabi militias. Favourable pay structures for the Iraqi Security Forces and a vibrant private sector could attract Hashd al-Shaabi militants into other employment. In tandem with this process there needs to be a phased withdrawal of Hashd al-Shaabi from all Kurdish and Sunni Arab majority areas, as well as a phased withdrawal of all foreign forces that are not involved in an international stabilisation force, including Iranian commanders and units and Turkish troops. These issues are best addressed on a region-by-region basis.

Whatever the future structure of Iraq and Kurdistan, public and private sector expertise, loans, investment, aid and long term collaboration must be tied to military, political, economic, judicial and social milestones, that sustainably address the specific needs of a community, district, province or region on an appropriate scale. Where appropriate, projects will need to be designed to reconcile those on the fringe of ISIS and the victims of ISIS, Sunni and Shia Arabs, Kurds, Yezidi and Christians at the individual, family, community and leader levels, as well as the Gol and KRG, whether or not the KRI splits from Iraq.

Reconciliation will also require the development of a robust, impartial judicial system; programs in schools, universities, the media and other institutions, and reconstruction projects employing diverse people on the one project. On 19 June EU officials proposed working with Iraq's Ministry of Justice (as well as promising to contribute to Iraq's stabilisation). Post-2003 efforts failed because of their focus on national institutions and minimal scale and duration.

To empower communities, including youth, women, NGOs, as well as local administrations projects will need to be collaborative in setting priorities, designs and implementation. Too often international international NGOs embark on short-

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<sup>9</sup> See 'Supporting a functioning federation in Iraq, available at: <http://www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Supporting-a-functioning-federation-in-Iraq.pdf>





term projects that are not designed as building blocks for addressing long-term needs or building local capacity to deliver services. There are exceptions. A USAID project known as Taqadum is providing technical assistance and training for elected provincial leaders to better deliver services including legal advice to displaced citizens. People in the disputed territories do not have title deeds to their houses or land. A joint UN-Habitat/UN Development Program/German Government initiative rebuilt 562 damaged houses and gave the Yezidi owners title deeds to their houses. In late July, Prime Minister Abadi announced all who fought against ISIS would be given residential land in their home municipality. Given the sectarian nature of the GoI this may not be implemented in a non-partisan manner, if at all. Nor does the GoI have jurisdiction to implement this goal in the KRI.

With the people of Iraq having suffered four decades of war, terrorism and political oppression, the status quo is unacceptable. In the face of so much suffering, expressing 'concern' and 'hope' for better outcomes is inadequate. If Sunni Arabs are not empowered, ISIS and Al-Qaida will have fertile grounds for recruitment. If Shia regions are not empowered, Iran-backed Hashd al-Shaabi will have fertile grounds for expansion. Meanwhile, an independent Kurdistan would have local, regional and international military, political, economic, socio-cultural and humanitarian benefits.<sup>10</sup>

## Syria

### Overview

War in Syria is growing in complexity. The civil war has entered a seventh year with negotiations in Geneva and Astana at a stalemate. Attempts to establish ceasefires and de-escalation zones are being ignored by an increasingly confident regime as they go after 'terrorists' and militarily claw back territory. Opposition militias fight each other and HTS has taken control of Idlib province, although a Russian-US-Jordanian negotiated ceasefire in the southwest appears to be holding.

In the war on ISIS, the Syrian Army and Iran-backed militias have advanced east on three fronts. Although the ISIS caliphate is shrinking ISIS remains entrenched along the Euphrates River and southeast desert, including most of Deir Ezzor province, and is still capable of launching attacks elsewhere. It is unknown whether a Russian airstrike killed ISIS figurehead Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 28 May near Deir Ezzor city, but most analysts consider the fate of al-Baghdadi is no longer relevant.

Under the framework of the Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq Pact of September 2015, the Iraqi and Syrian governments have increased military co-operation, with the Syrian Army and militias joining up with Hashd al-Shaabi along their common border, where

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<sup>10</sup> See 'Why the Kurdistan Regions Deserve Self Rule' available at: <http://www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SelfRule.pdf>

10,000 ISIS fighters have amassed.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the US-led coalition supports Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to liberate Raqqa and rural Deir Ezzor in an effort to control the same border and prevent Iran entrenching itself in Syria. This struggle over who controls what territory has led to incidences of confrontation between the US-led coalition and (pro) Syrian forces between 18 May and 18 June and to Turkey escalating attacks on Syrian Kurds and their allies in the north, after Operation Euphrates Shield established a Turkish occupation in northern Aleppo.

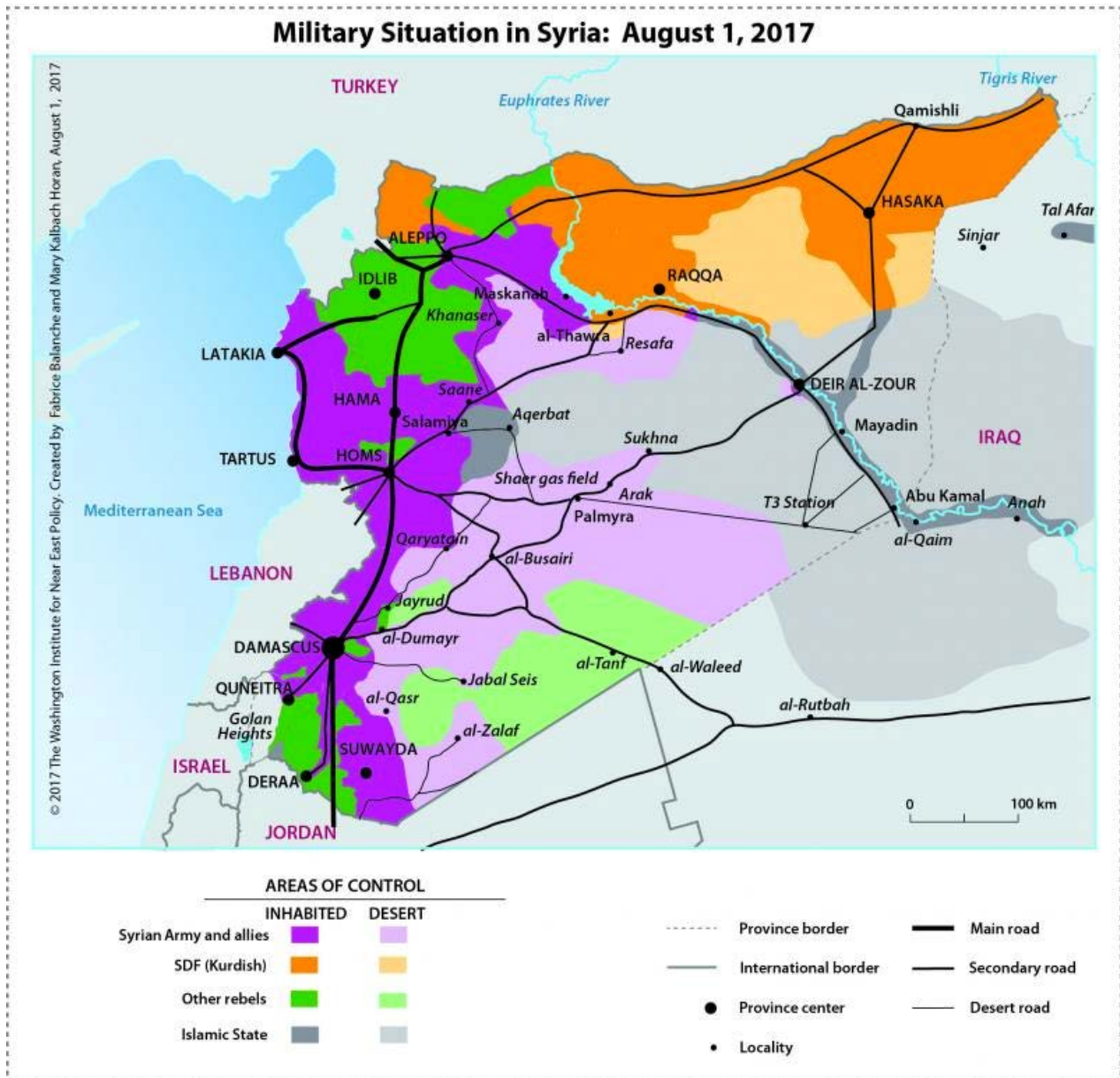


Figure 3: The de-facto division of Syria

<sup>11</sup> Co-operation includes the Syrian regime giving permission to Iraqi warplanes to bomb ISIS on Syrian soil on 24 February and in mid April, based on Iraqi intelligence, Syrian fighter jets conducted airstrikes on ISIS bases and key leaders in Raqqa and along the border. On 18 May, President Assad and Iraq's National Security Advisor discussed direct co-operation against ISIS along the border, with Hashd al-Shaabi in Nineveh reaching the border by 29 May, and from Anbar, crossing the border several times in direct contravention to Prime Minister Abadi's orders.

In the severely weakened state of Syria, solving one conflict will not solve others or address the de-facto division between:

- Regime-controlled areas, covering 45 percent of Syria, including areas controlled by pro-regime foreign militias and local militias, the largest being the National Defence Forces, a police force advised and funded by Iran;
- Kurdish-controlled areas, covering 23 percent of Syria, subject to attack by ISIS, Turkey and Turkey-backed militias;
- ISIS-held territory, covering 16 percent of Syria;
- Opposition-controlled areas, covering 15 percent of Syria, subject to air and ground offensives and fighting between opposition militias; and a
- Turkish-controlled area covering 1.2 percent of Syria.

Ostensibly the civil war goes back to the Arab Spring and the non-violent protests of 2011 that were put down by violent means. The ensuing civil war created the conditions that were exploited by ISIS. Yet before the uprising, poverty and drought were causing rural people to migrate to the cities, where they faced an unofficial employment rate of 20 percent, and minorities like the Kurds were severely discriminated against. Some analysts refer to other underlying causes, including two proposed oil pipelines to Europe going through Syria.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Russia holds offshore oil and gas exploration and development rights in Syria.

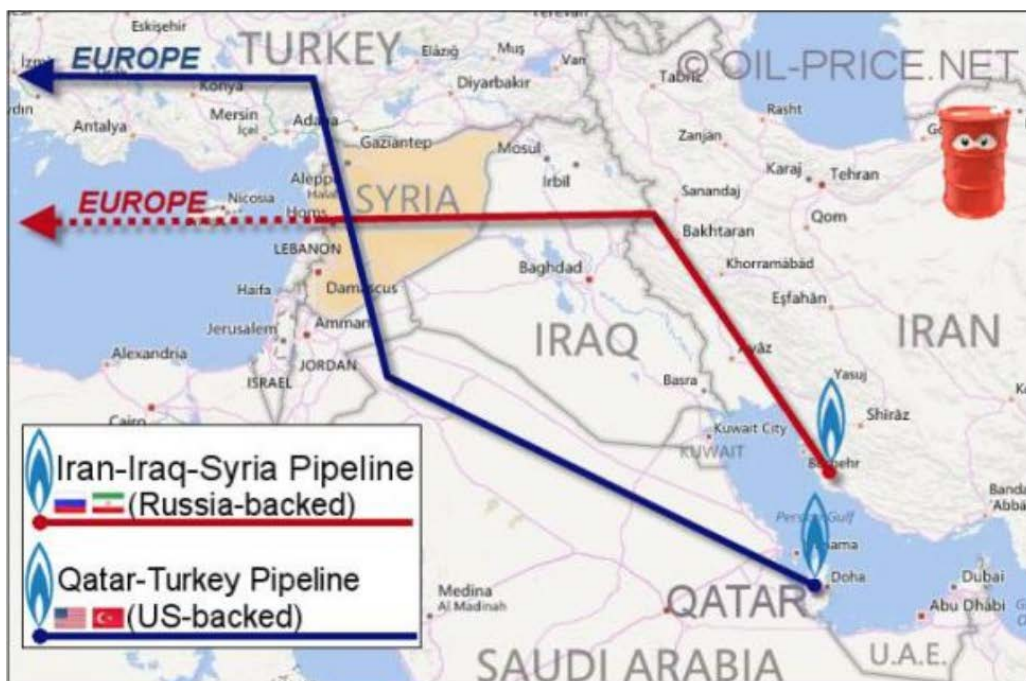


Figure 4: Proposed Russian and US backed oil pipelines through Syria<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Causes of the civil war are further explored in <https://independentaustralia.net/article-display/syrian-airstrike-more-to-the-september-16-mistake-than-originally-thought,10276>

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://images.angelpub.com/2017/15/43298/competing-pipelines.png>



The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that war in Syria between March 2011 and March 2017 has killed at least 465,000 people, including 96,073 civilians. The Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) estimates an additional 1.2 million people have been wounded. By far the most deaths have been caused by the civil war, although in the month of May the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that of the 964 civilians who died in war, 273 were killed by US-led coalition airstrikes, 268 were killed by ISIS and opposition militias, and 241 were killed by pro-regime forces, 87 being inside the 'de-escalation' zones.

The war has displaced 11.3 million people, five million of whom are refugees, with 600,000 people returning home since late 2016. These, 6.3 million IDPs and another 10 million people who remained at home face daily fear of war, water and electricity shortages, queues for highly priced food items, extortion and rule by multiple and competing pro-regime or opposition militias and an unemployment rate of 60 percent with 80 percent of all Syrians living in poverty and 17 percent of all households headed by a female.

War has destroyed or severely damaged 27 percent of all housing stock. An estimated 13.5 million people, including six million children (an unknown number being orphans), are in need of humanitarian aid. Aid delivery has been used as a political tool by the regime, with at least 4.4 million people trapped in 13 regime-besieged areas and since March, Turkey has shut down aid delivery to 500,000 IDPs and Iraqi refugees in northeast Syria.

Since the fall of eastern Aleppo city in December the opposition have suffered many defeats although Ahrar al-Sham and HTS, or the 'Assembly for Liberation of the Levant', led by JFS co-ordinated in March to launch attacks in Damascus, Aleppo city, Hama, Homs and Idlib. These and other opposition militias have relied on old Soviet, Warsaw-Pact and Yugoslav weapons and ammunition purchased by Sunni Arab states from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania,<sup>14</sup> alongside covert and overt US support, with all supplies channelled through Turkey and Jordan. But with Arab states preoccupied with war in Yemen and the Qatar-Gulf rift, and the US announcing it will no longer supply some 20,000 opposition militants, support for opposition forces has decreased. The opposition appear to have no likelihood of a military victory, and in political negotiations face an intransigent regime.

In an effort to end the civil war, Russia has been the pivotal broker of all truce and ceasefire agreements, with the unenviable task of balancing conflicting interests. These agreements have consolidated regime, regime militia and Iran-backed militia control over 100 towns in Western Syria and engineered major demographic changes by removing Sunni Arabs from around Damascus and collecting them in Idlib

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<sup>14</sup> Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).



Kurdish Lobby Australia

and Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo. The agreements have also enabled the Syrian regime to embark on eastern offensives in May with the intention of taking back Syria.

Russia, the US, Iran, Turkey and the Gulf states all have vested interests in Syria, and no one player is in control of any other. For example, the more territory the Syrian regime takes, the less control Russia has over the regime. Assad remains secure in the knowledge that he cannot be tried for war crimes or crimes against humanity as the International Criminal Court (ICC) as the ICC has no jurisdiction in Syria, and a Russian veto would block the UN Security Council referring matters to an international court. This is despite extensive evidence collected by a UN investigation commission that includes government records, testimony from more than 1,400 witnesses and victims, corroborating photographs, video, satellite imagery, and forensic and medical reports that implicate Assad and his chain of command in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet tensions are growing between Russia and the Syrian regime because Assad insists on militarily taking back all of Syria and refuses to make any political concessions. In turn, Russia is currently refusing to provide air support for a regime advance on Idlib, preferring to establish a de-escalation zone and avoid another Aleppo.

Although Iran and Russia support the Assad regime, they do so for different reasons. Iran wants to defeat all opposition to shore up a compliant regime that will allow Iran to entrench itself in Syria, despite Syria's majority Sunni population, consolidate its influence in Lebanon and have access to the Mediterranean Sea. Clashes have even occurred between regime forces and Iran-backed militia in northern Homs after the latter rejected Astana V, while in eastern Aleppo city Iran-backed militia have consolidated their positions and Iran has opened Shia religious centres under the watch of 600 Russian military police. In contrast, having protected its core interests, Russia wants an end to the civil war through ceasefire agreements with moderate opposition groups, a focus on stabilisation and humanitarian needs and to establish civilian councils within each ceasefire zone to support a political transition. Other major differences are that Russia wants a decentralised government in Syria, and is not aligned with Iran's position on Israel.

Russia's tactical alliance with Turkey also has inherent tensions, including Turkey's support for Ahrar al-Sham, which Russia classifies as a terrorist group;<sup>15</sup> Ahrar al-Sham's offensives against the regime until June 2017; Turkey's links with HTS; Turkey and Turkey-backed militants' links with ISIS; Turkey's wish to expand its Syrian territory and use opposition militia against the regime; Turkey's support for a Sunni Islamist government in Syria and opposition to any form of decentralisation, particularly when it comes to a Kurdish-majority autonomous region; Turkey's wish to eliminate all Kurdish forces in Syria; and Turkey's own Islamisation, which Russia

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<sup>15</sup> Ahrar al-Sham worked with ISIS until January 2014 and with Al-Qaida/Al-Nusra/JFS/HTS until June 2017, having amalgamated under the name Jaysh al-Fatah in 2015 to take Idlib and make other significant advances leading to Russia's intervention. The alliance had its ups and downs with defections to HTS in December 2016 and pro HTS Ahrar al-Sham fighters merging with HTS in January 2017. Both groups continued to co-ordinate until mid 2017.



does not want to influence its own Muslim population. In return, Turkey rejects the continuation of Russian sanctions against Turkey's agricultural products that began on 1 January 2016 after Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 aircraft, and vehemently opposes Russia not classifying PKK as a terrorist group and Russian proposals for Syrian Kurds in the Federal System participating in the Geneva negotiations and the formation of an autonomous Kurdish region.

As a result of these tensions, Russia appears to have sidelined Iran and Turkey in the July – August ceasefire agreement in Daraa-Quneitra-Suweida, and the Cairo agreements that established de-confliction zones in eastern Ghouta and Homs, with Russian military police taking responsibility for securing these zones, as they have done in Aleppo city.

Given the web of interests, the paralysis of the UN Security Council and the Geneva negotiations, the more Russia and the US co-operate on Syria, the more likely solutions can be found. Despite their considerable differences outside Syria, Russia and the US share a wish to defeat terrorism, end the civil war and encourage a political transition, although to achieve these goals they have different allies, or the same ally in different locations. Their high level of cooperation includes using the de-confliction channel on a daily basis, successfully de-conflicting numerous front lines and flash points and extending these agreements geographically, and forging a Russian-US-Jordanian agreement for a southwest ceasefire zone. In early August, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claimed there was potential for greater co-operation, provided two conditions were met: the removal of Assad and the withdrawal of Iranian forces and militias from Syria.

Currently Russia oversees Syrian territory west of the Euphrates, operating out of 11 airbases: Khmeimim airbase in Latakia, the Shayrat and Tiyas airbases in Homs, Kuweires airbase in Aleppo, and seven airbases around Damascus, including Khirbat Ras al Wa'r in eastern Damascus. Russia also has forward bases including one in Suweida, a former Druze state under the French mandate.

Except for two forward bases in Manbij, the US oversees territory east of the Euphrates, operating out of at least seven bases and six forward bases. Since March 2016, the US has been upgrading airbase facilities near Kobani (Aleppo province), 110 kilometres north of Raqqa city. In Raqqa province the US operates an airport facility in Tel Abyad, a training facility near Ain Issa, two forward bases (one being Al-Tanf, 30 kilometres from the borders with Jordan and Iraq), and since April 2017, has control of Tabqa airbase. The US also has at least two airbases in Hasaka province (Abu Hajar airport near Rmeilan and al-Malikiya) and two forward bases in Deir Ezzor province. On 17 July, Turkey caused the Pentagon concern when the state run newsagency published details of ten US bases in northern Syria, including exact locations, troop numbers and equipment.



Alongside the military conflict, is a propaganda war over the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons and US-led coalition airstrikes causing civilian deaths. Both risk further alienating local communities, enhancing extremists' capacity to recruit.

Russia estimates that it will cost \$300 million to demine 40 percent of Syria. Western experts estimate a comprehensive reconstruction program will cost \$1.2 trillion. Russia does not have this money. US and EU officials claim their countries will only become involved in reconstruction if Assad is removed from power, yet without Russian co-operation they do not have any non-military means to do so. What might convince Russia to act is for the US and EU to lift sanctions on Russia, provide guarantees for Russian military, oil and gas interests in Syria, and convince Russia of the numerous benefits Russia would gain from a comprehensive reconstruction plan.

## **Under the cloak of ceasefires**

The Russia-Turkey-Iran Astana ceasefire agreement is in tatters but no-one is saying so. This section outlines how all parties are responsible for the breakdown and how Russia has forged ahead by side-lining Turkey and Iran and co-operating with the US.

## **Israel's concerns about the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria**

Israel feels directly threatened by the presence of Iran in Syria, including Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps under Quds command, and Iran-backed militia, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, estimated to number between 5,000 – 8,000,<sup>16</sup> and some thousands of militants from Iraq,<sup>17</sup> Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their presence along Israel's border is of particular concern, resulting in Israel lobbying the US and Russia to take action regarding the withdrawal of these forces from Syria before they form a Basij-style military police in support of the Assad regime. Israel also insists that Iran must not be allowed to establish military bases or build an arms industry in Syria, or establish or operate port facilities on the Mediterranean Sea. Israel claims to have evidence that Iran is building a port terminal at Tartas and missile factories in Syria and Lebanon. A meeting between the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on 9 March resulted in a Russian-Israeli accord, and for a period thereafter Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah and Syrian assets increased.

