

Background Report V: 14 March 2017

Post-ISIS States

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Introduction

With the likely defeat of the ISIS caliphate in 2017, experts predict ISIS or an offshoot will remain capable of spreading international chaos, using advanced weapons, suicide bombers, car bombs, chemicals¹, scorched earth tactics and human shields for decades to come unless their capability is destroyed and their ideology discredited. In responding to the threat of terrorism and the wars raging in the Middle East, the international community has a choice: to spend resources on more wars or use resources in support of alternatives to the current dysfunctions. After the military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, 'nation building' has become a discredited concept. Yet to be tested is a process of collaboratively arriving at clearly defined political, economic and social goals and milestones, which are then linked to adequately resourced incentives and disincentives to building multiple checks and balances over a 30-year time frame. Otherwise one elite replaces another elite, and one terrorist group replaces another terrorist group. In our conclusion we suggest this does not have to be done on a national scale if there is a lack of will or resources. It costs less, may be more effective and inspire others if 'islands of stability and influence' are created with willing partners.

Iraq

Government of Iraq (GoI)

The Government of Iraq (GoI) remains gridlocked and sectarian and is following an increasingly Islamised path. The influence of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation Units are destabilising factors. Rhetoric and legislation are not enacted, dismissed ministers are not replaced, other ministers rule chiefdoms of inaction, while any redress for Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Shia is repeatedly postponed.

Provincial elections are scheduled for September 2017. The elected governors of Nineveh, Salahaddin and Diyala have already been replaced and insecurity means an indefinite delay to provincial elections in Anbar, Kirkuk and Nineveh. National elections are scheduled for 2018. Iran has pressured the Shia parties to unite, and in early October the Iraq National Alliance accepted the return of Moqtada al-Sadr's Ahrar block, after Al-Sadr boycotted the alliance in April. The block's return led to a hiatus in protests until Al-Sadr called for protests over the absence of electoral commission reforms in February. On 11 February protests turned violent resulting in the deaths of five civilians and two security officers and the wounding of another 320 protesters.

Despite rhetoric promising decentralisation, in October the Iraq Parliament rejected a Sunni Arab request for new federal zones and declared Mosul's administrative boundaries will not change. On 31 October, the ruling National Alliance announced a post-ISIS 'Historical National Settlement', which would be implemented with the help of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The document focuses on decentralisation and the distribution of powers, reconstruction and the return home of IDPs. But Sunni

¹ IHS Conflict Monitor estimates that ISIS has used chemical weapons – ranging from chlorine to mustard gas – more than 52 times between 2014 and November 2016.

Arab leaders walked away from this 'National Settlement' because it proposed that the 60 odd largely Shia Hashd al-Shaabi militias form a single government force independent of other military and police. Despite Sunni Arab opposition, on 26 November, the Parliament ruled in favour of the independent force, although the GoI has not outlined any procedures for how Hashd al-Shaabi will be integrated or isolated from current leaders. Four months later, the law has yet to be enacted. Muqtada al-Sadr also opposes the law, arguing that the Hashd al-Shaabi should be amalgamated with existing forces. Others want the law to be enacted quickly because in order to run in the September elections Hashd al-Shaabi leaders must abandon their armed wings. Meanwhile, the GoI has taken no action in forming Sunni Arab provincial National Guards.

Although former Baathists were not included in the 'National Settlement', the de-Baathification Law was amended on 30 September to allow many former Baathists to apply for government positions. Baathist demands include rewriting the constitution, annulling all de-Baathification measures, eliminating all laws banning the Baathist political party and compensation for all material and moral losses since 2003.

In response to the inadequacies of the 'National Settlement' on 20 February, Moqtada al-Sadr presented a 29 point document called 'Initial Solutions' which included establishing a UN fund for reconstruction, a UN entity focused on individual and minority rights, the Hashd al-Shaabi being dissolved and integrated into existing security forces, the expulsion of all foreign troops including US, Iranian and Turkish forces and a dialogue between all leaders. Sunni leaders welcomed the proposals. Shia leaders did not.