On 17 March Israeli airstrikes hit Syrian army facilities and a Hezbollah convoy near Palmyra. The Syrian regime retaliated with anti-aircraft fire. An Israeli airstrike on 19

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<sup>16</sup> An estimated 1,700 to 2,000 Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria. Although Hezbollah has gained battle experience they have lost credibility in supporting Assad and killing Sunni Arabs.

<sup>17</sup> Hashd al-Shaabi units fighting in Syria under direct orders from Iran include al-Nojaba, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saray al-Kharasani and Kataib Hezbollah. These militias wish to be part of the fight for Raqqa, Aleppo and the Golan Heights and also threaten to fight Turkey if Turkey does not withdraw from Iraq and Syria.



March took out a supply truck near the border. On 23 March Israeli airstrikes targeted Syrian military installations near Damascus and between 22 – 24 April, Israeli jets targeted a pro-regime militia base in Quneitra province, in response to Syrian artillery shells landing in the Golan Heights. On 27 April, five Israeli airstrikes hit Hezbollah arms and fuel depots resulting in huge explosions at Damascus International Airport. On 24 June Israel targeted two regime artillery positions, two tanks and an ammunition truck in Quneitra after regime errant mortar fire and tank shells landed in the Golan Heights when regime forces were fending off a JFS advance on the Daraa-Damascus highway. On 25 and 28 June, Israel again targeted Syrian forces following errant fire landing in the Golan Heights.

Some analysts suggest a negotiated settlement needs to include Hezbollah leaving Syria in return for an arms channel into Lebanon on condition arms are not used against Israel; that Shiite shrines, towns and communities in Syria are protected, and that Israel does not attack Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, these suggestions do not address Israel's concerns about the Iranian presence in Syria, with Israeli officials claiming that an ongoing presence would determine the trajectory of the Middle East for generations to come.

### **Regime offensives and forced evacuations**

The Syrian regime is determined to eliminate any threat to regime-held cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs, and by the end of May had largely succeeded. This was achieved by Russia brokering truce agreements after years of regime sieges, airstrikes and ground offensives, with ground forces estimated to be 80 percent Iran-backed militia, and by clashes between pro-Astana and anti-Astana opposition militias. For instance, after weeks of bombardment of the opposition-held Al-Waer district in Homs city, on 13 March Russia brokered a truce agreement allowing between 20,000 to 40,000 civilians and 2,500 opposition fighters to evacuate to opposition-held rural Homs, Idlib and Turkey-occupied Jarablus, with evacuations supervised by Russian Chechen Special Forces. Those who remained in Al-Waer, had security provided by Russian military police. But not all militias wanted the evacuations to take place and during April opposition militias clashed with each other causing the deaths of scores of fighters. By the end of May, further evacuations had occurred in opposition-held neighbourhoods of Damascus and Aleppo city.

Leading up to Astana IV, Syrian and Russian warplanes used bunker busters, cluster bombs, phosphorus and barrel bombs to pound HTS and other jihadi militias in northern Aleppo, Aleppo city, Damascus, Idlib, Homs and Hama. After a plan for four de-escalation zones was announced on 6 May, the regime continued its air and ground offensives killing many civilians and by the end of May thousands of opposition militants had been forced to withdraw from Hama, the Jobar, Barzeh and Qabun districts of Damascus, and the besieged Yarmouk refugee camp, from where ISIS was allowed to travel to Raqqa. Only parts of eastern Guouta on the outskirts of





Damascus remained a threat, although fighting between opposition militias in the district were causing the deaths of hundreds of militants and tens of civilians.<sup>18</sup>

### **Opposition counteroffensives in March**

Opposition militias continued to resist, the sheer number of militias and their changing allegiances making the regime's task of spying on them difficult. Leading up to and during Geneva V, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham co-ordinated attacks inside Damascus, Hama city and Homs province. These included a suicide attack outside a Damascus courthouse that killed 43 people on 15 March. Five days later, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham captured several buildings and industrial sites to the east of Damascus. Pro-regime forces took back these areas the following day, and in three days of fighting 26 pro-regime forces and, according to the regime, 157 'terrorists' were killed.

Concurrent with what was happening in and around Damascus, on 21 March 10,000 fighters from HTS and Ahrar al-Sham launched an offensive on regime headquarters and other areas in and around Hama city, forcing the regime to withdraw by 24 March. Some sources claim that militias were using US-manufactured anti-tank missiles. Kurdish sources claim that 500 Turkey-backed Euphrates Shield fighters took part in the attack on the regime headquarters in Hama city, and Russian sources claim over 2,100 opposition fighters were killed in four days of fighting i.e. Iran-backed militants killing Turkey-backed militants. The UN claimed the fighting displaced 40,000 people.

According to Kurdish sources, Turkey was forcing fighters who had evacuated to northern Aleppo to return to Damascus, Hama and Homs to fight pro-regime forces. Those who refused to fight were being arrested, disarmed and threatened with salary and food cuts. A few escaped to Manbij Military Council and reported that many Euphrates Shield fighters wanted to lay down arms. Russia and the Syrian regime accused Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar of supporting these offensives.

### **Lack of safety during evacuations and inside refugee camps**

After signing a truce agreement, those evacuating are not necessarily safe. In mid-March, Iran and Qatar mediated a deal between HTS/JFS, Ahrar al-Sham, Hezbollah and Iran Revolutionary Guards for 1,500 prisoners to be released and at least 30,000 civilians to be evacuated from four towns: the regime-held, opposition-besieged Shia towns of Fuaa and Kafraya north of Aleppo city, and the opposition-held, regime-

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<sup>18</sup> In the last days of April, fighting between HTS and Saudi-backed Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) caused the deaths of eight civilians and up to 200 militants. Clashes temporarily stopped after 3,000 people protested, but fighting resumed in May, this time involving Faylaq al-Rahman and HTS on one side and Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam on the other, causing the deaths of 'tens' of fighters and civilians. Clashes ended when HTS demanded Ahrar al-Sham withdraw from eastern Guouta.



besieged majority Sunni Arab towns of Madaya and Zabadani near Damascus. The evacuations were to begin on 14 April. Delays caused thousands of people to be stuck at two northern exchange checkpoints for 48 hours. On 15 April, a suicide bomber drove a truck up to a convoy of buses at the Rashidan exchange point and handed out chips and lollies to children who had been living under siege. The subsequent explosion killed 126 people. At least 70 were children. The majority were Shia evacuees. About 17 were Ahrar al-Sham guards.

Nor is safety assured of people living in refugee camps. On 2 May, ISIS attacked a checkpoint at Al-Hol refugee camp in Hasaka province killing 37 IDPs, refugees and SDF fighters, and injuring another thirty. In May, Rukban camp near the Jordanian border was targeted several times by car bombs. Six civilians were killed in one instance. Turkish artillery and Turkey-backed militia regularly fire on Rubar refugee camp in Kurd-controlled Afrin, causing casualties and material damage.

### **The propaganda war: 4 April Chemical Attack**

On 14 March, the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported that the cutting off water to Damascus in December 2016 was not the result of the opposition contaminating the supply, as claimed by the Syrian regime, but the result of regime airstrikes deliberately targeting infrastructure. The report concluded it was a war crime.

The propaganda war continues with an incident that occurred in Khan Sheikhoun – a JTS co-ordinating centre in southern Idlib – just days after US President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claimed that President Assad's fate was for the Syrian people to decide. On 4 April, after Russia provided operational details to the US through the de-confliction channel, two SU-22 Syrian fighter jets flew from Shayrat airbase and one released a Russian-supplied guided 500-pound bomb (rarely given to the Syrian military) on a building in Khan Sheikhoun after being told that inside the building a meeting of 'high value targets' was taking place. The building's basement was used to store rockets, other weapons, ammunition, chlorine-based materials for cleaning corpses, fertilisers and disinfectants. An explosion followed by secondary explosions released a toxic odorous cloud that allegedly killed 92 people, one third being children, and injured more than five hundred.

Thirty or more victims were taken to Turkey for treatment where examiners concluded the victims were suffering from sarin or a similar nerve agent mixed with chlorine. The explosions were subsequently reported as the deadliest chemical incident since August 2013 when a sarin attack in Ghouta killed up to 1,500 people (sources vary on the number).

There was an immediate international outcry that the regime had committed a war crime, for which the CIA director Mike Pompeo and others claimed there was irrefutable evidence. According to veteran reporter, Von Seymour M. Hersh, some in



the intelligence community claimed there was no evidence, although the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was to conclude there was credible evidence that sarin was used. This would discount three out of four alternative scenarios. President Assad claimed the attack was faked to discredit the regime. Russia claimed that the regime's airstrikes could have hit an opposition chemical weapons storage site, although Hamish de Bretton-Gordon<sup>19</sup> claimed that sarin is stored as two separate precursors. A third explanation was that the toxic cloud was a mix of what was being stored in the basement, which could produce sarin-like symptoms. Dr. Theodore Postol,<sup>20</sup> offered a fourth explanation, suggesting a 122 mm artillery rocket fired on a windless day could have been the source of the chemical explosion, although this would mean the opposition militants were able to time the attack with the airstrike.

There have been 161 documented chemical attacks involving chlorine, mustard gas, sarin or phosphorus in Syria since 2011, with the OPCW investigating claims that chemicals were used in Syria 45 times since mid-2016. Allegedly the regime, opposition militias and ISIS have used chemical weapons. A 2013 agreement negotiated by the US and Russia resulted in the removal of 1,300 tons of chemical arsenal held by the Syrian regime. The process was completed in 2014, although Russia was unable to decommission two of twelve storage sites because they were in opposition-held areas. ISIS and opposition militias have allegedly stolen government chemical arsenal or otherwise obtained chemicals weapons,<sup>21</sup> and allegedly used sarin on the Syrian Army four times between March 2013 and February 2015.<sup>22</sup> The regime has preferred using chlorine, the infamous exception being the sarin attack in Ghouta on 21 August 2013, although some claim that evidence points to Al-Nusra/Al-Qaida/JFS as being responsible.

Following the 4 April attack, US, UK and France formulated a UN Security Council resolution demanding that the regime hand over all air force records related to airstrikes on Idlib on 4 April, and make available all relevant personnel for an immediate investigation. Russia found the wording unacceptable. The Assad regime said it would approve an investigation as long as Turkey was not involved.

Before the fog of war had cleared (if it ever does), but after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claimed that there were steps underway to remove Assad diplomatically,

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<sup>19</sup> A former commanding officer of the British Armed Forces Joint Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) Regiment

<sup>20</sup> Professor of Science, Technology and National Security Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

<sup>21</sup> In 2013 the Adana High Criminal Court brought a case against 13 Al-Nusra members, with the scope of the indictment covering Ahrar Al-Sham, Turkish police and intelligence, and the Machine and Chemistry Institute. The allegations were that Turkey was the source of phosphorus and raw materials for the manufacture of sarin as well as rockets delivered to Syrian opposition groups before the Ghouta attack in August 2013. According to CHP MPs, Erdem Eren and Ali Şeker, the case was dropped and all suspects released and sent abroad.

<sup>22</sup> The alleged incidences occurred in the government-held areas of Aleppo (19 March 2013), Jobar (24 August 2013), Ashrafiyat Sahnaya (25 August 2013) and Daraa (15 February 2015), with opposition militia having used mustard gas on Kurdish forces in Hasaka (28 June 2015) and Sheikh Maqoud neighbourhood in Aleppo city (21 August 2015).



and three hours after the UN Security Council yet again failed to pass a resolution demanding an investigation into the chemical explosion, and 1.5 hours after informing Russia of the proposed action, President Trump ordered the launch of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from two US destroyers in the Mediterranean Sea. These struck the Shayrat airbase in Homs at 3.45 am local time on 7 April, killing an estimated six Syrian military personnel and up to nine civilians and destroying between nine and 20 MiG-23 fighter jets, as well as radar, petroleum and other facilities, but not runways, or (if any) chemical storage facilities.

Russia claimed that the US action was ‘aggression against a sovereign state in violation of international law, and under a false pretext’, and said it would suspend (i.e. not cancel) the air safety agreement with the US, although communications remained open. Russia promised any future action of this nature would be met in kind and asked for the US to provide evidence that a Syrian fighter jet released sarin.

Those who supported the action, including Turkey (in yet another U-turn), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Israel, Britain, the EU, individual EU member states, Australia and Canada, saw it as a necessary, swift, limited, low risk, proportionate and significant response to the use of chemical weapons. The action served to place the US back in the ‘game’ in Syria, possibly making it easier for the US to pressure Russia to pressure Assad.

Within days of the missile strike, the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, announced a significant US policy shift: that of removing President Assad from power. Russia and Syria continued to call for an impartial investigation. On 11 April, Tillerson, G7 foreign ministers, and officials from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan and Qatar called on Russia to withdraw support from Assad.

On 12 April, Tillerson flew into Moscow for meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin. Russian officials expressed confusion regarding the real intentions of the US, but the air safety agreement was reinstated, and Lavrov and Tillerson reported ‘fruitful’ discussions. Also on 12 April, Russia vetoed another draft resolution for a thorough investigation of the chemical attack as the draft retained the same demands as previous drafts. Russia demanded UN Security Council-approved Russian investigators be included in an OPCW investigation. On 24 April President Assad announced that he would put a moratorium on all air and ground action in the Khan Sheikhoun area so OPCW experts could conduct on-site investigations. Also on 24 April, the US announced sanctions on 271 employees of Syria’s Scientific Studies and Research Center responsible for developing non-conventional weapons. On 26 April the French Foreign Minister announced that French Intelligence had proof that the sarin used in the explosion was manufactured in Syria and was the same as that used in Guouta in 2013. In mid-August it was announced that a team of OPCW and other investigators was going to Syria to investigate the 4 April explosion. On 25 August Russia announced it had dismantled two chemical weapons facilities in territory formerly controlled by the opposition.



If the 4 April chemical explosion was not a dreadful accident, the question is, 'Who had the most to gain'? With Assad in a strong position militarily and politically, it would seem political suicide for the regime to have perpetuated the attack. Others argue that Assad's forces are depleted and battle weary, and the regime wishes to sow terror and a sense of futility among opposition militias. The regime also stood to benefit from jeopardising US-Russian co-ordination.

### **Political Negotiations: Astana III and IV, and Geneva V, VI and VII**

At Astana III (14 – 16 March) the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) arrived a day late, having previously said it would not attend because the regime was breaking the December ceasefire. The Syrian regime's chief delegate, Bashar al-Jafaari, accused Turkey of blocking the opposition from attending. Talks were extended by a day, but ended without progress.

Geneva V (23 March – 1 April) had the same problems as Geneva 1 – IV. The same parties (either guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity or removed from on-the-ground realities) led by the same figures (Bashar al-Jafaari for the regime and Jaish al-Islam commander Mohammed Alloush for the HNC) held the same uncompromising positions. One problem is that the Riyadh and Turkey-backed HNC does not represent a sufficient cross section of Syrians. Other interested parties are either denied a position at Geneva (e.g. representatives from the Federal System of Northern Syria) or are relegated to side rooms (e.g. civil society organisations and women).

The only development related to Kurds. On 24 March the Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council (KNC), which attends talks as part of the HNC, raised objections to an unpublished UN paper on a political solution written by UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura. The objections were that the paper:

- Referred to Syria as comprising 'one people', noting Syria's 'cultural diversity', but not referring to Syria's ethnic diversity;
- Was vague about the division of power and what was meant by 'local self-administration';
- Raised topics like the Golan Heights that have no relevance to a political transition; and
- Made no mention that a major cause of the civil war was that segments of the Syrian population lacked political, social and cultural rights.

The KNC representatives called for a specific commitment to Kurdish issues by all parties, including the UN. They proposed two options, either Kurdish autonomy or a confederation of Syria. When the HNC refused to put Kurdish issues on the agenda, on 29 March the KNC pulled out of negotiations. Like the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the KNC calls for a federal system throughout Syria but unlike the PYD, the KNC wants a Federal Kurdistan Region in contrast to the PYD's emphasis on a multi-ethnic Federal System of Northern Syria.



During the meetings the HNC demanded face-to-face talks, and clear points to discuss. They got neither. The HNC refused to discuss terrorism and insisted Assad step down. Staffan de Mistura once again called upon Turkey, Russia and Iran to do more in support of the 'ceasefire' and Israel, Russia and the HNC called for more US engagement.

Astana IV (3 – 4 May) focused on a Russian proposal for Russia, Iran and Turkey to establish and monitor four de-confliction/de-escalation zones. The opposition suspended talks on the first day because of continued airstrikes and ground offensives on opposition-held areas, and the regime's failure to release prisoners in accordance with the December agreement. The opposition vehemently opposed Iran being a monitor in any de-escalation zone and demanded a nation-wide ceasefire, fearing the four zones would threaten the territorial integrity of Syria. The opposition returned to talks the next day, but when Russia, Iran and Turkey signed an agreement on establishing four zones, an opposition member called out 'a killer cannot be a rescuer'.

At Geneva VI (16 – 19 May) Staffan de Mistura proposed that a consultative team of civil society activists and technocrats from both sides be formed to map options for drafting a constitution. It was agreed to form an unofficial committee to discuss the process.

At Astana V (4 – 5 July), opposition militias in the Southern Front did not participate because of continued regime offensives, and Russia, Iran and Turkey failed to agree on borders and security for each de-escalation zone. Instead they formed a 'working committee', and scheduled Astana VI to be held in Tehran at the end of August. However Astana VI was delayed until mid-September because Russia, Iran and Turkey have not agreed on how to handle Idlib.

Geneva VII (10 – 14 July) was held to little fanfare and resulted in 'no break, no breakthrough'. Afterwards, Putin allegedly claimed that the de-escalation zones could be a prototype for future divisions within a federal system, despite Assad's objection to any form of decentralisation. Staffan De Mistura and the opposition claimed that the regime continued to refuse to negotiate a political transition.

On the 21 August, the HNC, and two other opposition groups, the Cairo Group and the Moscow Group, met in Riyadh with the aim of forming a united opposition before the next Geneva negotiations. These groups agree that Assad must go, but disagree on the timing of his departure.

## De-escalation zones

The Astana IV agreement signed by Russia, Iran and Turkey called for four de-escalation zones to be established on 6 May for an initial period of six months. The four zones were:

- Zone 1: Idlib province, and areas in northeast Latakia, western Aleppo and northern Hama, where there are up to one million civilians and at least 30,000 opposition fighters;
- Zone 2: northern Homs where there are up to 180,000 civilians and about 3,000 opposition fighters;
- Zone 3: eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, where there are 690,000 civilians and about 9,000 opposition fighters;
- Zone 4: opposition-held areas in the southwest provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, where there are 800,000 civilians and 15,000 opposition fighters.

Inside the zones there would be delivery of humanitarian aid; an exchange of hostages and prisoners of war; a government effort to restore water and electricity,<sup>23</sup> and a ban on the use of heavy weapons and airstrikes. Pro-Astana opposition militias would be separated from anti-Astana militias, the latter including HTS. There would be no military activity inside a zone, except the regime maintained the right to target all 'terrorists'. A buffer security belt, observation posts and checkpoints manned by unspecified troops would protect each zone. The opposition called for UN monitors but the Assad regime rejected this proposal and any other troops from enemy countries.

Within days, Russia announced the no-fly zones would exclude US-led coalition airstrikes on HTS in Idlib. The US rejected this limitation, expressed concern that Iran was a guarantor and called on Turkey to withdraw support from designated terrorist groups. Since May, Russia and the US have continued to negotiate details, including instating no fly zones, which has not occurred.

The Syrian regime and pro-Astana opposition did not sign the agreement, and important details were left unclarified. Some were cleared in July but outstanding issues include:

- Borders and lines between opposing forces;
- The nature and numbers of troops required and their rules of engagement for Idlib, with the opposition rejecting Iranian troops and the regime rejecting Turkish troops;
- Mechanisms to separate pro Astana and anti Astana militants, especially given HTS's numerous ideological and military links with Ahrar al-Sham and Turkmen militias, with anti-Astana groups present in all zones and dominant in Zone 1 (Idlib);

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<sup>23</sup> In eastern Ghouta residents receive electricity for 1.5 hours a day and have been without gas since March.



- Mechanisms to address ceasefire violations by any party;
- Mechanisms to address fighting between opposition groups; and
- Whether the zones will be expanded throughout Syria, as demanded by both Iran and the opposition.

In the first 24 hours of establishing the de-escalation zones the regime conducted 18 violations and in all four zones continued to use airstrikes, barrel bombs and ground offensives. Many analysts concluded the establishment of these zones was a pre-emptive move so the regime could consolidate control over western Syria, and advance east. This is what has occurred. Analysts fear that the zones will entrench the presence of Iranian and Turkish troops and consolidate the militias they back. For this reason, Israel opposed the establishment of de-escalation zones. Others speculate that the zones are Russia's attempt at a de facto partitioning of Syria, keeping the Assad regime in nominal control, in view of Russia consistently advocating for a federal system of governance. However, the Russian drafted constitution presented at Astana I (23 – 24 January) was rejected by the regime and opposition alike, and did not elaborate on mechanisms for federalism and sectarian quotas, the latter proving unworkable in Lebanon. Nor did it solve contradictions inherent in the 2012 constitution, such as the independence of the Supreme Constitutional Court and judiciary, but these institutions coming under the authority of the president.

### **Zone 1: Idlib and surrounds, yet to be established**

Zone 1 was always going to be the most problematic. Fifty percent of the 1.8 million people in Idlib are IDPs from other opposition-controlled areas. In daily life everyone must navigate the checkpoints and rivalries of three opposition factions, with the two dominant factions, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, being accused of laying mines along roads, routinely disrupting services, seizing aid convoys, kidnapping or killing civil rights activists, and undermining local civilian councils. Civilians also suffer from Russian, Syrian and US-led coalition airstrikes targeting HTS. For instance, Human Rights groups reported that on 16 March a US airstrike killed 49 civilians in a mosque in an opposition held area near the Idlib border. The US denied it was responsible, claiming they had conducted airstrikes on JFS leaders nearby. At the end of May hundreds of opposition militants, who had evacuated from Damascus, found conditions in Idlib so unbearable they negotiated an agreement to return to Damascus.

In Idlib, the smallest opposition faction is loosely labelled the 'Free Idlib Army'. Despite the US, Turkish and Saudi intelligence providing salaries, light weapons, ammunition and anti-tank missiles for this 'army', it has failed to become a united force. By far the most dominant in numbers, territory and checkpoints is HTS, which controlled the provincial capital and most territory along the Syrian-Turkish border, and 80 of the 156 local councils in Idlib before further gains in July. Since the December ceasefire agreement HTS had gained credibility and members, with at





least 10 percent from Ahrar al-Sham defecting to HTS. In May its leaders went to Turkey to negotiate a deal on Idlib. The other faction is Ahrar al-Sham, a Syrian jihadi militia supported by Turkey and Qatar despite being a former ally of ISIS. Ahrar al-Sham partnered with HTS to take control of Idlib province in 2015. In 2017, despite co-ordinating outside Idlib, in Idlib Ahrar al-Sham began fighting HTS, allegedly at Turkey's behest. Clashes escalated in February and March, ending with civilian protests, then resumed in May through to July. The heaviest fighting began on 18 July when HTS took control of Ahrar al-Sham's main supply routes and revenue sources – two border gates including the al-Bab al-Hawa Border Gate. Over three days, 19 militias joined HTS, and fighting spread across northern Idlib killing at least 77 militants (some say 300) and 15 civilians (some say more). Protests against the fighting and HTS rule were met with gunfire before a ceasefire agreement was signed between the two factions. Ahrar Al-Sham withdrew from Idlib city and surrounds leaving HTS to take over 31 towns and villages. By 23 July, Ahrar al-Sham had withdrawn from Idlib into rural Hama and by the month's end HTS had expanded its control into pockets of Aleppo by forming tactical alliances with local groups and issuing fatwas to kill opposing fighters. By the end of August HTS was fighting (pro) regime forces in northern Aleppo.

HTS is intent on consolidating its position by forming a unified civil administration that will oversee local councils and controlling informal money transfers and the border. HTS has at least 15,000 fighters, and was further reinforced at the beginning of August when 1,700 JFS militants and 6,000 civilians arrived in Idlib from Lebanon in return for the release of eight Hezbollah fighters held captive by JFS in a deal brokered by Lebanon and Jordan following two weeks of fighting between Hezbollah and JFS along the Jordan-Syria border. Meanwhile, a weakened Ahrar al-Sham reshuffled its leadership in an effort to stay united and reduce tensions with HTS. The new leader, Hassan Soufan, spent ten years in a Syrian prison (2006 – 2016), during which time he established a history of negotiating in a crisis.

HTS has its own problems. Its harsh rule is unpopular among many civilians. For instance, in June, 80,000 people in the town of Maarat al-Numan protested against HTS. It was the same town that held a 100-day protest against HTS in 2016. On 20 July 2017, Nour e-Din a-Zinki announced it was splitting from HTS because of their fighting Ahrar al-Sham and because Sharia law was not being implemented in HTS territory. Some of Nour e-Din a-Zinki's 7,000 fighters had received CIA training and support in Turkey, but when evidence emerged in 2015 of them committing atrocities the CIA withdrew its support, although Turkey did not. The militia became one of five main battalions in HTS. HTS is also split between those who follow an international agenda and those who wish to focus on overthrowing the regime.

The Syrian regime wants to advance on Idlib but needs Russian air support and is currently preoccupied fighting ISIS in the east. Turkey has been preparing its own occupation of Idlib, in view of which it allegedly supported Ahrar al-Sham to stand up to HTS. Since 20 June, Turkey has been moving tanks, armoured vehicles and trucks loaded with howitzers across the al-Bab al-Hawa Border Gate, from where they entered opposition-controlled Azaz and advanced on SDF-controlled areas in



northern Aleppo in an effort to isolate Kurdish-controlled Afrin. While waiting for Russia's permission to enter Idlib, Turkey and Turkish-backed militia stepped up their attacks on the SDF in Afrin and north Aleppo.

Some analysts suggest Russia would prefer to use its own military police to secure the province rather than have Turkey move through Kurdish-controlled areas into Idlib, alone or as part of a coalition. In Idlib, Turkey would face multiple dilemmas. Turkey could use the Syrian National Coalition and civil society groups to apply pressure on HTS and other opposition militias to amalgamate, but this does not solve the problem of jihadis controlling the province. Nor is the HTS likely to disarm given its current position of strength. The only reasons the Idlib militias would amalgamate are their determination to topple the Assad regime and stop Turkey from occupying Idlib. If negotiations fail and Turkey attacked HTS, possibly as part of a coalition, Turkey would be vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. Nor would the fight be easy given the Turkey's army is demoralised and the Turkey-backed militias are divided. Inside Idlib, Turkey is unpopular among many IDPs and opposition fighters who think Turkey has betrayed their cause and intends to annex Syrian territory. They also object to Turkish border guards assaulting and killing civilians attempting to cross the border. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented that between 12 January 2016 and August 2017 Turkish border guards killed 292 civilians, including children, who were attempting to cross the border into Turkey.

In the meantime, Turkey has closed the al-Bab al-Hawa Border Gate except to humanitarian aid, and on 17 August, signed a military agreement with Iran. The agreement is thought to relate to Syria and Kurdish aspirations in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. It came two days after Russian, Turkish and Iranian companies signed a contract to develop Iranian oil and gas fields. Allegedly Erdogan hopes to convince Iran to build a gas pipeline to Europe through Turkey that would also tap into gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, thus decreasing Turkey's dependence on Russian supplies.

Meanwhile, civilians in Idlib live in fear of what is going to happen next. Although many dislike HTS they want an end to the Assad regime. The councils that have pledged support for a HTS civil administration in Idlib have done so on condition HTS will disband and isolate its more extreme elements, while other councils have rejected HTS control. If Russia, the US, Syria or anyone else attacks the province, many will try and escape into Turkey or the hotbed of northern Aleppo.

There have been some positive developments. In early 2017 civilians elected their first civilian council in Idlib city and the regime released 672 prisoners on 24 – 25 June as a gesture of reconciliation. Where calm has been restored, local councils and NGOs have been providing limited services, working on damaged buildings and parks and delivering relief to the needy. During Ramadan Idlib city benefitted from the culinary and musical customs of IDPs despite HTS disapproving of music. Since 2016, many women's NGOs have been established to work on literacy, language



acquisition, health, food assistance, employment and business skills, and skills to take a more active role in the community and in local politics.

#### **Zone 4: Daraa, Quneitra and Suweida, established 9 July 2017**

Separate to the Astana agreement on de-escalation zones, on 9 July a Russia-US-Jordan ceasefire agreement was implemented in the opposition-controlled areas of Daraa, Quneitra and Suweida, including Daraa city, in southwest Syria. About 400,000 people live in these areas, while about one million people live in regime-controlled territories in the same provinces.

Negotiations between Russia and the US had begun shortly after Trump became US president, and continued as the regime subjected Daraa city to a siege and heavy bombardment, but failed to advance. Even after Daraa was identified as one of four de-escalation zones, the regime conducted thousands of airstrikes and barrel bombings, and fired ground-to-ground missiles, artillery and rocket shells during clashes between pro-regime forces and opposition militias, including HTS, in an effort to recapture Daraa city. In the two weeks prior to a two-day ceasefire (17 – 19 June), the regime killed 88 civilians according to Syria Civil Defence. When a five-day ceasefire was declared on 2 July, the regime continued its offensive, thus discrediting pro-Astana militias.

Under an alternative meticulously planned Russia-US-Jordan ceasefire agreement implemented on 9 July, opposition-held areas would become no-fly zones in exchange for opposition forces protecting infrastructure. On 18 July, 400 Russian police arrived to maintain security supported by regime internal security forces. All forces had to withdraw from contact lines and all foreign militias, including those supported by Iran, and any faction unwilling to keep the peace had to withdraw from the zone. with Iran-backed forces having to withdraw 40 kilometres from the borders with Israel and Jordan. There would be immediate aid deliveries and infrastructure preparation for the return of IDPs and municipal elections would be held. Municipalities would be granted broad powers. A joint monitoring centre in Amman, Jordan would oversee all matters.

Within 48 hours there were sporadic exchanges of fire on the ground; the opposition claimed to have shot down a Syrian military aircraft and damaged two tanks; the Syrian army dropped a barrel bomb on Daraa and attacked opposition militants north of Suweida and on 21 – 21 July the regime shelled two towns. Nevertheless, on 28 July, regime forces withdrew from Daraa city and the ceasefire is deemed to be holding, despite (pro) regime forces taking control of the Suweida-Jordanian border in the first 12 days of August.



### **Zone 3: Eastern Ghouta, established 22 July 2017**

In the mixed urban-rural region of eastern Ghouta, civilians have lived under regime bombardments, ground offensives and a partial siege for four years, and under four opposition militia's zones of influence. Fighting continued after the 6 May de-escalation agreement. Concurrent with Geneva VII in July, a pro-regime offensive killed and wounded at least 20 US-vetted militant-mercenaries according to Fars News. In a counterattack on 20 July, opposition militants killed at least 28 Syrian army commanders, troops and allied forces. Finally, on 22 July, Russia announced a ceasefire.

Of the four opposition militias in eastern Ghouta, the most powerful is Jaish al-Islam, which controls the town of Douma. The second most powerful is Faylaq al-Rahman, with a smaller presence of JFS/HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. In April and May, HTS and Faylaq al-Rahman clashed with Jaish al-Islam, leading to more than 150 people being killed.

Under the ceasefire agreement, the regime could not deploy its army to the zone but could open police stations and schools and would guarantee safe passage for humanitarian aid and the sick and injured. Within days Russia deployed 150 military police to checkpoints and observation posts to keep the peace, and promised an election for a civilian council.

Yet the ceasefire offered civilians little relief. All non-HTS militias were tasked with removing HTS from the zone and the regime continued to target JFS/HTS and its ally, Faylaq al-Rahman, with regime bombardments escalating as the days progressed, killing 170 people, including at least 25 civilians, in the first 12 days. Many more were injured. At the end of July, clashes broke out between former allies, Faylaq al-Rahman and HTS, leading to a civilian protest in Douma city calling for HTS to leave. The regime continued to bombard pockets of eastern Ghouta, killing at least ten civilians and injuring 'scores' between 5 – 7 August. Clashes between Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaish al-Sham resumed thereafter but on 19 August, Faylaq al-Rahman signed a truce with Russia on the promise that the regime siege of eastern Ghouta would be lifted. This did not stop pro-regime forces fighting Faylaq al-Rahman in Jobar and firing missiles into areas near Douma. The opposition concludes that the regime and Iran-backed forces will not let up until all opposition forces leave Damascus.

### **Zone 2: North of Homs city, established 3 August 2017**

On 3 August Russia announced the implementation of Astana Zone 2 north of Homs city, including Al-Waer neighbourhood. The zone covers three towns and 80 villages. Despite pro-regime and opposition militia targeting each other's territory with rockets and gunfire within hours of the announcement, Russia deployed military



Kurdish Lobby Australia

police to set up two checkpoints and three observation posts and claimed humanitarian aid and the release of prisoners of war would be forthcoming.

## War on ISIS

Apart from those killed in war, between 29 June 2014 and 29 May 2017, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights claims ISIS executed 4,850 people in Syria: 2,685 civilians, 1,270 Syrian soldiers and pro-regime militants, 533 ISIS fighters, 351 opposition and YPG fighters, and two Turkish soldiers.

The Syrian Kurds and their Arab, Assyrian and Turkmen allies in the SDF have been responsible for liberating half of all liberated territory in Syria. Their success in comparison to the CIA and Pentagon-supported Arab forces trained in Turkey and Jordan is put down to Arabs being divided and focused on removing Assad, with some fighting for money, compared to Kurds trained by veteran PKK fighters and the US, and unified under a central command structure and aspirations for self-rule. That Kurds and their allies avoid fighting the regime also means they receive support from Russia.

Although ISIS is under increasing pressure from the YPG, SDF, the Syrian army and Iran-backed militia ISIS continues to hold a strip of territory along the Euphrates River, and much of Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Suweida provinces including the towns of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Mayadin and Al-Bukamal and remains capable of launching attacks seemingly anywhere at anytime. One of the most horrific occurred on 18 May, when ISIS attacked two Ismaili (i.e. Shia) villages in Hama province, near the Damascus-Aleppo highway. The attack killed at least 52 people, including 17 Children, 11 women and 27 Syrian soldiers. Another 40 to 120 people were wounded. Of the 52 victims brought to a local hospital, many were children, who had been beheaded or dismembered.

The following day the regime took back the villages, at a cost of 100 soldiers and pro-regime militants, and advanced on Maskanah (in the Manbij district of Aleppo) but ISIS continued to attack regime and opposition forces. On 21 May, two ISIS suicide bombers in Idlib province killed at least 21 Ahrar al-Sham militants. In May ISIS shelled Deir Ezzor city twice, killing 26 people. On 21 June ISIS launched an attack in eastern Homs and Deir Ezzor city, and advanced in Hama province. On 3 July ISIS suicide bombers killed 18 people in Damascus, including seven security force personnel.

In the provinces of Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Suweida, the war against ISIS is transforming into a race for who will claim what territory. At stake is control of two thirds of Syria's oil, the Syrian regime's ability to reclaim Syria and control of the border with Iraq, either guaranteeing or preventing Iran's freedom of movement.



## **Regime offensives against ISIS**

Backed by Russian air power, Syrian forces and Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah and other militias advanced east from Aleppo and the Palmyra region opening a corridor to Raqqa on 24 March when they took the ISIS held-city of Dayr Hafir in Aleppo. By the end of April the regime claimed to have liberated 228 villages and towns in eastern Aleppo, the Palmyra region (Homs) and Hama. Their advances continued in May. On 10 May the regime killed 13 senior ISIS figures including the Minister of War, Abu Musab al-Masri, with the US-led coalition also killing at least three top ISIS commanders in May. (Pro) regime forces then retook al-Jarrah airbase in Aleppo and regained control of the Palmyra-Damascus Highway. On 5 June the regime captured Maskanah, ISIS's last urban stronghold in Aleppo province, and the town before Raqqa. The next day (pro) regime forces entered Raqqa province and were 80 kilometres from Raqqa city. On 8 June regime airstrikes hit ISIS positions west of Raqqa city and on 15 June regime forces captured Al-Thawra airport.

On 18 June, a missile from one of two US Navy FA-18E Super Hornets downed a Syrian SU-22 fighter jet targeting SDF in Ja'Din, south of Tabqa. The action came after pro-regime militants used artillery and tanks to attack SDF positions in Ja'Din, wounding a number of SDF fighters. The US asked the Russians to de-escalate tensions. When this failed to produce results, the US Super Hornets conducted strafing runs to deter the militants' attacks. At this point a regime SU-22 approached. Failing to heed the US Super Hornet's flares and other warnings the SU-22 dived and dropped munitions on SDF positions. The two US Super Hornets targeted the Syrian jet with short-range air-to-air missiles, one missile hitting its target.

The Syrian regime claimed that the Syrian jet was targeting ISIS, not the SDF, although on the ground, the pro-regime militants continued to attack the SDF that day and the next. On 20 June another SU-22 was about to target the SDF, when a show of force from a US-led coalition aircraft caused it to abort the mission. The SDF warned they had the right to defend themselves against future regime attacks. Russia's response to the US downing the SU-22 was to threaten to track and target any coalition aircraft west of the Euphrates and to shut down the de-confliction channel but the downing of the SU-22 was the last direct confrontation between the US-led coalition and Syrian regime after a series of confrontations, as outlined in the next section.

In July and August, supported by Russian and Syrian airstrikes, (pro) regime forces stepped up attacks against ISIS in Hama, Homs and Deir Ezzor, reclaiming ISIS-held oil and gas fields in Deir Ezzor. By the end of July regime forces were within 23 kilometres of Raqqa city and shared a 100-kilometre line with the SDF, separated only by the Euphrates River. To avoid direct conflict, since June Russia, the Syrian Army and YPG operated several de-confliction centres. In mid-August it was announced that all parties had formally agreed to a de-confliction line running along the Euphrates River from Tabqa to Deir Ezzor, but not reaching Deir Ezzor city.



The regime is determined to recapture Deir Ezzor city, where ISIS has besieged 10,000 Syrian soldiers and 15,000 pro-regime militants for two years. An estimated 93,500 civilians remain besieged in the city. ISIS is also determined to keep Deir Ezzor, and in August conscripted all men between 20 to 30 years of age. The province is being subjected to Russian, Syrian and US-led coalition airstrikes, with many civilians being killed. By the end of August, (pro) regime forces had surrounded ISIS in the desert of Homs, Russian airstrikes had killed at least 800 militants since the beginning of August and on 3 September the Syrian army was within 10 kilometres of the city.

Despite the regime's significant advances, analysts consider that (pro) regime forces are spread too thin to achieve a decisive victory in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa. This assessment was vindicated when ISIS launched a counteroffensive and retook territory south of the Euphrates near the Raqqa-Deir Ezzor border in the third week of August. Israel's *Maariv* newspaper subsequently reported that Russia had agreed to allow 'thousands' of Iranian soldiers into Syria to reinforce the regime's eastern offensives. Some commentators speculate that the US-led coalition and their SDF allies are better equipped and positioned to take rural Deir Ezzor, but that the regime will let the SDF spill blood, then negotiate its own terms if the US leaves Syria after defeating the caliphate.

### **Southern Front**

In May, the regime opened a front in the southern triangle, where two large Jordan-run IDP camps are located.<sup>24</sup> Since 2015, the area had witnessed fighting between ISIS, groups pledged to ISIS, and several US-trained opposition forces including the Maghawir al-Thawra (Commandoes of the Revolution), formed in May 2015 in Jordan. In March 2016 Maghawir al-Thawra helped set up a US forward base in Al-Tanf inside a de-confliction zone, allegedly with Russian agreement. Strategically located 30 kilometres from the Iraq and Jordan borders, Al-Tanf serves as a training centre and launch site for airdrop operations on ISIS targets in Deir Ezzor and along the border with Iraq. By May 2017, 150 US Special Forces, as well as Special Forces from the UK and four other coalition countries manned the base.

Analysts conjecture that the US had four objectives in this southern triangle, these objectives now potentially reduced to three. The first was to use Arab fighters to advance north to Al-Bukamal and into Deir Ezzor, with the SDF advancing from the northeast and forces on the Iraqi side of the border helping to squeeze 10,000 ISIS in the desert. This objective was prevented when pro-regime forces reached the border with Iraq northeast of Al-Tanf, effectively isolating Al-Tanf and cutting the US-led coalition's ability to advance north on 9 June. Allegedly these pro-regime forces met

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<sup>24</sup> After absorbing 659,000 refugees Jordan closed its borders in July 2014. These camps were subsequently set up. Rukban camp has 80,000 IDPs, 80 percent of whom are women and children. The camp has received only one delivery of humanitarian aid in five months. There is no medical facility inside the camp and no adequate security. ISIS frequently attacks the camp, and inside the camp opposition militias often fight each other.

up with Hashd al-Shaabi under the command of Iranian Quds Force commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani.

The second objective is to prevent Iran opening the Baghdad – Damascus – Beirut highway. The third objective is to limit Syrian regime’s territorial claims, and block Syrian and Iranian forces from joining up with Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. The fourth is to protect Israel from (pro) regime and Iranian forces.

Battles between ‘ISIS’ and US-trained militias between February and May pushed ISIS back to the Iraq-Jordan border, although on 12 April ISIS attacked Al-Tanf. In early May, on the Jordan side of the border, there was a build up of US, UK and Jordanian forces and some 4,500 US-trained Syrian Arab forces, along with British Challenger tanks, US Cobra and Black Hawk helicopters, Jordanian heavy artillery, US-made Hermas missile launchers and other vehicles. To test US-led coalition resolve, about 1,000 Iran-backed mostly Hezbollah fighters accompanied by some Syrian soldiers, tanks and heavy equipment moved into the Syrian Badia desert, where they captured the town of Sabaa Biyar, close to the Damascus-Baghdad highway.