In the good years - 2005 to 2014 - \$361 billion went missing from Iraq's budgets and on average only 57 percent of the budget was spent each year. Since 2014, the economy has been impacted by low oil prices and the war with ISIS that has cost Iraq an estimated \$35 billion in infrastructure damage. In 2017, although oil prices are set to improve after Russia and OPEC agreed to cut oil production, contracts require the GoI to compensate the likes of Exxon Mobil, Shell and BP for losses outside the control of each company. Hence, Iraq is in danger of going bankrupt.

The \$85 billion national budget for 2017 includes an anticipated deficit of \$19 billion and an increase in security spending from 27 percent to 32 percent of the budget, with \$854 million allocated for the new force of 110,000 Hashd al-Shaabi fighters and \$32.5 million allocated for 100,000+ Peshmerga provided the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) fulfil an oil agreement with Baghdad. Only \$20 billion was allocated for development and service projects. The education budget was slashed from \$18 million to \$6 million.

Apart from co-ordinating militarily in the Mosul offensive, tensions with Kurdistan continue. Meetings to discuss solutions are proving fruitless. Abadi erroneously claims that the GoI regularly pays Peshmerga salaries despite the KRG having not received GoI funds for Peshmerga since 2005. Since January 2014, the GoI ceased sending revenue to the KRG, with the exception of four monthly part payments. Weapons and medical deliveries continue to be delayed and all Kurdish parties have rejected repeated calls from the GoI, Hashd al-Shaabi and Nouri al-Maliki to withdraw from the disputed areas that Peshmerga have defended or liberated since June 2014. The Barzani-led Kurdistan

Democratic Party (KDP) rejected the 2017 budget allocation for Kurdistan as it falls short of what the KRG can make by selling oil independently; the monthly allocation of \$271 million for 650,000 public servants was well below the required \$753 million; there was no provision for pensions and social protection; and the budget allocation for Peshmerga was inadequate. In contrast, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Gorran and Islamic party parliamentarians voted for the 2017 budget, agreeing to the allocation for Kurdistan in return for Kurdistan supplying the Gol-run State Oil Marketing Organisation 300,000 bpd of oil from the disputed territory of Kirkuk and 250,000 bpd of oil from the Kurdistan Region, with all revenue going to the GoI treasury for distribution.

Meanwhile the bloodshed continues. According to the London-based Iraqi Body Count group between mid 2014 and the end of 2016, 54,157 Iraqi civilians have died from terrorist attacks, airstrikes and shelling. The UN figure for 2016 was 6,878 Iraqi civilian deaths. Although 50 percent of ISIS territory has been liberated, only 19 percent of Iraqi IDPs have returned home due to a lack of security, administration and services.

Mosul offensive

The 5,000-year old trading city of Mosul is 400 kilometres north of Baghdad, 85 kilometres west of Erbil, and 125 kilometres from the border with Turkey. The pre-ISIS population was about three million. In the 1957 census Kurds were 40 percent of the population. As a result of the Arabization Policy beginning in 1963, the proportion of Kurds in Mosul fell to 15 percent in the 1977 census. Several districts in Nineveh province are disputed territories, despite being within the no-fly zone imposed over Kurdish areas in 1991.

Since ISIS took control of Mosul in June 2014, the city had become a centre for weapons manufacturing and storage, with bulk supplies coming in from Turkey. By October 2016, the ISIS presence had dropped from about 10,000 to between 3,000 and 5,500 in the city, with another 1,500 to 2,500 in surrounding villages. The majority were locals led by former Baathist commanders and Sunni Turkmen. These oversaw up to one million people who had remained in Mosul and surrounding villages. The majority of these civilians were Sunni Arabs. Others were Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Turkmen, Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans, as well as Yezidi, Shabak and Kakai Kurds. Throughout 2016, Mosul citizens lived without public services, under curfew and with severe food and water shortages.