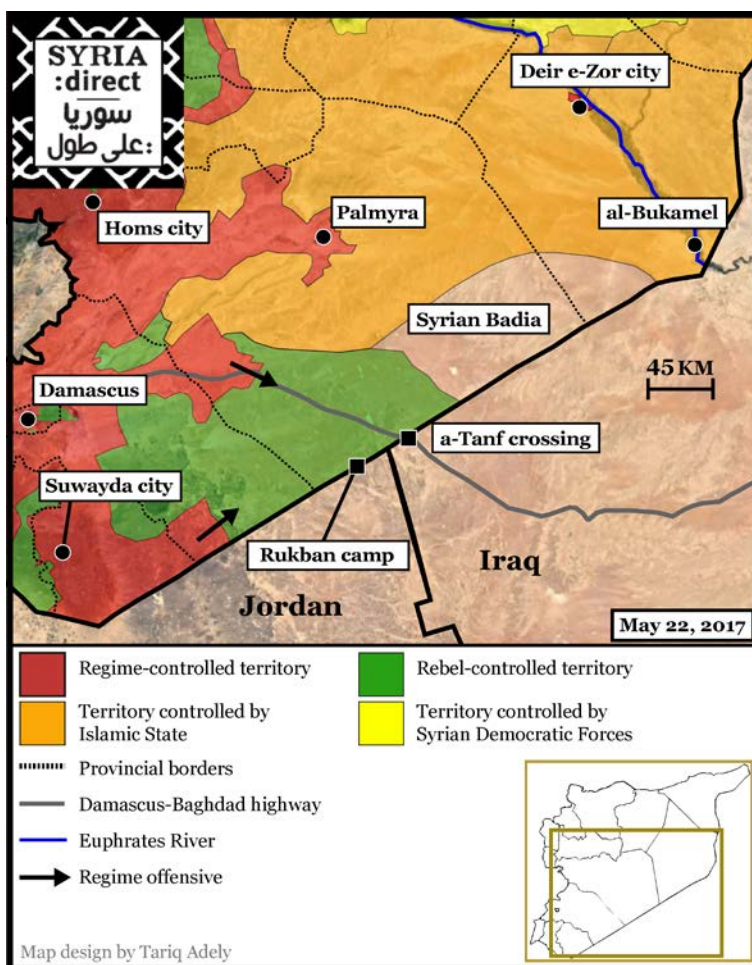


Figure 5: Map of southern Syria<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Source: <http://www.monitor.upeace.org/images/Syriamap2.jpg>





On 9 May, regime airstrikes targeted the US-trained Arab forces in the Badia region and by 17 May Iranian troops, Iran-backed militants and some regime forces led by the Iran Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) were 24 kilometres from Al-Tanf. With Russian efforts failing to stop their advance, on 18 May, a twenty-vehicle convoy entered the de-confliction zone. As they set up a military position, US warplanes fired warning missiles but when this failed to deter their activity, a series of US-led coalition airstrikes killed six soldiers and militants, wounding another twenty-five, and hit a Soviet-made radar-guided anti-aircraft vehicle (which had fired on the US warplanes), four tanks and a bulldozer. This was the third time that the US had hit (pro) Syrian forces since 2014. The first in September 2016 ‘accidentally’ killed at least 90 Syrian soldiers in Deir Ezzor and the second was the missile strike on Shayrat airbase in April. The strikes near Al-Tanf were the first time the US had targeted pro-regime militants to protect US-led coalition ground forces.

The Iranian-led forces remained in the de-confliction zone and were reinforced by 3,000 Hezbollah fighters, Iraqi and Syrian paramilitary and Syrian soldiers. On 19 May US airstrikes targeted Hashd al-Shaabi that had crossed into Syria and on 22 May, pro-regime militias advanced on Al-Tanf from Suweida, 110 kilometres to the southwest, where the Syrian Army and Russia had a military presence.

In the last week of May pro-regime forces and tanks gathered outside the perimeter of the Al-Tanf de-confliction zone causing US planes to drop leaflets warning them not to come any closer to either Al-Tanf or the border. On 31 May Russian jets hit US-backed Arab militia advancing on pro-regime forces near the Damascus – Baghdad highway and on 6 June, after repeated warnings, US-led coalition airstrikes hit pro-regime forces who had advanced to within 56 kilometres of Al-Tanf. Two days later (8 June), a US striker jet shot down an Iranian drone that had fired on Al Zakf, a US forward base 70 kilometres northeast of Al-Tanf.

With Al Tanf cut off from a northern advance on 9 June, on 17 June, Iraq security forces and Sunni Arab tribal fighters liberated the Al-Waleed border crossing near Al-Tanf, and on 19 June, Maghawir al-Thawra militants shot down an armed Iranian drone over Al Zakf, after it dropped a bomb on Al-Tanf. After each US attack, US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis claimed that the US was defending its partners on the ground and did not want to fight the Syrian regime and since the US-Russia-Jordan agreement and formation of a de-confliction zone in the region, there has been a de-escalation of tensions, with the US cutting support in early August of an opposition militia (Shohada Al Quartyan) that had independently started fighting pro-regime forces.

Throughout August (pro) regime forces fought ISIS and opposition militias in the southern triangle, and by 28 August claimed to be in control of 40 kilometres of the 370-kilometre Syria-Jordan border, including all opposition checkpoints. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Army on the Lebanese side of the border, and Hezbollah and the Syrian Army on the Syrian side fought ISIS in a mountain enclave that straddled the border until a ceasefire was brokered on 27 August. The ceasefire entailed the recovery of

up to nine bodies of Lebanese soldiers captured by ISIS in 2014 and the exchange of bodies of those killed in recent fighting. In return, 308 ISIS fighters and 331 ISIS family members agreed to evacuate, leaving in an escorted convoy that would cross the country to ISIS lines near Al-Bukamal on the Iraq border. But on 30 August the convoy was stranded when US-coalition airstrikes cratered a bridge and road they were travelling along. US airstrikes also struck ISIS vehicles heading west to rescue the stranded convoy. On the same day, Fars News reported that 500 ISIS fighters on the Syria-Iraq border had surrendered to the Syrian Army. Thus, both southern and eastern Syria are contested.



Figure 6: Map of Syria and neighbouring countries

### SDF Eastern Front (Tabqa and Raqqa)

An estimated 4,000 ISIS fighters in Raqqa city (sources vary on the number) had been building berms and extending trenches to stop armoured vehicles, and extending tunnels for surprise attacks, as well as lacing roads and tunnels with IEDs in preparation for the US-led coalition offensive on Raqqa. From March 2017, ISIS administrative officials, hospital personnel and specialist units began vacating the city, and re-establishing in Deir Ezzor. By late March, ISIS offices in Raqqa were empty and there were noticeably fewer police and military checkpoints. On 22 – 23 March ISIS used megaphones inside the city to announce that the infidels (the Kurdish-led SDF) were about to destroy Tabqa dam<sup>26</sup> and flood the city. Thousands

<sup>26</sup> Tabqa dam is the largest dam in Syria. It was built in 1968 -1973 and has a water reserve of 12 billion cubic metres. It produces 20 percent of Syria's electricity needs and has a capacity to produce 880 megawatts of energy and irrigate 600,000 hectares of land. Only 200,000 hectares have been irrigated due to soil salinity.



of Raqqa residents fled through SDF-created corridors to Ain Issa, 55 kilometres to the north. The problem for those who remained was if they defied ISIS or provided information on ISIS, ISIS would execute them or could take retribution in the future.

Europe began pushing for the Raqqa offensive to begin after US intelligence reported that ISIS in Raqqa was plotting terrorist operations in Europe. The dilemma for the US was that the SDF was the most highly trained, experienced and committed force but was largely Kurdish and led by Kurds, when Raqqa's majority Sunni Arab population had undergone four years of ISIS indoctrination against the infidel. If Raqqa residents resented the SDF, this could push them towards ISIS or JFS, not necessarily during the liberation process (people in villages around Raqqa and Tabqa welcomed their liberators) but after ISIS was defeated. The second problem was that Turkey vehemently objected to Kurds receiving weapons and being instrumental in the offensive or in establishing a sympathetic local administration. Turkey argued it was in the best position to take and administer Raqqa. The US reassured Turkey that 75 percent of the liberating force would come from Raqqa (this was not to be) and after liberation Raqqa, would be administered by the people of Raqqa.

The US considered various alternatives. Of those made public, Turkey proposed using 10,000 Turkey-trained militia and 10,000 Arabs from the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) within the SDF. The US preferred using 10,000 Turkish Security Forces (TSK) and the SDF, given many in Turkey-trained militias were jihadis and had links to the same militias that handed Raqqa to ISIS in May 2013. Nor had they proved to be a unified, disciplined force when taking Al-Bab. But Turkey refused to co-ordinate with Kurds. Also, Turkey's forces and militia would have to travel through Kurdish-controlled territory. Another alternative was to use US troops – the least preferred option. In January, the now sacked US National Security Advisor and Turkey lobbyist, Michael Flynn opposed the SDF taking Raqqa, which caused a delay in the offensive, despite 28 tribes around Raqqa pledging support for the SDF in January. Meanwhile, the SDF continued to lay siege on Raqqa and recruit and train Arab fighters from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

In preparation, the US had built airport facilities outside Kobani able to receive aircraft from across the defence spectrum. There was the Iraqi airbase at Qayyara, 370 kilometres away, and the US planned to liberate Tabqa military airbase. This endeavour began on 22 March, when multiple coalition helicopters airdropped 500 SDF commandoes and US Special Forces behind enemy lines five kilometres west of Tabqa city. Unlike YPG and SDF fighters before and since, the Kurdish commandoes were supplied US combat helmets, night vision goggles, weapon sights, digital camouflage uniforms, Patagonia cold-weather attire, chest rigs, body armour and modified M4 rifles with infrared lasers, although the Pentagon denied the gear was supplied by them.<sup>27</sup> Supported by precision airstrikes, Apache helicopters and

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<sup>27</sup> The Pentagon is only allowed to supply state actors. The CIA and US Joint Special Operations Command do not have the same restrictions. The equipment is also available on the black market.



marine artillery, within hours the forces took four villages and cut the road linking Aleppo to Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Two days later they had reached Tabqa dam.

Back in February 2017, the UN had warned that Tabqa dam was in danger of collapse as a result of coalition airstrikes, ISIS shutting down turbines, heavy rains and snow. If it did collapse it could flood the cities of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. On 27 March the advance on the dam's spillways was put on hold for four hours so experts could examine the structure. But ISIS attacked and the SDF responded and in the firefight the power and water supplies to Tabqa and Raqqa cities were cut. A hydroelectric power station and mechanisms for controlling floodgates required repair. The Syrian Red Crescent brought in a generator, but ISIS artillery and mortar attacks delayed the repair work. ISIS claimed one engineer was killed by a US-led coalition airstrike.

Using a pincer movement by 27 March the SDF had taken full control of Tabqa military airport on the southern outskirts of Tabqa city. This was where ISIS had beheaded 200 Syrian soldiers in August 2014. In 2017, between 22 – 27 March, the fighting at the airbase was intense and 90 civilians were killed by airstrikes and fighting, which also caused heavy casualties on both sides.

Before ISIS Tabqa city had a population of 240,000 people, reduced to 80,000 under ISIS. Throughout the fighting, the SDF had helped many thousands of civilians evacuate the city. At the end of April, the SDF helped 10,000 civilians evacuate in one day alone, with at least ten YPG fighters losing their lives defending evacuees from ISIS attacks.

On 11 April, a US coalition airstrike called in by a 'partner force' killed 18 SDF fighters near Tabqa but this did not stop their advance and on 13 April, the SDF took control of the Raqqa-Damascus road and laid siege to Tabqa city. Fierce clashes inside the city included hand-to-hand fighting, ISIS drones dropping bombs and ISIS vehicle-borne IEDs. ISIS commanders were executing deserters and refused to let others surrender. At the beginning of May, with 80 percent of the city liberated, the SDF asked the remaining ISIS fighters to evacuate. They refused.

Two days after the US announced they would directly arm YPG, on 10 May (Day 50 of the Tabqa offensive), the SDF announced the liberation of Tabqa city and dam, after coming to an agreement with local tribal leaders to let the remaining 70 ISIS fighters withdraw but only after they had cleared IEDs from around the dam. The Pentagon claimed it was not party to the agreement, although it was aware of the negotiations, and US airstrikes killed some of those who withdrew. The SDF claimed the agreement was necessary to save civilian lives, and allow for the immediate clean up of IEDs near critical dam infrastructure and the resumption of Tabqa's water supply after six weeks of no water. As the SDF cleared IEDs in the following days, dead bodies and rubbish remained in the streets. Residents continued to suffer severe food, water and electricity shortages, and feared ISIS would return. They had witnessed horrendous scenes: ISIS playing football with peoples' heads and dragging headless bodies behind cars. On 15 May, Tabqa civilians met and agreed to form a



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temporary Tabqa Civilian Assembly. Once others returned, a permanent assembly would be formed which would oversee Tabqa services and a local security force. The SDF announced the dam would remain an asset for all Syrians, and 1,000 Tabqa youth volunteered to join the SDF.

Other SDF units were laying siege on Raqqa city, liberating the surrounding areas and rural areas in Deir Ezzor province. In the month of March the SDF killed 351 ISIS fighters, at a cost of 63 YPG/YPJ fighters. Airdrops of fighters into specific locations had resulted in a close associate of al-Baghdadi being killed on 6 April, this individual allegedly linked with the New Year's Eve Istanbul nightclub attack. Another airdrop in a Deir Ezzor village on 23 April resulted in the capture of ISIS-appointed governor of the eastern Euphrates region, and on 1 June an airstrike killed the head of Amaq, ISIS' media outlet.

On 1 April, 27 April, 15 May, 20 May, 18 July and at the end of July the SDF was supplied armoured vehicles, bull dozers, weapons and ammunition trucked overland from the KRI. Turkey protested that the YPG were being supplied tanks and FGM-148 anti-tank missiles, but the tanks had been captured from ISIS and the M-ATVs, complete with mounted Common Remotely Operated Weapon Stations (CROWs) and MRAPs were for US Special Operations. With the increasingly armed SDF estimated to number about 40,000, supported by an increased number of Special Force advisors, 400 Marines operating artillery and US-led coalition airstrikes, including by Australian F/A-18 Hornets<sup>28</sup>, the UN expressed concern for the safety of an estimated 400,000 civilians in Raqqa province.

On 24 April alone, 15,000 Raqqa civilians evacuated through a SDF corridor and in May, an estimated 100,000 Raqqa residents fled in trucks, cars, motorbikes, tractors and on foot to SDF controlled areas such as Ain Issa, as well as to Aleppo and Jarablus, where many IDPs came from. About four to five IDPs a month were being killed by IEDs when trying to escape Deir Ezzor and Raqqa. On 22 April, 'dozens' of IDPs in a camp 20 kilometres west of Raqqa city were killed or injured by airstrikes. When IDPs got to safety, many were forced to live without shelter. A humanitarian disaster was unfolding in Ain Issa because of a lack of international aid. Except for Medecins Sans Frontieres, no international NGOs worked in the town. Any aid had to be airlifted until late June, when the road from Aleppo was opened and the first World Food Program convoy in two years got through to Qamishli. Also in June, a US State Department civilian team of seven arrived in northeast Syria to oversee the removal of IEDs and the restoration of water and electricity in liberated areas, so IDPs could return home.

Back on 7 May, al-Baghdadi ordered all fighters to march on Raqqa. From 9 May the SDF, joined by 2,000 fighters from Manbij Military Council, fought ISIS on three northern fronts within two to four kilometres of the city, and on a western front 24 kilometres from the city, liberating 30 villages and neighbourhoods in 15 days. In the

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<sup>28</sup> Australia's Air Task Group consists of 300 personnel, six F/A-18 Hornets, an E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft, and a KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker and Transport plane.



last week of May the SDF asked ISIS fighters to surrender. Some ISIS left through a southern corridor and headed towards Palmyra. These were targeted by Russian airstrikes on 25 May, which killed 120 fighters travelling in 39 vehicles, and on 29 – 30 May and 10 June. Russia accused the US of intentionally allowing ISIS to flee towards (pro) regime forces.

On 6 June the SDF announced the final phase of the offensive on Raqqa.<sup>29</sup> The next day (pro) Syrian ground forces targeted the SDF west of Raqqa while other SDF units engaged in fierce fighting around the city, entering neighbourhoods from the east and west. ISIS withdrew towards the city centre but as the SDF advanced, they were increasingly subject to sniper and mortar fire, drone, car bombs and suicide attacks and Human Rights groups reported that on 8 – 9 June, US artillery subjected Raqqa to white phosphorus attacks, which are used as a smokescreen for either troops or escaping civilians. Coalition Special Forces were said to be fighting alongside the SDF 'near' the front lines. At this point, at the request of local tribal leaders, the Syrian Elite Forces, formed with Arabs from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in December 2016, helped negotiate the SDF releasing 83 low-ranking ISIS members.

By 14 June, the SDF had reached Raqqa's 1,300-year old city walls, where ISIS put up a fierce fight. ISIS claimed that suicide attacks on 21 June killed and injured 50 SDF, and published a video of ISIS on motorcycles dragging alleged SDF bodies through the streets of Raqqa. By the end of June the SDF had closed the southern escape route and 40 percent of Raqqa had been liberated. On 4 July airstrikes breached the old city walls allowing the SDF to enter. Heavy fighting street-to-street, house-to-house, room-to-room with ISIS using children as human shields and ISIS emerging from tunnels behind front lines, often targeting the Syrian Elite Forces, took a heavy toll on allied forces. The Syrian Elite Force operate independently of the SDF, and YPG accused them of sometimes deserting their positions and causing delays in the advance, with ISIS recapturing some areas and some YPG fighters being killed. Similarly the Syrian Elite Forces accused the SDF of exposing them to danger by withdrawing at times, and resented pressure to come under YPG command. At the end of July the Syrian Elite Forces withdrew from the frontlines because of these tensions, but on 24 August commanders of 800 fighters from the Bakara and Shuaat tribes announced they had separated from the Syrian Elite Forces and joined the SDF. By this time it was estimated that there were 24,000 Arab fighters and 31,000 Kurdish fighters in the SDF, with some 15,000 involved in the Raqqa offensive.

In the first eight weeks of the offensive 413 civilians, 536 ISIS fighters, and 241 SDF fighters (including four foreign nationals and two from the Syrian Elite Forces) were killed. Fifty percent of Raqqa had been liberated, some 600 ISIS fighters had

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<sup>29</sup> The SDF forces participating in the offensive are the Army of Revolutionaries (Jaysh al-Thuwar), Jabhat al-Akrad, Democratic al-Shamal Brigades, Tribal Forces, Maghawir Humus Brigades, Siqur al-Raqqa, Liwa al-Tahrir, Seljuk Turkmen Brigade, Hamam Turkmen Martyrs Battalion, Sanadid Forces, Syriac Military Council, Manbij Military Council, Deir ez-Zor Military Council, Self-Defense Forces, Asayish Forces, YPG/YPJ and Nuxbe Forces.

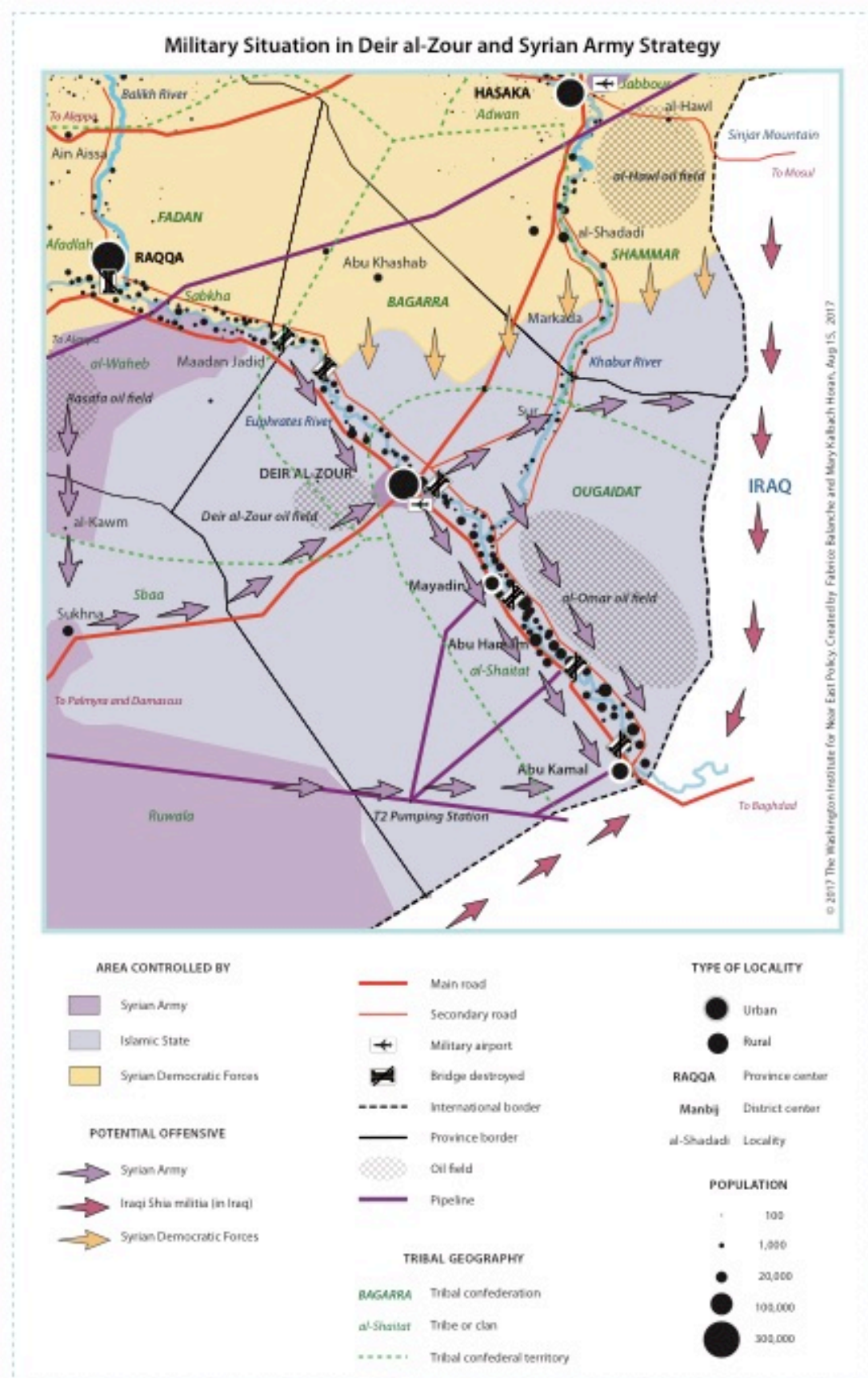


Figure 7: Military movements around Deir Ezzor



surrendered and about 1,000 mostly foreign fighters and 50,000 civilians remained in the city, the civilian population reduced to 10,000 by the end of August by which time 65 percent of Raqqqa was liberated. Another 101 SDF fighters were killed in August, including the commander of the Manbij Military Council, Adnan Ebû Emced. Some UN officials called for a halt in the fighting to save civilian lives, discounting that ISIS fighters, high on amphetamines, were unlikely to heed such calls.

At the end of August some SDF units advanced further into Deir Ezzor, which the US is determined to liberate and also secure the border before (pro) regime forces do so, but their ultimate success in preventing a future ISIS insurgency and blocking Iranian intentions will depend on a post-ISIS plan. In preparation for a post-ISIS Raqqqa, and in full knowledge that there could be acts of retribution among the Sunni Arab majority population, the US-led coalition has been training a transitional 'holding' force of 4,000 people from Raqqqa in Ain Issa. Ain Issa is also where the SDF and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), responsible for overseeing the Federal System of Northern Syria, assembled an interim Raqqqa Civil Council in late March, recruiting respected individuals with no ties to the regime or ISIS. On 18 April, the SDF announced the official establishment of the 200-member Raqqqa Civil Council, co-chaired by the leader of the Al-Weldeh Arab Tribes Union, representing the largest tribe in Raqqqa, Sheikh Mahmoud Shawakh al-Bursan, and Kurdish civil engineer, Leyla Mustafa. Eighty percent of the council is Arab, with all local Arab tribes being represented on the council. Operating out of Ain Issa, the council has been distributing aid to IDPs in tent cities, although aid relies on donations and is inadequate. This council will soon be replaced by an elected council, after which there will be a vote on whether Raqqqa province would like to be part of the Federal System of Northern Syria. If Raqqqa does vote in favour of joining the Federal System of Northern Syria, the Federal System would oversee 40 percent of Syria.

## **Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria**

The Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, declared in December 2016, covers 23 percent of Syrian territory and is home to an estimated three million people, as well as 500,000 IDPs and refugees. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) oversees the territory and a hierarchy of local councils or assemblies at the communal, village, town, municipal and canton levels and proposes to divide the territory into three federal regions. These are the:

- Afrin Federal Region, which would include the cantons of Afrin and Shehba, the latter in northern Aleppo formed on 6 August, including the town of Tel Rifaat, and representatives from Turkey-controlled Al-Bab, Azaz and Jarablus, but excluding SDF-liberated Manbij and the Kurdish-controlled neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsoud inside Aleppo city;
- Euphrates Federal Region, which would include the cantons of Kobani and Tel Abyad (Girê Spî in Kurdish), and the town of Ains Issa; and





- Cizre Federal Region, which would include the cantons of Hasakah and Qamishli, and the towns of Hol/Hawl and Shadaddi.

The Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa civil councils will vote on whether to join the federal system.

In August, the SDC announced that communal elections would be held on 22 September; village, town, municipal and canton elections would be held on 3 November and elections for 60 percent of all representatives of the Federal Constituent Assembly or Parliament overseeing the Federal System will be held on 1 January 2018. The other seats in the Parliament will be subject to a minority quota system. At every level, there will be an equal number of male and female representatives who will be entitled to run for two terms. The Syrian regime called the elections illegal and the KDP-linked Kurdish National Council (KNC/ENKS) called for an election boycott because too many people were displaced and the PYD was imposing its will on the region.

In defiance of Turkey blockading the border and military attacks by Turkey, Turkey-backed militias, ISIS,<sup>30</sup> and occasionally the Syrian regime, the councils administer a region that is relatively safe and better serviced than opposition-held areas, with a police and security force that is less brutal than others in Syria. Yet there have been cases where *Asayish* have arrested KNC members on allegations they were colluding with Turkey. Turkey is known to be cultivating KDP-affiliated Syrian Kurds to oppose the PYD in Syria, but that does exclude the possibility that innocent people have been detained.

Since 2012, the territory has been largely self-sustaining. By 2017 the territories within the Federation included one third of Syria's oil, half of Syria's wheat growing areas and three of Syria's largest dams, two of which produce most of Syria's electricity. Public sector services and infrastructure is sustained by oil, agriculture, customs duties and voluntary work. While people may be willing to work voluntarily in a time of war, they will be less inclined to do so as time goes by. To become economically and politically sustainable the Federal System of Northern Syria will need international support, and to successfully negotiate with the Syrian opposition, national government, KRG and Turkey.

Progress on four issues has strengthened the federal project, which Syrian Kurds and their allies would like throughout Syria. Firstly, US support of the YPG to liberate Raqqa has strengthened their status and legitimacy. Secondly, the Syrian regime's advances in Aleppo have opened the Aleppo-Afrin Highway, which links Afrin and other parts of Syria to the cantons east of the Euphrates. Thirdly, there has been some effort to reconcile Syrian Kurds with the Sunni Arab opposition. For instance, on 10 May a US-brokered draft agreement entailed the SDF handing over the

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<sup>30</sup> In March ISIS attacked Shaddadi three times, with clashes killing 45 ISIS and nine YPG. At the end of August ISIS attacked Shaddadi again, killing eight YPG fighters. All 12 ISIS attackers were killed.



administration of 11 villages in northern Aleppo captured in February 2016 to a US-supported Sunni Arab militia as a conciliatory measure to enhance Arab – Kurd relations, provided all civilians, including Kurds, be allowed to return home. In June, a delegation of opposition groups met with representatives of the Federal System in Rmeilan to discuss Syria's future form of governance. In August, the new Syrian opposition consisting of the HNC, Moscow and Cairo Group that was formed to strengthen future negotiations in Geneva put forward a plan of allocating principal positions to different ethnicities, including a position for a Kurd, although the PYD are sceptical that the person would represent the Federal System. The Cairo and Moscow Groups have always been more conciliatory towards the Kurds and their Federal System but by August even the HNC expressed a willingness to fight ISIS 'alongside' but 'independently' of the SDF in Deir Ezzor. That Syrian Kurds have consistently argued for a united Syria may stand them in good stead in talks with the opposition. Fourthly, the Saudi-Qatar rift, in which Turkey took Qatar's side, gave Kurds some hope that Saudi Arabia will be more inclined to override opposition from Turkey and back their participation in the Geneva negotiations.

The Federal System faces six vulnerabilities. The YPG/J and PYD's adherence to PKK ideology and reliance on PKK expertise (although this is decreasing) which makes them vulnerable to PKK strategies and tactics, including PKK's fight with the Turkish state.<sup>31</sup> If attacks on civilians in Turkey escalate, then the YPG and civilians in northern Syria will be vulnerable to an escalation of attacks or an invasion by Turkey.

A second vulnerability is that critics claim that the peoples' councils have no real power and that the Federal System suffers from one ideology – one party rule. Cracks between ethnic groups could develop, as indicated when the former co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, Haytham Manna, resigned over the lack of consultation in developing a constitution.

A third vulnerability is the more the Syrian Kurds and their allies expand their territory the less resources they have to provide services for each area and the more reliant they are on Arab components for stabilising liberated areas and forming councils. Arab-majority councils may experience divisions between people who are divided in their loyalties to Islam, ISIS, a tribe, the regime or the opposition, with these divisions being exploited by outside forces. At least some Arabs may not have the same commitment to a secular system of governance, especially if there is a lack of money to pay salaries or 'buy' loyalty. This may lead to future discontent by those initially grateful for being liberated and has implications for the future of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces, especially the latter, where the capital is likely to be liberated and held by the current regime, although the SDF has already established the Deir Ezzor Military Council like they did for Manbij and Raqqa.

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<sup>31</sup> The same day the SDF announced the final phase of the Raqqa offensive (6 June) a radical PKK offshoot called the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) announced it would escalate attacks on tourists and cities in western Turkey. The timing of TAK's announcement was alarming and caused many Kurds to suspect it was the result of MIT infiltration. That the threat was not acted upon may vindicate their suspicion of MIT infiltration or indicate US pressure via the PKK.



A fourth vulnerability is the Syrian regime's wish to re-establish control over all of Syria. If external funding for the Federal System is not forthcoming the Syrian regime will take Raqqa by force of bureaucracy, i.e. the need to deliver services and rebuild infrastructure. While the regime has occasionally referred to some form of autonomy if the PYD and pro-Barzani KNC reconcile, the regime is probably gambling this will not happen. Since March 2017, Russian-sponsored negotiations between representatives of the Federal System and the Syrian regime have broken down, with the regime becoming more intransigent in its unwillingness to countenance any form of regional autonomy. The regime is attempting to restrict activities wherever possible. For instance, the only way in or out of the Kurdish-council run and *Asayish* secured neighbourhood of Sheikh Masqoud in northeast Aleppo city (17 kilometres from Afrin), which has a population of 40,000, is one regime checkpoint open between 8 am and 5 pm in summer, and until 3 pm in winter. This checkpoint controls all movement of people who need to travel to and from regime-controlled areas for work and education. The checkpoint also controls all goods coming into the neighbourhood and taxes them, and blocks all construction machinery being brought into the neighbourhood, and on occasions, has blocked humanitarian deliveries. Thus, while the regime has not reclaimed the neighbourhood as it threatened to do in December 2016, it certainly constrains it. However, meetings between Russian officials and Kurds are ongoing. In one meeting at Khmeimim airbase on 17 June the Russians insisted the SDF keep to the eastern side of the Euphrates. Russian representatives were surprised by the SDF response: that the boundary was an agreement between the US and Russia and their democratic project was for all Syrians.

A fifth vulnerability is if the Federal System is forced to rely on Hashd al-Shaabi controlled border crossings into Iraq. This would increase the potential for attacks or an invasion by Turkey, or war between Turkey and Iran.

A sixth vulnerability is the Kurds reliance on US support, which may be limited in nature and time, as already shown by the US having twice denied the PYD co-chair Saleh Moslem a visa to enter the US, although the US allegedly is considering a PYD request to establish an office in the US. On 17 May, a US State Department official, Jonathan Cohen, claimed the US partnership with the YPG was: 'temporary, transactional and tactical. ... We have not promised the YPG anything.' In late June a US official proposed some funds would be forthcoming if the Raqqa Civil Council proved to be representative of the people of Raqqa. US Presidential Envoy to the Coalition, Brett McGurk, reported that the US does not want the regime to take over Raqqa, but the US will not pay for services and salaries and would not partake in reconstruction before there was a political solution in Syria. At the end of July, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) co-chair Ilham Ehmed claimed that 73 countries were considering whether to offer support to the Raqqa Civil Council to rebuild the city but the official line of the US remains that the US is only committed to defeating ISIS and *preventing its return*. The last goal would imply an on-going presence in eastern Syria, but this would anger Turkey, a NATO ally and for numerous reasons the Federal System could become a liability, leading to Kurds once again being



abandoned by the US and Russia and falling victim to prevailing regimes, each using Kurds for their own purposes. However, to ease tensions with Turkey, the US State Department claimed the SDF could be restructured so only local elements remained in Raqqa. This does not reassure Turkey given some Raqqa elements are Kurds.

Although long term support is far from assured, if international protection and support were linked to the PYD accepting political pluralism; allowing non-Kurdish ethnicities to rise in the ranks of the police, security forces and peoples' assemblies, as what has happened in Manbij under US-led coalition guidance, and if PYD reconciled with the KRG and the KNC to keep the border open, perhaps amalgamating the YPG and Rojava Peshmerga, *and* if the PKK was convinced to cease military activities in Turkey for the sake of establishing a Democratic Federal System in Syria, the Syrian Kurds would well become a valued asset: a worthy ally in fighting terror, a means of preventing an Iranian crescent of influence and a way of promoting a democratic system in Syria that Turkey may not see as a threat.

## Turkey in Syria

Multiple players are concerned about Turkey's intentions in Syria. Iran considers Turkey fully intends to annex Syrian territory, as it did Hatay in 1939, and on 25 March, a UK parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee asked the UK Government to clarify its position on Turkey's 'safe zone' in northern Aleppo and its implications for Syrian sovereignty and Syrian Kurds.

Back in 2011, Turkey's overriding objective was to topple the Assad regime in favour of a compliant Sunni Arab majority government that would launch Turkey as a regional, if not global power broker. But at the end of 2014 – beginning of 2015 Turkey was threatened by the Kurds' victory over ISIS in Kobani and the Syrian Kurds forming multi-ethnic administrations in northern Syria, which Turkish leaders continue to see as a national security threat because key figures share ideological if not political and military links with Turkey's arch enemy: the PKK. Compounded with these developments were the electoral successes of Kurds in Turkey in the 2014 municipal elections and 2015 national elections. Therefore, to topple Assad *and* stop the rise of Syrian Kurds, Russia and the SDF claim Turkey (e.g. MIT and Erdogan's son-in-law etc,) has collaborated with ISIS by having an open border, allowing ISIS to live freely in Turkey, purchasing ISIS oil and supplying ISIS and other jihadi militants with weapons and ammunition, as indicated by the SDF finding Turkey-manufactured or supplied weapons, including NATO weapons, in ISIS caches in April near Tabqa dam; a month later, in the village of Bir Hamad near Raqqa, and in early June, east of Raqqa. Elements in Turkey (e.g. MIT) at least had enough relations with ISIS to negotiate an ISIS withdrawal from Jarablus in August 2016, at the start of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield campaign that went on to capture territory between Azaz and Jarablus down to Al-Bab, at the cost of 67 Turkish soldiers lives, with another 220 being wounded. This operation came to an end on 29 March. But President Erdogan was quick to announce on 3 April a new 'anti-terror' operation in



northern Syria (and Iraq), with Turkey immediately stepping up attacks on YPG positions in and around Afrin and east of the Euphrates River.

Turkey currently occupies 2,000 square kilometres or 12 percent of northern Aleppo, containing 250 towns and villages secured by an estimated 4,000 Turkish security forces as well as 2,500 Turkey-trained and paid Syrian police, with the intention to expand this force to 5,000 by absorbing Syrian militants. Having established 10 military training camps, one for each militia, inside the triangle, Turkish Special Forces and Syrian army defectors have been training 10,000 – 17,000 Syrian militants from Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam and other opposition militias, recruited by MIT, with Turkey paying the militants monthly salaries in view of forming a Sunni Arab National Army. Until July, the CIA funded and supplied weapons and ammunition to at least three brigades led by former Syrian army commanders.<sup>32</sup> Although this army could maintain security, Turkey also wants to expand Turkish-controlled territory in Aleppo, Idlib and Afrin. This means fighting YPG/YPJ/SDF ‘terrorists’.

Inside Turkey-occupied territory, there is relative stability in the towns, with Turkey-salaried civil councils, under the auspices of the Turkey-established Council of Free Aleppo Governorate, providing services and repairing infrastructure, alongside Turkish administrators, police chiefs and religious officials. Turkey has hired Syrian legal professionals selected by Turkey’s Ministry of Justice to open courts; hospitals are manned by Turkish doctors; and Turkey’s Ministry of Education employs 500 teachers in local schools that are modelled on Turkey’s religious schools, in addition to a Turkish foundation setting up Sharia education workshops. Whether as a consequence of religious indoctrination and/or war, HTS has called Jarablus ‘a corrupted town’ because of the increase in polygamy, child marriages and sexual harassment, as well as smuggling and other crimes!

On 16 April Fars News reported that Turkish businessmen were buying up large tracks of land around Al-Bab, offering vendors resettlement in Al-Rai. In Al-Bab, Turkish heavy machinery has been moving rubble and in Jarablus and Al-Bab, Turkey has embarked on massive building and renovation projects, including hospitals, schools, police stations, an oil refinery and 80 mosques, and a new Al-Bab suburb for 80,000 people. About ten local Islamist NGOs are co-ordinating with Turkey to provide humanitarian aid, with international NGOs being denied permission to work in the area. Markets and restaurants are opening in towns and an estimated 50,000 residents had returned to Al-Bab by mid-May. Others stayed away because of a lack of electricity and water (the regime cut water to Al-Bab on 8 March, although Turkey has since fixed the water supply) and because Turkey-backed militias are fighting each other over territory and smuggling privileges, each setting up mini fiefdoms.

The militias that run these mini fiefdoms have been clashing. In May, days of clashes between the Turkey-backed Al-Bab Military Council and Turkey-trained police caused casualties on both sides. Clashes between militias in and around Jarablus, Azaz, Al-Bab and Idlib in late May – early June resulted in 200 militants being killed

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<sup>32</sup> These are the Al-Mu'tasim Brigade, al-Hamza Brigade and the 51st Brigade.



and the wounding of at least twice that number. In the second week of June, 60 to 70 militants in the Turkey-backed Sultan Murad Brigade surrendered to regime forces in an amnesty deal, and called other militants to do likewise, claiming they did not want Turkey to occupy Syria. As a result of clashes, and the alleged brutalities perpetuated by Turkish forces and Turkey-backed militias, many thousands of IDPs have escaped to Kurdish-controlled areas, including Manbij, where the population has doubled with the inflow of IDPs.

According to multiple sources, Turkey is Arabising and Turkifying the region. Between March and June Turkey burnt 50 Kurdish villages and evacuated other villages in the Shehba region of northern Aleppo. Residents were given one hour to leave their village, after being subjected to house raids, abductions and having their possessions confiscated. Opposition fighters and IDPs from Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Hama, as well as Turkmen from Tal Afar, were brought in to replace the evacuees in villages left standing. By early August, Turkey had repatriated 70,000 Syrian refugees from Turkey to northern Aleppo, some 45,000 of these being settled in Jarablus. Turkey intends to repatriate another 100,000 to Al-Bab by the end of 2017, with help from the UNHCR. Turkey would also like to resettle Arabs in Tel Abyad, thus dividing the Kurdish-led cantons east of the Euphrates. However, the presence of US Special Forces stops Turkey making a move on Tel Abyad.

Turkey continues to push Russia and the US to cut all ties with the SDF, YPG, YPJ, and PYD) and regularly attacks YPG/SDF positions in Afrin, the Shehba region and east of the Euphrates. In the 73-day SDF led liberation of Manbij between June and August 2016, 4,180 ISIS fighters and 264 SDF fighters were killed. The capture of Manbij gave US intelligence access to huge amounts of ISIS documentation. On 12 March, the Manbij Democratic Administration Assembly was officially established with 71 Arabs, 43 Kurds, ten Turkmen, eight Circassians, an Armenian and a Chechen. A Turkey advance on Manbij in March was only stopped when Russian Chechen, Syrian and US forces moved in to create a buffer zone between Turkish and Kurdish forces.

Rather than Syrian Kurdish forces being a security threat to Turkey, Turkey is a security threat to Kurdish-liberated and administered territory in Syria. Turkish security forces have crossed into Syria and along with Turkey-backed militias have used tanks, mortars, howitzers and heavy weaponry to attack YPG/SDF and civilians:

- 47 times in March, with the YPG responding to 27 of these attacks causing the deaths of two Turkish soldiers, one being on Turkish soil;
- 67 times in April, with YPG killing 18 Turkish soldiers on Syrian soil;
- 80 times in May, causing dozens of civilian casualties. YPG responded 51 times;
- 102 times in June, with YPG retaliating 18 times killing 56 Turkey-backed militants. On 3-4 July, Turkish shelling killed six civilians, and wounded others;
- 159 times in July, causing the deaths of five civilians. YPG claimed to have killed five Turkish soldiers and 28 militants at a cost of three YPG fighters;

- 158 times in August, causing the deaths of six militants, four YPG fighters and injuries to six civilians.

With Afrin under constant threat, the Kurds asked the US and Russia to provide protection. On 20 March about 100 Russian Special Forces entered Afrin to establish a reconciliation centre to prevent ceasefire violations along the border and train YPG fighters to fight JFS in Idlib. Yet Turkey's attacks continued.

Between 21 – 24 April Turkish fighter jets conducted airstrikes and artillery attacks on YPG centres and civilians in Afrin and Hasaka (and on PKK centres in the KRI). Having tested the level of international reaction (none), on 25 April, 30 Turkish F-16s conducted airstrikes on a YPG headquarters, media centre and ammunitions depot in Qarachok near Derik in Hasaka province killing at least 20 YPG fighters and media personnel and wounding nineteen. One of the dead was Mohammed Khalil, a commander planning the Raqqa operation. Others were survivors of the fight for Kobani and Manbij. US personnel were 10 kilometres from the airstrikes.