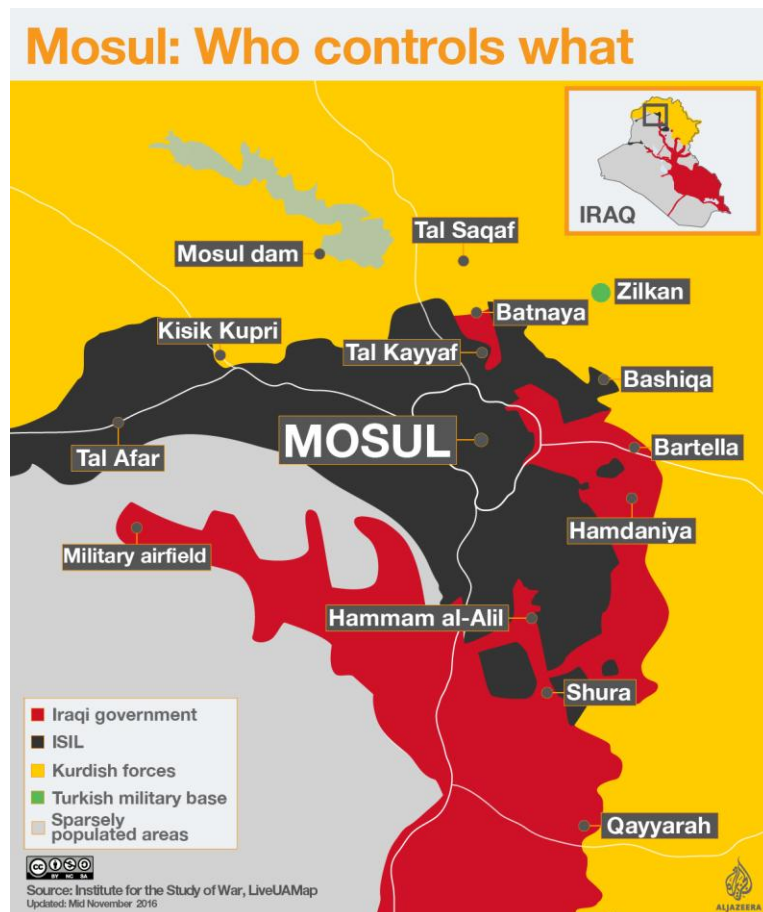
After the liberation of Qayyara in August 2016, 600 US advisors arrived at Qayyara airbase, despite Hashd al-Shaabi leaders threatening to kill any US and Turkish troops if they participated in the Mosul offensive. According to Human Rights Watch, on 21 September, 6 October and 10 October, ISIS attacked Qayyara with a blistering agent thought to be a crude form of mustard gas. In November Qayarra oil fields were still burning from ISIS having set them on fire, causing residents to evacuate.

To defend Mosul, ISIS had dug honeycombs of tunnels under the city and villages, these tunnels sometimes booby-trapped and extending for hundreds of metres. One was 10 kilometres long. Passageways were illuminated with electric lights, and rooms were stacked with weapon caches and explosives, or served as small kitchens and food

pantries. ISIS also built trenches, berms and concrete walls in and around Mosul and used containers to close roads and bridges. Trenches were filled with oil and streets were lined with tyres and barrels of oil. ISIS sent boys as young as nine, mostly from Syria, known as Lion Cubs of the Caliphate, to the front lines.

For many months Peshmerga had been maintaining a front line from the Mosul dam and the disputed territories of Khazar, Bashiqa and Nawran in wait for the offensive. The Iraqi Army advanced from the south, Peshmerga advanced from the northwest, north and east and Peshmerga and two divisions of the Iraq Army advanced from the southeast. This left a number of routes open for ISIS and civilians to escape into Syria, a strategy intended to reduce deaths and infrastructure damage, bring forward the city's liberation and create a defence line against Assad's forces in Syria. But Russia and Iran objected to this controversial strategy and 11 days after the start of the offensive, Prime Minister Abadi ordered the Hashd al-Shaabi to close the western escape routes. Five days after Abadi's announcement, Al-Baghdadi allegedly made an audio statement proclaiming there would be no retreat. ISIS had two options: fight till the death or evacuate with refugees and regroup.