Figure 8: Syrian Kurd killed in Turkish airstrikes, Qarachok, 25 April 2017 <sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Source: [https://scontent-syd2-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/18157453\\_465379687148457\\_1047262454705016543\\_n.jpg?oh=c35d79858b703d5d65b12661b8e9a181&oe=598EDD98](https://scontent-syd2-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/18157453_465379687148457_1047262454705016543_n.jpg?oh=c35d79858b703d5d65b12661b8e9a181&oe=598EDD98)



Turkey had sought to co-ordinate with the Qatar-based US Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), but CAOC had refused approval for the airstrikes, as had Russia. This did not deter Turkey. Fifty minutes before the airstrikes, Turkey notified the Americans they were taking action but failed to specify the exact co-ordinates. Allegedly the US informed the YPG but the YPG did not have enough time to evacuate.<sup>34</sup> After the attack, US airplanes and helicopters flew over Hasaka for several hours.

Iraq, Syria and Russia demanded that Turkey stop any further aggression and US State Department officials announced that although they respected Turkey's right to protect its borders, Turkey must stop attacking US allies that are fighting ISIS. Syrian Kurds felt betrayed by the Americans, and some wanted to withdraw from the Raqqa campaign, but they were convinced that this was what Erdogan wanted.

Intent on gathering proof that the YPG were a military threat to Turkey, on 26 April Turkey used tanks and artillery to fire on YPG position in four villages 130 kilometres west of Derik, and on 27 April, fired on YPG positions in ten villages in Afrin. In Afrin, YPG responded, claiming to have killed 17 Turkish soldiers. On 27 April, Turkish General Staff alleged that YPG had attacked 11 Turkish border posts in 13 separate attacks and Turkish state media claimed that inside Turkey PKK were using sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons obtained from YPG. US officials claimed there was no evidence of this. Turkish media also made much of a man photographed beside a US official inspecting the damage to the YPG media centre near Derik, identifying him as a senior PKK commander, Abdi Ferhad Şahin.

As a result of Turkey's aggression, on 28 April, a convoy of 250 US Rangers in Strykers prominently displaying US flags travelled between YPG utilities along the Syrian Turkish border to monitor the situation. Their presence was felt in subsequent days in Kobani, Tel Abyad, Darbasiyah and Qamishli. Civilians welcomed the Americans although the overt presence was not welcomed by President Assad or President Erdogan, the latter claiming that the display of US flags between 'YPG rags' was an affront to a NATO ally. On 30 April Erdogan threatened to attack the YPG at any time, day or night, without warning, whether or not US Special Forces were present. US Colonel Dorrian, a spokesperson for Operation Inherent Resolve, (the US military's name for the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria) claimed the US presence was to monitor, report and reassure both allies that the US would protect their security, but in August US forces were targeted by Turkey-backed militias several times, including around Manbij, where US forces returned fire, although there were no casualties.

With Turkey's continued attacks on Afrin, on 30 April, Russian forces once again deployed along the border between Afrin and Turkey. This did not stop Turkey firing

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<sup>34</sup> In the same operation Turkish airstrikes struck Sinjar in Iraq for the first time. Turkish media reported that the US had informed the PKK in Sinjar, who had time to evacuate.





on the Rubar Refugee Camp in Afrin on 2 May, injuring four IDPs. Also on 2 May, reports emerged that Russia had informed the SDF of an imminent Turkish attack on Tel Rifaat and called on the SDF to let regime forces into the area to prevent this occurring. The offer was rejected.

Since March, Turkey has shut down the delivery of aid into northern Syria from Turkey by targeting international humanitarian agencies in Turkey. On 7 March Turkey suspended the operating licence of Mercy Corps. In April Turkey closed the Italian-based Coordination of the Organizations for Voluntary Service, the UK-based Safety Organization and the US-based Business Software Alliance, with police inspecting the offices of more than a dozen other international NGOs. In late March Turkey detained 10 workers of DanChurchAid and on 20 April Turkey detained 15 employees of US-based International Medical Corps. Of these, 16 Syrian nationals were imprisoned and nine foreign nationals were deported. Turkish media claimed the NGO workers were either spies or supplying Kurdish 'terrorists'. Turkey has since introduced a requirement that all meetings of seven or more people in Hatay province must be registered with local authorities 48 hours in advance. Turkish officials claim these actions are necessary for national security.

The worst blow for President Erdogan came on 8 May, when President Trump signed off on the US Department of Defence directly arming the YPG within the SDF for the Raqqa offensive. The deal involved the SDF receiving breaching equipment (bulldozers, engineering equipment), light armoured vehicles, 120mm mortars, heavy (0.5 calibre) machines guns, rifles, ammunition, armour, radios and anti-tank weapons (TOW missiles) but no artillery or surface-to-air missiles. C-130s, airdrops and ground convoys would deliver supplies. Within 24 hours, the YPG were receiving supplies, concurrent to the US informing Erdogan's personal adviser, Ibrahim Kalin, head of Turkish Intelligence Hakan Fidan, Chief of the General Staff General Hulusi Akar, and Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog, of the decision in Washington. Erdogan's immediate response was relatively low key, possibly because he was feeling in a weak position after the close referendum results on an executive presidency. In subsequent days his rhetoric escalated: if the US went ahead with arming the Kurds there would be 'consequences', that the US was violating the NATO treaty, and 'Turkey reserves the right to take military action'. Ever since, the Pentagon, US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis and other US officials have repeatedly reassured Turkey that the equipment provided would be 'limited, mission specific and metered out incrementally', depending on the mission, and all would be accounted for.

On 15 May, President Putin repeated the necessity for Russia to have working relations with the YPG, as they were fighting ISIS. A day later, after a 23-minute meeting between Trump and Erdogan in Washington, Trump extolled the US-Turkey alliance in fighting ISIS and PKK terrorists. All was overshadowed by what happened afterwards on Erdogan's arrival at the Washington residence of the Turkish ambassador. Erdogan's personal black-suited security guards and others dressed in camouflage charged past US police and attacked pro-Kurdish demonstrators, including women. One woman was held in a headlock, her attacker threatening to kill her. Another woman was punched in the face, knocked to the ground and



repeatedly kicked, as were several men. Police found it difficult to separate the parties. Eleven protesters and one policeman were injured. Two security guards were arrested but later released so they could return to Turkey with Erdogan. In Turkey, one of the few newspapers who reported the incident, a pro-government newspaper, *Yeni Safak*, claimed that Erdogan's security guards had come to the aid of US police against an illegal demonstration. Turkish officials argued that the security guards acted in self-defence. Two days after the incident, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu demanded that the US Presidential Envoy for the Coalition, Brett McGurk, be sacked for supporting Kurds. The US ambassador in Turkey was summoned by the Turkish Foreign Ministry to discuss the aggressive and unprofessional actions of the US police and the need for a full investigation. On 15 June Washington police issued arrest warrants for 12 of Erdogan's security detail. Two Turkish-Americans were arrested for participating in the violent attacks and on 30 August, a grand jury indicted 19 people, including 15 Turkish security guards, on a number of charges including bias-related hate crimes and conspiracy to commit a crime of violence.

At the end of June, Turkey cut the flow of water of the Euphrates River into Syria and used artillery and missiles to shell SDF/YPG positions in Tel Abyad. US Special Forces once again began patrolling Tel Abyad. On 5 July tens of thousands of protesters in Afrin and Manbij took to the streets protesting the threat posed by Turkey. On 7 July, Turkey conducted another round of airstrikes on Rojava and Sinjar and on 17 – 18 July Turkey fired barrages of artillery shells into the centre of Afrin city for two days, killing five civilians and injuring at least twenty.

Some Kurds assume Russia allows Turkey to attack them to put pressure on Syrian Kurds to allow the Syrian regime into Afrin after five years of self-rule. If conditions worsen in Idlib, many thousands of civilians will need a place to flee and Turkey would prefer them to flee to an expanded area under its control inside Syria rather than cross the border into Turkey. This has implications for Kurdish-controlled Afrin and Shehba. A Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force was formed in the Shehba region in mid-August to expel the Turkish occupation of northern Aleppo, and afterwards, it was agreed that more Russian police move into Afrin and the Shehba region to de-escalate tensions between Turkey and the SDF. Days after the agreement was announced, Turkey again targeted Afrin city with rockets and shells on 29 August.

From Turkey's point of view, Turkey's actions are about defending Turkey from a cross border leak of arms and Kurdish 'terrorists'. In reality, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) fear that any form of Kurdish self-rule in Syria will inflame the aspirations of Turkey's large Kurdish population. With Turkey's capacity to act unilaterally, both Russia and the US have tried to de-escalate tensions. Turkey needs to be reminded that only 12 years ago it was stridently opposed to the formation of a semi-autonomous region in Kurdistan of Iraq, threatening war and mayhem. It is now the KRI's chief trading partner.



## Conclusion

Decades of Baathist oppression, 6.5 years of civil war, enforced demographic changes and the rise of ISIS make returning to the pre-war status quo in Syria unrealistic. Yet those who support a political transition have yet to identify how Syria can avoid the problems plaguing Iraq, other than the de-Baathification of the military and bureaucracy in Iraq was too sweeping and led to a Sunni Arab insurgency. The US restricts itself to defeating ISIS but claims 'No peace with Assad, no stability with Assad and no reconstruction with Assad'. Other US intentions are contradictory: minimise long-term commitments, repair relations with Turkey, counter Iranian influence and fight jihadi insurgencies. The first two intentions would likely lead to a betrayal of Syrian Kurds and their allies. The last two intentions would likely lead to the US providing support for the Syrian Kurds, their allies and moderate opposition groups.

Even Russia's stance is full of contradictions. Russia insists that Syrians decide the future of Syria but assumes that the Assad regime will negotiate a political transition, in which case Russia would support a secular government, against the intention of major parties in the HNC. Yet only Russia is positioned to insist that Assad and those in authority who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity step down, whether by not supporting new regime offensives or by the way Russia votes in the UN Security Council. To address Russia's concern, as expressed by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on 13 July: 'As for Assad, we do not support him, we simply categorically do not want to repeat what happened in Iraq,' the Syrian regime's ministries for education, health, electricity, water and so on could remain in tact after Assad, his cronies in crime and his patronage networks within the bureaucracies are purged. Whoever remains would hopefully be more willing to negotiate a political transition. If Russia fails to apply pressure on Assad and others to step down, there is no hope for ending the war in Syria and embarking on a political transition and reconstruction any time soon.

All analysts recognise that political negotiations are key to moving forward but a *Foreign Affairs* survey conducted in Turkey in 2016 found that 28 percent of 1,120 Syrian refugees, the majority from opposition held areas of Aleppo city, felt no political or military group in Syria represented their interests.<sup>35</sup> For the Geneva negotiations to overcome impasses, it is essential to expand those at the negotiation table. Only stakeholders willing to talk face-to-face, commit to a total ceasefire and compromise on political issues should be allowed to negotiate, while no single stakeholder should have the right to determine who sits at the table. Negotiations need to include Alawites who tried to negotiate with protesters and went into exile (2011 – 2015), ethnic representatives of all political persuasions, including representatives from the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria and local councils in opposition-held areas, local NGOs, lawyers, academics, journalists, women, youth, religious and tribal leaders. If HTS gives up its armed struggle in favour of negotiations, let them participate. If negotiations allow them to establish

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<sup>35</sup> The authors of the report were by Kristin Fabbe, Chad Hazlett and Tolga Sinmazdemir.



local administrations based on Sharia law, let them, provided the international community ensures civilians are free to vote with their feet. If the UN is unwilling or incapable of expanding stakeholders at the negotiation table, then perhaps a team of international judges and experienced commanders of UN peacemaking missions should replace the current UN team. Stakeholders need to discuss a future constitution that involves power and resource sharing, and political and cultural rights for minorities

The presence of Russian military police in de-escalation zones has not deterred the Assad regime and Iran-backed militias from defying ceasefire agreements, or opposition militia from fighting each other. To provide security throughout Syria, one analyst estimated it would require 450,000 troops, with at least 150,000 of these being foreign. If UN peacekeepers cannot fulfil the requirements, then individual countries will need to make contributions to one or more coalitions that would need to complement the region in which they work. For instance, NATO (with any Turkish troops remaining on the Turkey side of the border) could secure a safe zone in northern Syria to protect Turkey and Syrian Kurds from each other and prevent fighters and supplies from entering Syria or Turkey. A Sunni Arab coalition could supervise the opposition held areas and Syrian military and police could be restructured, trained and equipped to provide security in government-controlled areas on condition that Assad's air force is grounded over opposition-held districts.

Less foreign troops would be required in an alternative scenario whereby forces within an Alawite-run region, opposition-run region and a multi-ethnic Federal System of Northern Syria would secure their own territory. Regionalisation risks massive displacements of populations, but tight security and careful reiterations with political negotiations may prevent worse case scenarios. The Dayton Accord for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serb Republic relied on such divisions, with some forces being integrated over time.

In either scenario, only foreign forces that participate in a coalition should have a presence in Syria. This would involve a phased withdrawal of Iranian and Turkish forces unless they were part of a coalition. They would need incentives to withdraw and disincentives if they did not, with incentives including opportunities to profit from reconstruction.

The UN and IMF estimate physical reconstruction will cost between \$100 and \$200 billion. A report on 22 July claimed Chinese state and private companies are prepared to spend \$2 billion on electricity, water supplies, roads and housing. Even more difficult to estimate are the costs to build capacity, skills and trust. The international community has met many times to discuss reconstruction. If these meetings produce outcomes, they are not publicly disseminated. However, a few projects are underway. As part of a UN Development Program the Old City in Homs is being cleared and the Syrian regime is doing some reconstruction with public-private financing.



Who controls the reconstruction process, the trade routes, checkpoints and borders will determine the future of Syria. There are a number of considerations. To channel reconstruction through the current regime would only reinforce a government that has lost its legitimacy. A future government may not honour any deal made or debt incurred by the current regime. The current regime claims that only countries that support the regime will be allowed a role in reconstruction. In turn, US officials claim the US will not become involved in reconstruction if Assad remains in power. This impasse must be resolved for the well being of Syrians.

In territory administered by the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria and in areas of Hama, where powerful mercantile families have distanced themselves from the regime and opposition, there has been a networking of local councils, local NGOs and businesses which have delivered services and employment (even if voluntary). These could act as local partners in the reconstruction effort. But in opposition-run areas, a competition between militias for recruits, territory and foreign aid has meant civil councils have been unable to establish strong networks, with militias constantly threatening these councils, NGOs and civil activists, and wanting to control business.

The politicisation of reconstruction could lead to more war. One is forced to conclude that Assad and his colleagues must be removed from power or the regime must become a regional governing structure rather than a national one. Only then can the international community commit the necessary investment, loans, aid and time to collaborate, design and implement reconstruction processes that reconcile and empower communities, districts, provinces and regions, without it all being undone by more war.

## Turkey

### Overview

Since 2011, when Erdogan's policy decisions became more overtly moulded by a marriage between political Islam and Turkish nationalism, many reforms the AKP Government carried out between 2002 and 2009 have been undone. The process has accelerated since 2015, when the AKP Government ended the only bilateral ceasefire it had agreed to with the PKK (2013 – 2015) after it failed to get a majority in the June election because of the success of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). Since then Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian policies have polarised the nation, alienated Turkey from key allies and made Turkey a security threat to Syria and Iraq, and Kurds in four countries.

Since the failed coup on 15 July 2016 Turkey has been under a state of emergency. In the ongoing purge of alleged Gulenists, PKK sympathisers and critics of the APP Government, 160,000 people have lost their jobs (including more than 7,655 military personnel, 168 generals and admirals and 4,287 commissioned officers, 10,732 police officers; more than 5,000 university academics and administrators, and 2,575



judges and prosecutors. Some 169,000 people are under investigation. By the Ministry of Interior's own admission on 2 April, (i.e. before the referendum to change the constitution and create an executive presidency) 113,260 people had been detained. Of these, 47,155 remained in prison and 41,499 had been released to face court at a later date. Among those detained were 9,000 members of the HDP, one third of whom remain in prison. As of 1 September, 10 HDP parliamentarians, one Republican People's Party (CHP) parliamentarian and 69 elected Kurdish mayors remain in prison and four HDP parliamentarians have had their parliamentary status revoked.

The purge has caused untold suffering. Teachers and academics suspended from duty no longer have the right to teach and all those suspended are not eligible for welfare payments. The social costs include increased distrust, suspicion and fear, and a rise in domestic violence and the incidence of women being murdered. Distrust extends to the government, with many questions yet to be answered about the attempted coup. For instance, the instigators did not carry out basic requirements for a successful coup such as capturing or killing the head of state or taking over media channels to give a public explanation.<sup>36</sup> In response to the attempted coup the state appears to have been incompetent or to have intentionally allowed the coup to unfold. According to information gained from the trials of 221 alleged coup plotters commencing in May, planning for the coup began eight days after the AKP Government won the second national election held in 2015, on 1 November. The timing of the coup was pushed forward when plotters learned of an upcoming purge of the security forces. On the day of the coup, a helicopter pilot alerted MIT of what was happening at 2.30 pm but no action was taken until MIT alerted the deputy chief of General Staff at 4.30 pm. Again, no action was taken such as confining the army to barracks or closing Turkish air space. Even after the coup started at 8.30 pm, the MIT chief continued his normal routine, with Prime Minister Binali Yildirim unable to reach him until 11 pm. At 9.30 pm the Command Operations Centre ordered Martial Law, while the whereabouts of President Erdogan was unknown until the early hours of the morning. With the trials throwing up more questions than answers, Erdogan stopped proceedings, delaying them until 30 October. On 1 August, another mass trial of 486 alleged coup plotters began. Those on trial were accused of orchestrating the F-16s flights from the Akinci airbase near Ankara, where Chief of Staff General Hulusi Akar and others were held until the 16 April. Some observers questioned why the F-16 pilots would want to bomb the parliament and if they did, why experienced pilots caused such minimal damage.

In eastern Turkey military operations on Kurdish urban neighbourhoods and rural villages continue, with many in the military who advocated a non-military solution being purged, and those who oversaw the brutalities of Sur and Sirnak being promoted. The war has caused the displacement of 500,000 people. According to Turkish analyst Berkay Mandiraci writing for the International Crisis Group, between

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<sup>36</sup> See David Phillips in Huffington Post: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/was-turkeys-coup-for-real\\_us\\_596cbc9ee4b06a2c8edb4815?ncid=engmodushpmg00000004](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/was-turkeys-coup-for-real_us_596cbc9ee4b06a2c8edb4815?ncid=engmodushpmg00000004)



July 2015 and July 2017, the war killed at least 2,981 people: 1,378 PKK militants, 976 security forces, 408 civilians, and another 219 people aged between 16 and 35 of unknown affiliation. Some would say these figures are an underestimation.<sup>37</sup>

On another front, Turkey is determined to wipe out the pre-Turk ancient history of eastern Anatolia and use water as a political tool by damming the Tigris and Euphrates that flow into Iraq and Syria. One dam will flood the 12,000-year old settlement of Hasankehf. This loss to world history also jeopardises the Tigris ecosystem.

Taking advantage of its geopolitical importance, the modern state of Turkey has a often used blackmail and skulduggery when it comes to foreign relations. The current AKP Government frequently defies Europe, Russia, the US, Syria and Iraq, in occupying Syrian territory, attacking US-led coalition allied forces fighting ISIS in Syria, having unwelcome military bases in Iraq, conducting airstrikes in both countries against Kurdish forces and threatening to invade Iraq. Having completed a concrete wall on Syrian soil along its border with Syria, Turkey has embarked on building a 70-kilometre wall on its border with Iran.

Erdogan is increasingly ambivalent about joining the EU, and regularly threatens to unleash waves of refugees if the EU criticises his policies, one being a pledge to reintroduce capital punishment, which would disqualify Turkey from joining the EU. He appears equally ambivalent about NATO. According to the 2016 NATO annual report, Turkey took part in four of 18 key NATO exercises held the previous year and in April 2017, Erdogan blocked NATO partnership projects in retaliation for Europe banning AKP rallies in the lead up to the referendum on the constitution in Turkey. As well, Turkey is negotiating the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system, which will be incompatible with NATO systems. With the Islamisation of Turkey, including the education system,<sup>38</sup> and Turkey about to create a presidency with unbridled power, Turkey has the potential to become even more volatile and disruptive.

## **Referendum on an Executive Presidency, 16 April 2017**

A referendum to change the constitution and introduce an executive presidency heralded the most significant constitutional changes since Turkey became a nation state in 1923. It would give President Erdogan and all presidents thereafter,

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<sup>37</sup> On March 10, 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Organization released a report that claimed that Turkey's military campaigns in the Kurdish region from July 2015 to December 2016 resulted in approximately 1,200 local residents being killed, but in court cases related to civilian deaths in Cizre in 2016, judges claim that there is no proof that Turkish Security Forces intentionally fired at civilians or stopped them from receiving medical treatment.

<sup>38</sup> Evolution will no longer be taught, and the concept of jihad will be a compulsory part of the curriculum. The government has stipulated that all schools must have two mosques, while religious schools have increased from 500 to 3,500 and enrolments in these schools has increased from 60,000 to 1.5 million since 2002.

unchecked executive powers. With polls predicting a close result, in the lead up to the referendum Erdogan's rhetoric grew increasingly virulent. He accused all 'no' voters of being terrorists, traitors, separatists and anti-Islamic. He called Europe an enemy of the Ottomans and modern Turkey and threatened undefined consequences after Germany allowed up to 10,000 Kurds to celebrate *Newroz* (Kurdish New Year) in Frankfurt on 19 March, after Germany had banned 'yes' vote rallies and did not allow the Turkish foreign minister to enter Germany to promote the 'yes' vote.