A joint commission had been established in Erbil to oversee the offensive and post-ISIS security. An agreement between the KRG, GoI and US was that Peshmerga and Hashd al-Shaabi would not enter Mosul city and that Turkish military stationed in Bashiqa and Dohuk, and three forces in Shingal: the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and the Yezidi Resistance Units (YBS/YJS) would not take part in the offensive.



Signs of resistance within Mosul caused ISIS to increase checkpoints, cut all civilian communications and use the Cubs of the Caliphate as spies. Hundreds of civilians were executed for either refusing to fight or plotting against ISIS. On 15 October ISIS set fire to 11 oil wells and trenches surrounding Mosul. The next day, Iraqi planes dropped 17 million leaflets over Mosul, Anbar and Hawija advising residents to stay indoors.

On the 17 October, the Mosul offensive began, involving about 100,000 fighters from an array of forces, although only half were deployed in the first two months. It was the first time Iraqi security forces and Peshmerga had co-ordinated. Advising them were about 100 US Special Forces, 80 Australian SAS assigned to the Iraqi Special Operations Forces spearheading the offensive, as well as British, French and Canadian Special Forces. On 21 October Abadi asked the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds general, Qassem Soleimani, to take part.

Initial progress in outlying villages was rapid despite ISIS setting fire to Mishraq sulphur factory southeast of Mosul, and having mined roads and villages with IEDs, using tunnels for surprise attacks carried out by snipers and suicide bombers, employing drones, mortars, artillery and rockets, and driving Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices into front lines. In four days, 54 villages and the Christian town of Qaraqosh were liberated. In response, ISIS began a mass movement of people out of the villages and into the city, forcing women and children to walk with them as they withdrew. Civilians were killed if they refused or were too slow. Inside the city, ISIS carried out numerous public executions for desertion, including executing child soldiers who tried to escape the battlefield, and for 'treason and collaboration' with Iraqi forces or for having a cell phone. Bodes were left at intersections across Mosul. By the end of October, ISIS had killed more than 530 former Baathist soldiers for refusing to co-operate. Three hundred were buried in a mass grave near the town of Hammam al-Alil, south of Mosul. These former Baathists had played a leading role in ISIS intelligence and military strategy.

In the first ten days of the offensive, the death toll included about 57 Iraqi soldiers, 30 Peshmerga and 800 – 900 ISIS fighters, including 300 Syrian child soldiers. Seventy Yezidi women and children were freed from captivity and 90 villages were liberated but many were damaged and were without water, electricity and roads, security or administration. On 7 November, Iraqi forces found a mass grave of 100 decapitated bodies.

By 31 October the Peshmerga were five kilometres from Mosul city, the agreed limit of their advance, with 90 percent of the disputed territories under their control. On 10 November, Peshmerga, supported by Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi Special forces and Canadian advisors liberated the mainly Yezidi and Shabak city of Bashliq. On 24 November, 2,000 men from Arab tribes on the Iraq-Syrian border enlisted in the Peshmerga, forming their own brigade.

From 29 October 5,000 Hashd al-Shaabi advanced towards Tal Afar. By 3 November they had cut the main highway between Mosul and Raqqa and by 23 November they had largely sealed the Syrian border to prevent ISIS escaping, although there were reports they were killing dozens of men, looting and randomly bombing homes, with many civilians escaping into Syria or Peshmerga-controlled territory in Nineveh.

On 31 October the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service pushed into an industrial zone on the eastern outskirts of Mosul, seven kilometres from the city centre. Coalition aircraft patrols hampered ISIS attempts to transport 25,000 civilians in convoys of trucks and minibuses from Hammam al-Alil, south of Mosul, to Tal Afar. By 4 November Iraqi forces had taken seven districts but their advance slowed due to the need to conduct house-to-house clearances of IEDs and ISIS fighters, which involved intense street clashes. On 6 November residents in two eastern neighbourhoods (Nabi Younis and Bakir) staged uprisings, killing three ISIS militants and forcing 111 ISIS families to flee to Syria. ISIS snipers and the intensity of shelling and street clashes prevented further uprisings.

On 9 November, Iraqi Special Forces temporarily suspended operations due to the high number of civilians being used as human shields, significant losses to their own forces and the need to divert personnel to deal with the dead, wounded and escaping civilians. Having killed 1,100 ISIS fighters and liberated one third of Mosul east of the Tigris River by mid-November, Iraqi security forces faced increasing ISIS resistance in the form of snipers, grenade dropping drones, advanced laser-fitted weapons and Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles. In the last ten days of November, Iraqi Counterterrorism Forces (ICTF) killed the ISIS governor, Marwan Hamid Salih al-Hayali, and other leaders, and airstrikes damaged four out of five bridges, with the fifth being damaged at the end of December, thus limiting ISIS supply lines.

In early December, ISIS remained in control of three quarters of eastern Mosul, and disconnected all residential water and electricity supplies. Even so, the GoI and UN asked residents to remain in their houses as international aid agencies were not prepared for one million IDPs. In December, the US agreed to provide air cover for Hashd al-Shaabi, as long as they co-ordinated with Iraqi forces, but a 50 percent casualty rate among the elite Iraqi counter terrorism units led to a two-week halt in fighting. This ended on 29 December with a three-pronged advance supported by another 450 foreign Special Forces. In early January ISIS kidnapped 1,200 Yezidis from Shingal, and others from Tel Afar and Al-Baaj, moving them to central Mosul to act as human shields. About 3,700 Yezidi remain in ISIS custody. On 15 January Iraqi Special Forces took Mosul University, which had been an ISIS manufacturing centre for weapons, IEDs and drones. By 24 January Iraqi forces had retaken eastern Mosul at a cost of about 2,137 Iraqi soldiers, police and militias, although exact figures are unknown. The UN estimates that half of all non-ISIS casualties were civilians.

On 19 February, the advance on western Mosul commenced against some 4,000 ISIS fighters embedded among an estimated 750,000 residents. By 24 February forces had entered outlying suburbs. As they advanced they uncovered an underground ISIS training base, prisons and mass graves, and just outside Mosul, Hashd al-Shaabi discovered a mass grave of hundreds in Badush Prison. Observers estimate that Mosul will be liberated within three to six months depending on the morale of ISIS fighters, who are no longer being paid and have no co-ordinated command structure. Iraqi and US-led coalition airstrikes are targeting leaders, command centres and weapons caches. For instance, on 12 February, the Iraqi air force targeted an ISIS meeting in Anbar, killing 13 ISIS leaders, 40 fighters and 24 suicide bombers. Some reports suggested Al-Baghdadi was injured in the attack. By 12 March, one third of western Mosul had been liberated.

Although Iraqi army units, local police and local Hashd al-Shaabi are tasked with security, liberated neighbourhoods continue to be targeted by ISIS. For instance, on 22 December, a triple car bombing in a Gogjali market killed 23 people. The GoI has not allocated funds for the administration of Nineveh. The lack of security and administration in outlying villages has caused tensions between Peshmerga and Iraqi forces.

IDP/Refugee crisis

In the first week of the offensive, 5,000 Mosul residents fled to the border with Syria heading to al-Houl² camp in Hasaka province, to join 6,000 Iraqi refugees and 3,000 Syrian IDPs from Deir Ezzor in the camp. One thousand more IDPs waited to cross the border and in mid-November, four IDPs, including three children, died of cold at the border crossing. By 9 January, 15,000 refugees from Mosul had arrived in the camp.

By 1 March the number of IDPs fleeing Mosul had reached 191,826. Up to 10,000 Tel Afar Turkmen went to Turkey-backed militia controlled Azaz in northern Aleppo, but were blocked from entering Turkey. Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga were tasked with screening those entering the liberated areas of Nineveh and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In the KRI, some families are separated and sent to different camps and in some camps mobility and external communications are restricted. More than half of all IDPs are children. Many are from female-headed households. In Salahaddin the authorities have moved families with one or more ISIS members into camps outside cities. Some members of the Nineveh Provincial Council have spoken against this practice as it could create a new generation of ISIS. Iraqi security forces are not allowing such families to return to Mosul.