Figure 9: An AKP poster promoting the YES vote in the referendum<sup>39</sup>

In February, electoral laws requiring balanced coverage on private Turkish TV networks before a vote were scrapped. Research conducted on the referendum coverage of 17 television channels by Unity for Democracy (DIB) found that between 1 – 10 March, the president and AKP were given 136 hours of air time while HDP's 'no' campaign was allocated 33 minutes. There was 485 hours of live coverage for the 'yes' campaign and 45.5 hours for the 'no' campaign. Many 'no' vote rallies were banned as was the HDP 'no' vote song. 'No' campaigners were harassed, physically threatened, attacked or arrested for holding 'illegal' gatherings. Ahead of Erdogan's visit to the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakir, thousands of police were brought in to conduct searches on every individual, helicopters flew overhead, snipers were stationed on top of buildings, Erdogan posters were put up everywhere, and AKP

<sup>39</sup> Source: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/turkey-how-islamic-state-became-a-naysayer-referendum.html>





supporters were bussed in. Leading up to the referendum there were on-going arrests of HDP and Democratic Region's Party (DBP) officials, including 152 people arrested on 12 April. Employers placed pressure on workers to vote 'yes'; imams preached 'yes'; pensioners were threatened that their pensions would be cut if they voted 'no'; some people lost their jobs even before they voted 'no'; *mukhtars* (village heads) threatened to confiscate villager's title deeds if they voted 'no'; the government appointed AKP supporters for polling station duties, and people displaced by Turkish military operations in the east were unable to register to vote, on top of which, ISIS threatened attacks on anyone who voted.

Europe is home to 2.5 million eligible Turkish voters, of whom 1.4 million live in Germany (800,000 of these being Kurds), 318,000 in France and 245,600 in the Netherlands. On 27 March, those in Germany started voting. On 30 March, AKP supporters attacked Kurds on their way to vote at the Turkish consulate in Brussels. One Kurd was stabbed in the throat with a knife.

On polling day, there was no question on the ballot paper, just the words 'yes' and 'no' which people chose by way of a stamp, before the ballot paper was stamped by an official. Videoed and photographed irregularities include soldiers and village guards entering a polling station in the Gurpinar district of Van asking voters to produce IDs and telling them to vote 'yes', pointing guns at the polling clerks and claiming the people inside the polling station would get what was coming to them when voting finished. There was other video evidence of votes not being officially stamped, and bags of ballot papers being carried from cars into polling stations and officials stamping the 'yes' side, voters being given a ballot paper with 'yes' already stamped on it and being told to put the paper in the ballot box, voters only being given a 'yes' stamp to mark their ballot paper, voters being forced to show the way they voted and people being assaulted for voting 'no'. Throughout Turkey, security forces surrounded polling stations and sometimes prevented people from entering a station. Other voters found their name already crossed off indicating they had already voted. Just before voting closed, the Supreme Election Board announced that all ballot papers that had not been officially stamped were valid. On news of that decision, protesters gathered outside the Supreme Election Board's headquarters in Ankara to protest. Police quickly dispersed the crowd.

Although up to 600,000 voters were prevented from voting because they were in prison, displaced by war or impacted by curfews and military checkpoints, 86 percent of eligible voters exercised their right to vote; 51.34 percent voted 'yes' and 48.66 percent voted 'no'. The 'yes' vote won by about 1.3 million votes. In 17 out of 30 major cities, including the five biggest cities (Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana and Antalya), the majority voted 'no', as did 70 to 87 percent of voters in Kurdish-majority towns and 60 percent of first time voters. Ten percent of all AKP supporters voted 'no', as did a majority of voters in Australia and New Zealand, although in Europe 63 to 73.5 percent voted 'yes'. Despite the close results, Erdogan was quick to claim victory, saying his next task was to introduce the death penalty.



### Turkish Referendum Results

It is highly unusual for an electoral victory in Turkey to be claimed without winning the largest metropolises.

Source: Anadolu Agency

Note: Results as of 99.99% of votes counted. In total, 48 million people voted.

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Figure 10: Referendum results in Turkey

Over the next week, thousands of people in Ankara, Izmir and Istanbul protested against the referendum outcome. On 22 April, 21 protesters in Izmir were arrested for insulting the president. Of these, seven were imprisoned and four await trial. There were street scuffles and hate-filled rhetoric targeting 'no' voters, with some Islamists claiming that women who voted 'no' were a booty in a war in which they would be victorious.

With nearly one million votes classified as invalid and another two to three million votes impacted by ballot papers not being officially stamped, along with other voting abnormalities, referendum monitors from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) suggested a recount. The Republican People's Party (CHP) and HDP appealed to the Supreme Election Board to conduct a recount or annul the referendum result. The CHP also appealed to the Council of State. Both bodies rejected petitions to annul the referendum based on unstamped votes, and the Council of State claimed that no court in Turkey could challenge a ruling by the Supreme Electoral Board.

The surprisingly narrow margin gained by the 'yes' vote had AKP insiders panicking but did not stop US President Trump congratulating Erdogan on his win, as did Vladimir Putin – the only Western leaders to do so. Congratulations also came from HTS, Ahrar al-sham, Jaish al-Sham and the Sultan Murad Brigade in Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Bahrain, Hamas and Tunisia. In contrast, on 24 April, the Parliamentary Assembly in



the Council of Europe voted to put Turkey on a monitoring watch list after finally concluding that Erdogan was violating human rights and stifling dissent.

Many questioned why Erdogan went to the trouble of holding a referendum given his current hold on power. According to Ayhan Edermir, a former Turkish MP writing in the *Cipher Daily Brief*, 7 April, Erdogan's intentions go beyond an executive presidency. Having complete control over the parliament, judiciary and military ensures Erdogan a life time immunity from corruption charges that were levelled against him when he was mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s and when he was prime minister in 2013, the latter charges initiated by Gulenists. As president he can only be charged with treason by the Supreme Court, and only after a series of parliamentary votes. With Erdogan's control of the parliament and half the judges, and parliament selecting the remaining judges, his immunity is assured for the foreseeable future.

## After the Referendum

Some observers speculated that Erdogan would be more conciliatory after winning the referendum. This was not to be. Within days, the state of emergency was extended for another three months, ending on 19 July, a year after the 15 July failed coup. It has since been extended for another three months. The on-going purge has meant that since March 2017 on:

- 26 April, 1,009 police and some 'covert' imams were arrested, and allegations of mistreatment and torture of detained police officers surfaced;
- By 2 May, another 9,100 police, 3,974 civil servants (including prison guards), 1,200 members of the armed forces (including 600 officers), 485 academics and 98 administrative personnel from 63 universities, and 201 employees of the Religious Affairs Committee were suspended from duty, and the government closed down Wikipedia;
- 5 May, 107 Istanbul and Edirne judges and prosecutors were dismissed;
- 6 May, 18 foundations, 14 associations and 13 healthcare organizations were closed for having suspected links to the Gülen movement, with five previously closed associations being reopened;
- 12 May, 57 former employees of the Istanbul stock exchange were arrested and another 45 were subject to arrest warrants. A few days earlier, 12 journalists and executives, including the editor-in-chief of the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper were arrested;
- 22 May, security forces arrested a sacked university professor and primary school teacher for going on a 76-day hunger strike in their own homes;
- 24 May, 139 staff from Ankara municipalities and ministries were detained;
- 26 May, the governor's office in Ankara banned any kind of assembly in public spaces after dark;
- 6 June, the local chair of Amnesty International Taner Kilic, and 22 fellow lawyers were detained for alleged links to Fethullah Gulen;



- 13 June, an activist for prisoners' rights, Inanc Ozkeskin, was shot dead during a police raid on his Istanbul home, and a Turkish UN war crimes judge, Aydin Sedaf Akay, who had been held in custody since September 2016, was sentenced to seven years in prison for being a Gulenist;
- 14 June, CHP MP Enis Berberoglu was sentenced to 25 years in prison. His 'crime' was revealing state secrets when he worked as a journalist for the *Hurriyet* newspaper. On 29 May 2015, he leaked video footage, which showed MIT overseeing truckloads of weapons entering Syria to supply jihadi groups. He was the first non-HDP parliamentarian to be imprisoned, an outcome of the CHP having joined the AKP in voting in favour of removing parliamentary immunity from parliamentarians in May 2016;
- 5 July, 72 academics and 10 prominent human rights activists were detained, with six human rights activists remaining in prison;
- 14 July, another 7,395 police, ministry staff, and academics were sacked;
- Late July, another 921 people were detained for alleged links with Gulen or the PKK;
- 2 August, the Heads of the Turkish Army, Navy and Air Force were replaced;
- 25 August, another 928 military and civilian staffers were dismissed.

On the 25 August, the announcement of Decree 694 altered 12 critical laws and fast tracked the introduction of the executive presidency. The decree established the National Intelligence Co-ordination Board under the presidency, which places MIT under the authority of the president and gave MIT the right to investigate and dismiss anyone in the Turkish Security Forces. It eliminated the military judicial system and put all prime ministerial powers in the hands of the president.

There is increasing criticism within Turkey of the on-going purge. In response to the arrest of Berberoglu, CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu (an Alevi from Dersim married to a Zaza-speaking Kurd) began a 432 kilometre 'March for Justice' from Ankara to Istanbul on 15 June. During the 25-day march many thousands joined the marchers despite the searing summer heat and Ramadan fast, and despite AKP accusing the marchers of being Gulenists, separatists and terrorists. The march ended in a rally of more than one million people in Istanbul, just days before the AKP Government celebrated the first anniversary of the 15 July coup. In a poll, 60 percent of voters in Turkey, including 35 percent of AKP voters, supported the March. Many hailed the leadership of Kilicdaroglu. Yet those who marched were divided, given they included ultranationalists angry that prominent Kurdish HDP members had briefly joined the march, Islamists angry that the march featured prominent female politicians and Kurds angry that Kilicdaroglu did not once raise the on-going imprisonment of Kurdish political representatives, the continuing curfews, military operations and demolitions of neighbourhoods and closure of media outlets, schools and NGOs in the Kurdish majority east, and the proposal to once again criminalise the word 'Kurdistan'.

Meanwhile, the AKP Government was accused of turning a blind eye to ISIS internet sites, books and schools inside Turkey, although on 21 May, Turkish security



thwarted an ISIS attack on an Alevi cultural centre in Ankara, killing two ISIS militants. This was the first time ISIS had targeted Alevi in Turkey.

The Turkish parliament has much legislation to pass before the presidential elections in November 2019 and to streamline the process has proposed amending parliamentary procedure, severely limiting the duration an MP can speak in parliament, making all voting open (i.e. not by secret ballot), and fining an MP one third of their salary or suspending an MP from parliament and fining them two thirds of their salary for saying any word that may be offensive to Turkey's history.

With Erdogan's re-election as AKP chairman on 21 May, he appears unassailable despite the many policy failures, signs of Erdogan and AKP fatigue, his new MHP allies facing a split, the referendum being a close call and the success of the March for Justice. Ironically, in the next election, constitutional changes mean that Erdogan must win more than 50 percent of the vote to be re-elected president, or broker alliances before a second round of voting. This may be Erdogan's undoing, especially as 18 percent of all voters live in Istanbul and there will be two million first time voters, and the majority of both cohorts voted 'no' in the referendum. Potential rivals include AKP co-founder and former prime minister and president, Abdullah Gul, who fell out with Erdogan, and Meral Aksener, former AKP stalwart, who intends to form a new party of disillusioned nationalists, Islamists and AKP supporters. Yet, Erdogan has all the state tools at his disposal and knows how to influence up to 50 percent of the Turkish population. It would take a truly dynamic team to usurp Erdogan and the AKP. Nor is a military coup likely given Erdogan has filled the leadership of the security forces with AKP supporters. However, in such a divided country challenges can come from unlikely sources.

## **Kurdistan Region of Eastern Turkey**

Since July 2015, the Turkish state has dismantled the political, socio-cultural and economic gains made by Kurds in the previous ten years, including the Kurds' success in municipal elections in 2014 and national elections in 2015, leading to the HDP being the first pro-Kurdish party to enter the Turkish parliament. Other gains such as Kurdish-language media and schools, NGOs and a growing tourism industry have all been shut down. In the place of progress, the AKP Government has reverted to curfews, military operations, demolition, imprisonment and repression of Kurdish identity and culture.

Since May 2014, four HDP MPs have had their parliamentary status revoked. They are HDP MPs Figen Yüksekdağ,<sup>40</sup> Nursel Aydoğan, Faysal Sarıyıldız and Tugba Hezer Ozturk. Consequently, HDP representation in parliament has been reduced from 59 to 55 seats, although of the 55, nine are in prison. Three other MPs – Faysal

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<sup>40</sup> As a result of Co-Chair Figen Yüksekdağ losing her parliamentary seat a new HDP co-chair, Serpil Kemalbay, was elected on 20 May.



Sarıyıldız, Tugba Hezer Ozturk and Özdal Üçer – along with another 127 ‘fugitives’, may be stripped of their citizenship if they do not return to Turkey to face trial.

Between November 2016 and March 2017, 34 HDP parliamentarians have been detained for varying lengths of time. With so many being detained, released and detained again it is hard to keep track of numbers of HDP parliamentarians in prison. Since March, the following nine HDP MPs were detained:

Dilan Dirayet Taşdemir	Agri MP
Burcu Celik	Mus MP
Ibrahim Ayhan	Urfa MP
Mehmet Ali Aslan	Batman MP
Besime Konca	Siirt MP
Pervin Buldan	Istanbul MP
Dilan Tasdemir	HDP Deputy Co-chair & Agri MP
Adem Geveri	Van MP

Two HDP MPs were released from prison (Meral Danish and Nursel Aydoğan), although Aydoğan has since received a prison sentence. In addition the following HDP MPs remain in prison:

Selehattin Demirtas	Edirne F Tipi Cezaevi B1-36
Figen Yüksekdağ	Kandıra 1 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi A3-15
Ayhan Bilgen	Silivri 9 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi B2-14, İstanbul
Çağlar Demirel	Kocaeli 1 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi A4-11
İdris Baluken	Sincan 1 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi B11-32, Ankara
Selma Irmak	Silivri 9 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi B1-02, İstanbul
Gülser Yıldırım	Kocaeli 1 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi A4-11
Abdullah Zeydan	Edirne F Tipi Cezaevi B1-36
Ferhat Encü	Kandıra 1 Nolu F Tipi Cezaevi C11-100
Burcu Çelik	Sincan Kadın Kapalı Cezaevi F-4 Ankara

Seven HDP MPs have received prison sentences. Şırnak MP Ferhat Encü , former Van MP Figen Yüksekdağ, and Ahmed MP Nursel Aydoğan received sentences of between one and five years. Hakkari MP Abdullah Zeydan and Amed MP Çağlar Demirel received prison sentences of 7.5 to 8 years and Siirt MP Besime Konca received 2.5 years. All were charged with allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda, aiding and abetting a terrorist organization and/or being a member of a terrorist organisation. HDP Deputy Chair Ahmet Yıldırım was sentenced to 1 year and 2 months and barred from political life for allegedly insulting the president.

Eighty-three Kurdish-majority municipalities have been taken over by AKP appointed trustees; 136 mayors have been removed from office, including all 96 female co-mayors; and 69 mayors remain in prison at the end of August, among them 32 female co-mayors, reduced from 84 in May, although six mayors were detained since March. These are:

Abdullah Tunç	Sirnak	Balveren Metropolitan Municipality
Dijvar Ulaş	Siirt	Pervari Municipality
Belkıza Beştaş Epözdemir	Siirt	Sirrt Metropolitan Municipality
Abdülkadir Çalışkan	Van	Saray Municipality
Yıldız Çetin	Van	Gürpınar Municipality
Zeki Yıldız	Van	Gürpınar Municipality

Imprisoned and sacked mayors are accused of funnelling money to the PKK and hiring people close to the PKK. Many hundreds of municipal workers have lost their jobs in municipalities taken over by AKP trustees. All have been accused of having links with the PKK. Given the notoriously high unemployment rate in Kurdish majority areas, they cannot find employment. Most do not have sufficient finances to adequately care for their families let alone launch an appeal in the court.

AKP appointed trustees claim they are better able to carry out reconstruction than their DBP predecessors because of their close links with the Turkish state. Appropriate reconstruction of infrastructure and services would mean a lot to a population tired of war, and suffering an employment rate of 78 percent among youth between the ages of 15 and twenty-one. However the new administrators and municipal workers lack local knowledge, most cannot speak Kurdish and people do not trust them, especially as they have taken down Kurdish language sign posts and statues of famous Kurdish figures, and closed NGOs that served women, children and provided for the poor. Women have been particularly affected. All female co-mayors having lost their positions, as have many female workers. For example, the number of women employed in Mardin Metropolitan Municipality has been reduced by 80 percent.



Figure 11: *Newroz* in Diyarbakir (Amed) 2017



Leading up to, during and after this year's Kurdish *Newroz* celebrations in March, many dozens of civilians with HDP affiliations across seven provinces were detained. For instance, 69 people were detained during celebrations in Bingöl, Batman and Izmir for chanting slogans, wearing traditional clothes, and carrying yellow, red and green symbols. On 25 March and at the end of July there were more waves of HDP, Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and Democratic Regions' Party (DBP) officials and supporters being arrested.

On 28 March, 154 Kurdish political figures stood trial in Diyarbakir, with 107 receiving prison sentences, including the DBP co-chair, Kamuran Yuksek, who was given a sentence of eight years and nine months on highly questionable terrorism charges, despite no witnesses being called and him being in Europe. The co-mayor of Dersim, Mehmet Ali Bul, received a similar sentence. When Kurdish politicians attempt to speak to people in towns and villages police and soldiers quickly surround them making people afraid to attend meetings. All these developments are a severe blow to democracy in Turkey.

On 19 June, 11 minors, who had been trapped in the Sur warzone between 28 November 2015 and 3 March 2016, were sentenced to a total of 37 years. Many had been wounded, and shrapnel wounds or residues on their clothes were taken as evidence that they belonged to a terrorist organisation.

With so many in prison, in February Kurds in six prisons began a hunger strike protesting prison conditions, including torture, overcrowding, solitary confinement, and a lack of food, water, heating and medical treatment. They also demanded a resumption of peace talks between the Turkish state and PKK. HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas joined the hunger strike on 31 March. When officials agreed to discuss matters with Demirtas the next day he called off his hunger strike and asked other hunger strikers to do the same, but by the end of April more than 300 prisoners in 33 Turkish prisons remained on an indefinite hunger strike.

The Turkish state continues to enforce curfews and conduct military operations in Kurdish-majority districts. The curfew on Sur neighbourhoods, beginning on 28 November 2015 continues, the state expropriating 6,300 homes and demolishing one third of the historical district resulting in the displacement of 40,000 people. When the government ordered the demolition of undamaged neighbourhoods thousands of local residents refused to leave their homes. The government responded by cutting off their water and electricity supplies, and banning outsiders from entering these neighbourhoods. Although the state promises to relocate and compensate people, the amounts being offered are a fraction of what the properties are worth. People also fear they will be forced to live in high-rise buildings surrounded by security checkpoints.

In Nusaybin the state is giving people three choices: a new apartment in the demolished area or in another province or a house in a 'reserve' three kilometres





outside Nusaybin. As of 5 April, only 183 citizens had signed up for one of these options, all 183 choosing an apartment in the area they originally lived. An unknown number want to be given back their land and rebuild for themselves because, for instance, women will be culturally restricted if they move to a new area, away from neighbourhoods where everybody knows each other. For many it is reminiscent of when they were forced out of their villages in the 1990s.

Seventy percent of Sirnak has been destroyed and, as in Sur, undamaged neighbourhoods have been demolished, displacing tens of thousands of people. Small shop owners and other business owners have lost their livelihoods, with many accusing the security forces of looting, even in areas not affected by the civil war.

Turkish Security Forces (TSK) continue to put in place curfews on declared 'military security zones' before targeting them, with no person allowed to leave or enter the area, unless forced to evacuate. Curfews and military operations include those that occurred:

- Between 14 and 28 March in 24 areas in Hakkari, with the Ministry of Interior claiming to have detained 740 alleged PKK members over two days;
- On 20 March in 10 villages in the Nusaybin district of Mardin province;
- On 22 March, in Sirnak province, with Special Operations reinforcements arriving in May;
- On 5 April in villages in the provinces of Semdinli, Bingol and Hakkari;
- In April, in another 25 areas in Hakkari province;
- In May in 59 villages in Diyarbakir province, with villages in Lice being shelled and the residents forced to evacuate.
- In the first eight days of June, in another 58 villages in Bingol, Diyarbakir and Lice. In Lice, during one week in June, eight civilians were killed by armoured vehicles running over them in the street, five of them returning from a funeral of two people who had been killed the day before.
- In July, in 15 neighbourhoods in the Varto district of Mus province, two villages and 15 hamlets in the Lice district of Diyarbakir province, 16 villages in the Nusaybin district of Mardin province, three neighbourhoods in Mardin city, and five villages in the Semdinli district of Hakkari province. Other villages were bombarded from the air, and villagers were forced to evacuate.
- In August, when helicopters and F-16s bombed areas of Bingol, Lice, Sirnak and Dersim setting fire to numerous forested areas that were left to rage. Security forces obstructed local people from trying to put out the fires.
- In August, when security forces surrounded a village in the Semdinli district of Hakkari province, put surveillance cameras on the village minaret and arrested 36 people, torturing them before and after they were taken to the police station. Sixteen remain in custody.

And so it goes on. Inside these villages people are confined to their houses and subject to raids and arrests of those suspected of collaborating with the PKK. Kurdish sources claim that Syrian, Afghan, Chechens, Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs refugees are being



settled in Kurdish majority areas, with 200 Afghan, Chechen, Uzbek and Kyrgyz men receiving military training before being employed as village guards.