Turkey's intentions in Nineveh

In early October Iraq sought an emergency UN Security Council meeting over Turkey's violation of Iraq's sovereignty after the Turkish Parliament voted to extend its troop presence in Syria and Iraq. On 15 October, Turkey sent at least 1,200 personnel and eight tanks to reinforce its base near Bashiqa, which is armed with howitzers, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, tanks and other armoured vehicles. Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim claimed that Turkey's troops would stay to ensure the 'demographics' of Nineveh do not change. President Erdogan repeatedly reminded his domestic and international audience that Mosul, Kirkuk, Tal Afar and Sinjar historically belonged to Turkey.

The GoI, local Mosul leaders and KRG agreed that only forces approved by Iraq should participate in the offensive. Yet in an effort to appease Turkey, on 21 October US Secretary of Defence, Ash Carter, negotiated an in-principle agreement for Turkey to have a role, which Prime Abadi rejected, Iran backing his position. Throughout November, Turkey moved tank and commando battalions and an Infantry Brigade to Silopi near the border and offered to join coalition airstrikes. The US asked Turkey to keep its forces confined to the Bashiqa base. In December, US mediation prevented Turkey sending Special Forces into northern Iraq in the guise of aid workers. At the end of December Erdogan contacted Abadi to mend relations. Abadi insisted that this required a withdrawal of Turkish troops from Iraqi soil.

² Also spelt 'Hawl' and 'Hol'.

Turkey's intentions are to:

1. Prevent refugees and ISIS escaping to Turkey; ISIS escaping to Raqqa and Al-Bab, and Hashd al-Shaabi crossing into Syria to fight ISIS and opposition militias, which would adversely impact Turkish interests in Syria.
2. Stop Iran consolidating a Shia crescent from Iran through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon by preventing the Iranian-backed Shia Hashd al-Shaabi, Iraqi army and Gol from consolidating power in Nineveh.
3. Eliminate the PKK presence in Shingal (Sinjar) and Kirkuk, and prevent them from supporting YPG/J in northern Syria and PKK in eastern Turkey.

Post-ISIS Nineveh

Prior to the Mosul offensive, stakeholders failed to agree on a post-liberation plan. To prevent future conflict an agreement must be reached as soon as possible. Suggestions for securing the peace include the UN implementing a peace plan with UN forces; security being left in the hands of the Shia dominated Iraqi army and Hashd al-Shaabi (rejected by many Sunni Arabs in Nineveh), the Peshmerga and Asayish being responsible for securing the peace in the disputed territories (rejected by Abadi and Hashd al-Shaabi, the latter threatening military action if Peshmerga fail to withdraw), or having local ethno-religious based security forces acting independently forming units within a larger force.

Tied to securing the peace are options for a post-ISIS administration of Nineveh. These include the implementation of the pre-ISIS status quo i.e. Nineveh remaining under the control of the Gol, as advocated by Abadi; an unaffiliated military governor ruling Nineveh until provincial elections; a joint administration between the provincial council, Gol and KRG; or Nineveh being declared an autonomous region and divided into autonomous provinces (e.g. Shingal for Yezidis; Tal Afar for Turkmen; the Nineveh plains for Christians; Mosul city and Southern Nineveh), with each being given the opportunity to decide if they want to join the KRI in accordance with Article 140 of the constitution.³ The danger of ethno-religious based territorial divisions is that they may further homogenise and divide the Nineveh population.

Kirkuk

Forty-five percent of the disputed province of Kirkuk including the city and district of Hawija and southwest Daquq remain under ISIS control. On 21 October, four days after the official start of the Mosul offensive, about 200 ISIS fighters, snipers and suicide bombers entered Kirkuk city and joined up with local cells to stage multiple attacks. Simultaneously, ISIS attacked villages in Dibs and Daquq, and the Dibs power plant,