Many civilians blame both the Turkish state and the PKK for what has befallen them, but others have been further radicalised. With the heavy military presence including security checkpoints and tanks around public buildings, and with the imprisonment of Kurdish MPs and mayors, the labelling of all non-violent Kurdish activists as 'terrorists', the shut down of NGOs and media, the banning of political gatherings and street protests, Kurds see no political means to address their wishes to reform the anti-terror laws, lower the electoral threshold for a political party to enter parliament, and have mother-tongue education and an ethnically neutral federal constitution with regional self-rule.

Then there is the war between the Turkish state and the PKK, although the state would argue the aforementioned military operations are part of this war. Despite the PKK leadership repeatedly calling for a ceasefire and political negotiations, the war has escalated in 2017, with each side claiming to have inflicted a high death toll on the other. The Turkish state claims that between 23 July 2015 and July 2017 security forces and police have killed more than 10,500 PKK fighters, or 88 percent of all PKK operating in Turkey. In that same period, PKK claims to have killed 6,353 Turkish soldiers and police, at a cost of 1,116 PKK fighter lives.<sup>41</sup> After the failure of claiming self rule in urban settings and military response costing so many lives, the PKK has returned to hit and run tactics. For instance, on 11 April Turkish state media reported an accident at a police headquarters in Diyarbakir (Amed) that killed two policemen. The armed wing of PKK, the Peoples Defence Forces (HPG) claimed that they had dug a 90 metre tunnel under the police headquarters and exploded 2,540 kilograms of explosives, killing 83 police and wounding another 110, as well as destroying 48 large vehicles and dozens of police cars. In clashes between 23 – 25 May, PKK claimed to have killed 57 soldiers in the mountains of Tendürek and Kato. On 8 June, PKK brought down a helicopter and claimed to have killed 14 soldiers in Çelê (Çukurca) district of Hakkari province. Turkey responded with airstrikes.

Otherwise, there has been no terrorist attack in western Turkey claimed by the PKK, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) or any other Kurdish group since 5 January 2017, when TAK claimed responsibility for killing two people and injuring 11 in Izmir. This would indicate the PKK has some strategic control over what happens, although PKK denies any connection with TAK activities. However, the Turkish state has attributed numerous attacks to the PKK for which the PKK have not claimed responsibility. These include the assassinations of four AKP officials, including Orhan Mercan, the AKP's deputy head in the Lice district of Diyarbakir province, and Aydin Ahi, deputy head of the AKP in the Ozalp district of Van province, on 30 June and 1 July. In contrast, PKK claimed responsibility for killing two people who they alleged

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<sup>41</sup> For a complete tally claimed by PKK go to <https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/hpg-announces-the-balance-sheet-of-war-for-two-years-21165>



were spying for the state, and also claimed responsibility for the unintentional murder of a teacher during an attack on an AKP appointment to a mayoral position.

With the marginalisation of Kurdish political leaders and AKP increasingly reliant on nationalist support in future elections, it is unlikely that the government will negotiate a ceasefire with the PKK. Unless PKK is convinced otherwise (for instance, deferring military operations inside Turkey in view of gaining international support for a Democratic Federal System in northern Syria) clashes are likely to intensify.

In view of embarking on political negotiations that would exclude the PKK, the AKP Government is fostering pro-Barzani and pro-Islamist parties, and Kurdish religious and clan leaders with no ties to the PKK, but they are unlikely to gain popular support given their links to the Turkish state. Even if there was progress, peace will not be achieved without the Turkish state and the PKK negotiating a ceasefire.

### **International responses to Turkey's current trajectory**

The Turkish Government spends many millions on lobbyists and NGOs in the US and Europe. Michael Flynn, President Trump's former National Security Advisor, admitted to accepting half a million dollars from a Turkish businessmen to lobby for Turkey's interests in the US, with Flynn meeting Turkey's foreign minister and Minister of Energy (Erdogan's son-in-law) in the lead up to the US elections in 2016. As previously mentioned, after the election in January Flynn argued against the US supporting the SDF to liberate Raqqa, resulting in a delay in the offensive. When Flynn was dismissed, the Turkish Government simply hired another lobbyist, the firm of Trump's Florida campaign manager, Brian Ballard.

Turkey is in need of lobbyists given the strain in relations with the EU, individual European countries, the US and NATO. Although up until 2017, responses to Turkey's trajectory have been moderate, largely because of the country's geopolitical importance, the US-led coalition relying on Incirlik airbase as a hub for fighting ISIS and Europe having outsourced its wish to stop the flow of refugees and terrorists into Europe, as Turkey backslides on democratic and human rights issues and Erdogan and his inner circle becomes increasingly vitriolic towards the West, European and US responses have become less moderate.

After the attempted coup in July 2016, Bruno Kahl, the head of Germany's Federal Intelligence Agency (BND), and various US officials expressed doubts about Fethullah Gulen being behind the attempted coup and Germany offered asylum for any Turkish citizen who was being politically persecuted. Along with Norway and Greece Germany has refused to extradite Turkish Defence personnel, including NATO representatives that Turkey alleges were behind the attempted coup.

A month before the referendum, Germany refused the sale of light arms, ammunition and other equipment to Turkey and a UK parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee released a highly critical report, observing that the referendum was



being held during a state of emergency when all opposition was being silenced, that there was no evidence that the Gulenist organisation was behind the coup, that democratic institutions were being severely weakened and that the government crackdown on the PKK was disproportionate. The report concluded that under such circumstances it was not possible to enter a free trade agreement with Turkey and that Turkey should be persuaded to embark on a peace process with its Kurdish population that should include the recognition of Kurdish cultural identity and a discussion of some form of local autonomy.

At the end of April, (after the referendum) Johannes Hahn, the EU executive's commissioner responsible for membership applications to the EU, called on EU foreign ministers to consider ending Turkey's accession process. The EU rapporteur on Turkey's accession negotiations, Kati Piri, likewise claimed that under the proposed new constitution Turkey would not be eligible to join the EU and on 6 July the European Parliament voted to suspend all accession negotiations with Turkey if constitutional reforms were implemented. In place of accession negotiations, both Hahn and Piri suggested that Brussels step up talks on enhancing the customs union with Turkey to give Europeans leverage to persuade Turkey to reverse its policies that were undermining democracy. However, on 16 August, when relations had deteriorated further, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that there would be no move to update the 1995 customs union for Turkey, although when considering other measures like sanctions, the 49 percent of Turkish citizens who voted against the referendum had to be taken into account.

Back on 10 July, five Swedish MPs filed a legal complaint at the Swedish International Public Prosecution Offices, accusing President Erdogan, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and other officials of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in the Kurdish east.

In July Germany pulled out troops from Incirlik and deployed them to Jordan after Turkey repeatedly refused permission for German parliamentarians to visit the troops at Incirlik airbase. Germany threatened to do the same with Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) surveillance planes stationed in Konya. Then when two German journalists and a German Human Rights activist were imprisoned on charges of supporting a terrorist organisation, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel advised German companies not to invest in Turkey, and German citizens not to travel to Turkey. Other proposals under consideration were blocking aid and pre-accession funding and refusing Turkey's request for further arms. In response, Ankara submitted a list of 681 German companies to Interpol, including Daimier and BASF. Although Turkey subsequently withdrew the list, Interpol arrested two writers in Spain at Turkey's request (Hamza Yalcin and Dogan Akhanli) prompting the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to call for a thorough inspection of arrest warrants in view of Turkey using Interpol for political reasons.

As for Turkey's relations with the US, on 27 March 2017, a year after Reza Zarrab's arrest in the US on charges that he had bypassed US sanctions against Iran, the vice



president for Halkbank, Turkey's second largest state-owned bank, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, was arrested in New York for using US institutions to engage in illegal financial transactions that enabled vast sums of money to be channelled into Iran, the deal known as the 'gold for oil' scheme, whereby Turkey purchased Iranian oil in exchange for gold. The scheme implicates Turkish officials including President Erdogan, who is thought to have a number of bank accounts in Europe and Russia that could relate to the deals with Iran. Relations have also deteriorated as a result of the the US refusing to hand over Fethullah Gulen and directly arming the YPG in Syria, with Turkish officials accusing the US of fostering terrorists in Syria that are a direct threat to Turkey. As a result, US officials have held numerous meetings with Turkish officials to reassure Turkey of the alliance. As if in compensation for arming and protecting the YPG in Syria, US officials, including President Trump on 16 May, and Defence Secretary Jim Mattis in August, have reiterated US willingness to support Turkey with intelligence in its fight against the PKK in Qandil and Sinjar, despite the visible presence of PKK fighters at the US base at Makhmour, and despite US forces in all likelihood working alongside PKK fighters in the war against ISIS. The US has also discussed with Turkey joint efforts in Idlib but has yet to agree to a request by Turkey to train new pilots for its decimated air force.

Although Russia still maintains some sanctions on Turkey, and like the US, supports and protects Syrian Kurds from Turkey's attacks, Russia remains favourable to selling Turkey the Russian S-400 SAM air defence system, but not necessarily the associated intelligence and technology. If this purchase goes ahead it will complicate the NATO alliance.

The NATO alliance is already under stain because of the requirement that a NATO member must be democratic and co-operative. While Turkey provided critical contributions to Bosnia and Kosovo, it has proved an unreliable ally in Syria, capable of acting unilaterally against an allied force fighting ISIS. This has implications for NATO's announcement on 25 May 2017, that NATO would join the 68-member US-led coalition fighting ISIS, not in a combatant role, but rather to co-ordinate air movements and share intelligence. At the end of May, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Denmark tried to block Turkey hosting the NATO summit in 2018. The problem for NATO is that it relies on consensus and there are no exit mechanisms.

It could be argued that Turkey needs Europe and NATO as much as Europe and NATO needs Turkey, given Turkey's economy is so reliant on trade with Europe and Turkey has annoyed a number of its neighbours who may take advantage of a polarised Turkish population. However, the balance of interests may tip if Kurds were given an independent Kurdistan in Iraq and autonomy in Syria, with leaders of both regions having offered alternatives to Incirlik.



## Conclusion

A barometer for democracy in Turkey is the way Turkey treats its Kurdish citizens. For 37 years, military operations have failed to curb the political, cultural and economic aspirations of these resilient people. Before and during the two-year ceasefire, Kurds progressed in leaps and bounds. However because AKP reforms like those related to Kurdish-language media and education and the development of civil society are not enshrined in the constitution, these reforms were easily taken away to gain the support of ultranationalists in the run-off election in November 2015 and the referendum in 2017.

Rather than waste resources on military operations against Kurds and suppressing dissent throughout Turkey, the Turkish Government must be convinced of the advantages of a ceasefire with the PKK and a political solution for Kurds that would have broader applications. Ultimately Turkey needs to consider a new constitution that embraces linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. Negotiations on a ceasefire and political and constitutional reforms would benefit from the PKK likewise embracing diversity within the Kurdish population, including the possibility that there are multiple approaches to realising minority rights. The international community can help the process by offering incentives and disincentives for all parties to meet milestones that would result in a lasting ceasefire and a political way forward that would benefit Turkey.

Incentives for Turkey could include the EU and US expanding trade relations, investment and aid linked to implementing a ceasefire, the release from prison and reinstatement of duly elected HDP parliamentarians and municipal mayors, and political and cultural reforms. If Turkey fails to change its current trajectory, disincentives could include those discussed in the previous section. With many Kurds seeing Turkey now where Syria was in 2011, if these disincentives do not work, to prevent Turkey's leaders further destabilising Turkey and the region, the international community must consider harsher measures, and finally, contingency measures.

A major incentive for PKK to adopt a more pragmatic approach and reach agreements with other Kurds and the Turkish state, would be the release from prison of Abdullah Ocalan, given he is a powerful voice of reason, and an advocate of peace and democracy. Another incentive would be for PKK to no longer be classified as a terrorist organisation. The PKK is the only group on any list of terrorist organisations that advocates for democracy, ethnic rights and women's rights. It is the only 'terrorist' organisation that has contributed to the establishment of a democratic federal system of governance, as it has done in Syria. It is the only group on any of these lists that has not only proved a formidable foe against ISIS, but has saved tens of thousands of people from ISIS tyranny, such as the Yezidi in Sinjar. Despite these achievements, the Australian Government appears to have hardened its view on the PKK, perhaps as a result of the US taking a hard line on the PKK to reassure Turkey of an on-going commitment to a fraying alliance. Until now,



evidence for PKK being classified a terrorist organisation has largely come from MIT. This 'evidence' is open to challenge and if context is taken into account an analyst could conclude that PKK fighters are freedom fighters. In reviewing PKK's status, criteria for declassification must take into account these factors, especially in light of Turkey's current trajectory. One criterion could be PKK unilaterally stopping military actions in Turkey, as it has done many times. Another criterion could be PKK reconciling with other Kurdish leaders in and outside Turkey, which would set a precedent. However, since the rise of ISIS and the likelihood of future jihadi insurgencies, asking the PKK to disarm at this point in time is unrealistic.

Australia could unilaterally or in co-ordination with other members of the international community call for the release of Abdullah Ocalan. In order to impartially review the status of the PKK Australia could collect documentation on PKK activities from sources outside the MIT, such as visiting those who have been imprisoned on allegations of having links with the PKK. Australia could also collect documentation on Turkey's judicial abnormalities and military and political operations against the Kurds since August 2015 to contextualise the actions of PKK.

As for political reforms, if one took a step-by-step approach, the first step would be the release from prison of all elected political representatives and their reinstatement to the positions for which they were elected. The second step could be replacing state appointed provincial governors with elected governors. The next step would involve negotiations regarding some form of municipal, provincial and/or regional autonomy. If the Kurdistan Region of Turkey was given some form of self-rule, ideally within a federal system, PKK fighters could become security forces, answering to a ministry of an elected council. This may sound idealistic given Turkey's current trajectory, but the international community must consider the demographic time bomb. The Kurdish population of Turkey is estimated to be 18 to 25 percent of the total population. It is predicted to reach 50 percent within three decades. An alternative to Kurds becoming partners in Turkey is for the country to be split in two.

## Iran

### Overview

Iran's wish to expand its influence in the Middle East is fuelled by a complex Shia minority – Sunni majority divide, Iran becoming a Shia Islamic Republic 38 years ago, and its subsequent isolation by the West, consolidation of power in the hands of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and strengthening of the state security and intelligence apparatus. In May, US President Trump accused Iran of being the main destabiliser in the Middle East. Whilst the rhetoric was probably intended to unite Sunni Arab states (which it did not do) blaming Iran for destabilising the Middle East is not a reflection of realities, although of major concern is that Iran's influence in



Iraq has not enhanced inclusive, democratic and effective governance, and Iran's support of the Assad regime has not curbed the Syrian regime's brutalities.

Iran has its own internal issues. Although Iran is rich in oil it has suffered from economic sanctions since 1979. Whilst the Iran Nuclear Deal saw Iran's economy grow by 7 percent in 2016, and in May 2017 the US lifted sanctions related to the nuclear deal, the US applied sanctions related to Iran's missile program. Iran has an official unemployment rate of 12.7 percent. For those living in Kurdistan province the unemployment rate is 45 percent and for those with university degrees the rate is as high as 40 percent, and for youth, 30 percent. Many families rely on government cash subsidies of \$14 a month, with the northwest Kurdistan region being the poorest in Iran.

US State Department reports on human rights in Iran continue to be damning. These reports identify discriminations against ethnic and religious minorities, including a lack of political representation, a lack of freedom of expression and freedom of association, a lack of language rights, and a lack of justice, with many in prison experiencing torture, being denied medical treatment, being on death row for years without a trial, and being denied legal representation even when on trial, while Iran consistently and increasingly over uses the death penalty. Conditions inside prisons are so poor there are suicide attempts and acts of self-mutilation. As a result of the poor prison conditions, in 2017 prisoners inside Sanandaj prison have been on hunger strikes.

Whilst there are no accurate statistics on the ethnic composition of Iran, if Lurs are considered Kurds (and there is linguistic and genetic reasons for doing so), Kurds make up about 16 percent of the population, as do Azeris. However, Kurds make up half of all political prisoners and a high proportion of those who receive the death penalty. In 2016, 138 Kurds were among the 530 – 545 prisoners executed. They included two Kurdish female political prisoners and 21 Kurdish prisoners charged with blasphemy. Blasphemy charges are not helped by Kurds belong to a number of religions. In 2017, from 1 January to 10 May, 29 Kurds were executed, with public executions often taking place in city centres. In the same period, 207 Kurds were arrested for civic activism or membership of a banned political party. One Kurdish political prisoner is Yousef Kakehmami. He has been in prison for nine years for having links with media outlets and human rights organisations. In April 2017 he was sentenced to another five years for sending a letter to the UN.

Kurds also suffer from land mines laid down during the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988), the Holy War on the Kurds (1979 – 1983), and thereafter, with Iran making no attempt to clear land lines in the Kurdistan region. In towns, Kurds and other people fear being harassed, verbally abused, bashed or arrested by Basij militia, morality police or Revolutionary Guards. For instance, on 23 June 2017, members of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps attacked four men in a street of Sanandaj city because they suspected these men were members of the banned Komala Party. They killed





three on the spot (Sabah Hossein Panahi, Hamed Seif Panahi and Behzad Nouri). The fourth was abducted (Ramin Hossein Panahi). No-one knows where he is.

Presidential and local council elections were held on 19 May. President Rouhani was running for a second term and campaigned on reform although Rouhani's track record was poor in promising Kurds much and delivering little. On 25 March, he visited the province of Kurdistan, promising a railway line that would connect Teheran to Sanandaj (the provincial capital), then pass through the Kurdistan Regions of Iraq and Syria onto the Mediterranean Sea. He also promised to give Kurds and other minorities more language and cultural rights and launched 21 new projects that would employ 6,000 people in the Kurdistan region. The construction of two dams and a petrochemical factory have already started.

At least Iran has elections. However a presidential candidate must be a pious Shia who believes in the principles of the Islamic Republic. For the 2017 presidential elections, 1,636 people registered to be considered as a presidential candidate. The Guardian Council approved six candidates. President Rouhani's strongest rival was a Shia cleric called Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, who allegedly presided over the 1988 massacre of more than 30,000 political prisoners (mostly members and supporters of the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran). Six banned pro-Kurdish parties boycotted the election. These were the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), KOMALA and four PKK affiliates: the Democratic and Free Society of Eastern Kurdistan (KODAR), Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), Community of Free Women of Eastern Kurdistan (KJAR) and Eastern Kurdistan Youth Society (KCR). On 19 May, Hassan Rouhani received 57 percent of the vote and claimed Iranians had voted for a united Iran that would engage with the world.

In the local council elections, 83,000 candidates registered in the Kurdistan region (as opposed to the province), where only 11 out of 40 local mayors are Kurdish.

Two events herald a further crackdown on Iran's Kurdish minority, and its ability to form associations and publish. The first is that the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) ended its ceasefire in 2016 and has reinforced its military presence along the Iraq-Iran Kurdistan border. In late July, the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps shelled their positions and on 6 August fighting broke out when Revolutionary Guards attacked KDPI Peshmerga in Azerbaijan. The KDPI claimed to have killed five Revolutionary Guards. The Revolutionary Guards claimed to have killed two KDPI fighters and arrested four who were injured. The KRG has asked the KDPI to stop its armed struggle, especially as the KRI heads towards a referendum on independence, as the Revolutionary Guards might use the KDPI's armed struggle as an excuse to attack the KRI. Instead, the KDPI is calling for others with a vested interest in undermining Iran to support their struggle. No stakeholder has come forward. On the contrary, Iran and Turkey have stepped up military co-operation.

The other event is the 7 June twin terrorist attacks on Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum and the Majlis (parliament) that killed 17 and wounded 43, for which ISIS immediately claimed responsibility. The Intelligence Ministry (VEVAK) claimed



that all five attackers were Iranians who had participated in ISIS activities in Mosul and Raqqa and that four attackers were Iranian Kurds. A crackdown in the Kurdistan region resulted in six people suspected of terrorist links being arrested within days of the attack. Social media messages accused Kurds of wanting war and separation, whereas most Iranian Kurds have long demanded autonomy within a federal Iran.

With Iran expanding its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen it is important to challenge Iran on its range of human rights abuses, as outlined here and in a Kurdish Lobby Australia statement dated 24 May 2017.<sup>42</sup> In the absence of any viable opposition, and with a military takeover a huge undertaking, regime change is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Diplomacy, trade and the lifting of sanctions linked to milestones to achieve ethnic and religious minority rights, greater freedom of association and political representation, and the abolition of the death penalty, even if just for all non-violent crimes, could act as incentives. The international community also needs to offer Iran help in clearing land mines. In one diplomatic endeavour, in 2017 Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade established a Australian-Iran Human Rights Dialogue, to which Iran has agreed to participate.

## Overall Conclusion

Kurds advocate that some form of federalism is the most viable option to secure peace, democracy and prosperity in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. This conclusion comes after a century of autocratic governments having oppressed and brutalised their citizens, targeting ethnic and religious minorities in particular. More aware, more educated generations in these countries have come to see gender equality and cultural, linguistic and religious diversity as valuable social assets, rather than threats to national or territorial integrity. As summarised in 'Ways Forward', in a region undergoing monumental change, and with Iraq and Syria in need of a massive reconstruction effort, the international community has an opportunity to encourage this mindset.

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<sup>42</sup> Re: Human Rights Abuses in the Kurdistan Region of Iran. Source: <http://www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/HR-East-Kurdistan.pdf>



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