³ In the disputed territory of Shingal (Sinjar), many Yezidi want an autonomous region defended by its own forces. Currently, some Yezidi villages are under PKK/YPG/YBS control and others are under KRG/Peshmerga control. Both sides jointly secure the city, which has dual administrations each headed by a governor. The KRG and US have asked the PKK and YPG/J to leave Shingal. On 6 January the KRG announced that Yezidi Resistance Units and Women's Resistance Units (formed and trained by PKK) could operate as distinct units within the Peshmerga. For two days in March there were clashes when Barzani-backed Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga attempted to enter Shingal. The PKK-backed, Gol paid Yezidi forces did not let them, highlighting the potential for conflict between proxies of Turkey/KDP and Iran/Iraq/PKK.

where they killed 19 technicians. Civilians, including Sunni Arabs, took up arms against ISIS until security forces took control. Kirkuk city was put under curfew, and people were asked to stay indoors. Clashes inside Kirkuk city continued until 28 October, by which time 100 civilians and security force personnel had been killed and another 300 were wounded. Eighty-nine ISIS were killed, and dozens arrested including the alleged mastermind, Saddam Hussein's cousin, Nizar Hammoud Abdul Ghani.

Between November and February, 30,000 people fled ISIS controlled Hawija and arrived in Kirkuk. The postponed liberation of Hawija and Daquq means 70,000 people continue to live under ISIS. One reason for the postponement is that Kirkuk is a disputed territory. While it remains so, insecurity and underdevelopment will prevail.

ISIS threats elsewhere

As ISIS loses territory in Nineveh, ISIS sleeper cells conduct attacks targeting civilians in central and southern Iraq, some of which are included in Table 1. Many other attacks target Iraqi security forces and border guards, with Prime Minister Abadi claiming for every attack one hundred are thwarted.

Table 1: ISIS attacks outside Nineveh and Kirkuk

Date	Location	Consequence
4 October	Sharqat	Most of the city fell to ISIS.
15 October	Shia suburb in northern Baghdad	30 killed and at least 60 wounded.
23 October	Rutba in Anbar province	
24 October	Shingal	
30 October	Multiple bombings in Baghdad	15 killed.
31 October	Sulaimani and Halabja	Asayish prevented attacks, arresting 40 ISIS fighters.
6 November	Tikrit	Car bomb killed seven and wounded 15.
6 November	Samarra	An attack killed at least 11 Iranian pilgrims and injured more than one hundred.
7 November	Rutba in Anbar province	ISIS offensive increased the area under its control from one third to one half of the city but ISIS fled in the face of Iraqi security forces.
14 November	Fallujah	Two car bombs killed nine and wounded forty-six.
17 November	Amiriyat al-Falluja, 35 kilometres south of Fallujah.	Bomb blasts at wedding killed 17 and wounded thirty.
20 November	Qayara	Nineveh governor sacks three security officials for failing to protect the town.
25 November	Gas station east of Hilla, 100 kilometres south east of Baghdad.	Truck bomb killed about 200 people, most of whom were Iranian pilgrims on the way to Karbala.
Late November	Diyala	ISIS attacked electricity installations leaving Qaratapa, Jabara and 83 villages without electricity.
29 November	Samarra	Eight Iraqi policemen were killed along with three ISIS militants.
3 December	Baghdad	Car bomb killed four and injured nine.

Early December	Sulaimani	An ISIS fighter was killed and two blew themselves up when ambushed by Asayish and counter terrorism units.
20 December	Koya	Twin bombings at the KDP-I (Iran) politburo offices in Koya (KRI), killed 7 Peshmerga (five from Iran and two from KRI). KDP-I accused Iran of being behind the attack.
23 December	Baghdad	Nine people - one Yezidi and eight Christians.
1 January	Central Baghdad	Three bombs killed 32 people and injured at least fifty-four.
1 January	Najaf	A car bomb attack on a police checkpoint killed five police and two civilians, wounding 15 prompting the Najaf Council to embark on building a defensive 50—70 kilometre trench. Trenches are also being built in Anbar and Karbala.
2 January	Baghdad , including Sadr City	A wave of suicide bombings in a market and near two hospitals killed at least 113 civilians.
2 January	Samarra	ISIS attacks on police stations killed at least seven police.
3 January	Ramadi	A suicide bomber blew himself up killing two civilians and two security personnel.
8 January	Baghdad , Sadr city	Car bomb killed 13 civilians in market in Shia neighbourhood.
15 January	Baghdad	Car bomb at nightclub killed six and injured twelve.
15 February	Baghdad , Sadr city	Truck bomb killed 15 and injured fifty.
16 February	Baghdad , Shia al-Bayaa neighbourhood	Car bomb killed 59 and injured more than fifty.
23 February	Across Baghdad	A series of explosions killed four people and injured another eight.
8 March	Tikrit	Four bomb blasts at a wedding killed more than 20 people.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The KRI remains relatively safe. For instance, more than 100 journalists and two TV channels from the south have established operations in Erbil since 2014, and others are applying to do so, despite the KRI suffering from ISIS attacks, being caught between the interests of Turkey, Iraq and Iran, and facing internal problems. Four crises come from external sources. These are:

1. War with ISIS resulting in:
 - i. At least 1,682 Peshmerga deaths, another 9,787 being injured, with many being permanently disabled. Overcrowded hospitals treat wounded Peshmerga and IDPs (7,600 wounded people arriving from Mosul in 65 days) but the GoI is supplying only 45 percent of the medicines needed to treat those from Mosul. Overcrowded prisons house up to 9,000 ISIS

prisoners, each prisoner costing \$250 a day to house, when a teacher's salary is \$300 a month.

- ii. An influx of Iraqi IDPs and Syrian refugees. The KRG Joint Crisis Centre (JCC) claims that the KRI hosts 1,411,314 Iraqi IDPs (40 percent of the total in Iraq) as well as 216,820 Syrian refugees (97 percent of the total in Iraq).
- iii. Hashd al-Shaabi mistakenly bombing Peshmerga positions in Shingal on 27 January, with Hashd al-Shaabi building up in Nineveh and Kirkuk and threatening to attack Peshmerga if they do not withdraw from all disputed territories; and the
- iv. Postponement of the liberation of Kirkuk.

2. A lack of revenue from:

- i. The Gol, which has refused to provide a budget, share of loans or investment to the KRG or pay Peshmerga and civil servant salaries since January 2014;
- ii. Oil, as a result of depressed oil prices, ISIS sabotage, Turkey intermittently stopping oil transport through the Ceyhan oil pipeline, major oil companies like Exxon Mobile and Chevron relinquishing 19 exploration blocks and the Gol's refusal to consider a KRG-Iran oil pipeline. However on 20 February, the Gol and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding to build a Gol controlled pipeline from Kirkuk, which would have to go through the KRI.
- iii. Kurdish farmers not being paid for three years of wheat they 'sold' to the Gol and the Gol announcing a 17 percent compensation for what they sold in 2017, compared to an 80 percent compensation for wheat sold by farmers in the south. The Gol is also refusing to purchase wheat from any farmer without land title, despite the Gol refusing to process land titles of Kurdish farmers.
- iv. The Gol not providing revenue to the Kirkuk Provincial Council since late 2013, except for \$1,014,672 in 2016. To function at all, Kirkuk Provincial Council has relied on a KRG payment of \$10 million a month for oil extracted from Kirkuk.

3. Territorial disputes. The Gol has refused to negotiate the status of the disputed territories since 2005. KRG officials, political leaders from all parties and Peshmerga refuse to withdraw from the disputed territories they have defended or liberated since 2014. A 1,050 kilometre berm and trench has been built from Shingal to Khanakin marking the territory the KRI claims to be theirs. The additional territory increases the KRI by 40 percent.

4. Turkey's actions including:

- i. On-going airstrikes on PKK inside Iraqi Kurdistan. One Turkish F-16 crashed on 29 September, and PKK downed another on 6 October. Two Turkish air operations in the second week of December caused villagers to evacuate, and 'neutralised' 19 PKK according to the Turkish state.
- ii. The Turkish government arresting Kurdish parliamentarians, mayors, journalists and activists in Turkey, and destroying towns and villages in eastern Turkey, putting strain on Turkish-KRG relations. The KRG is under

pressure from Kurds to speak against actions of the Turkish state and help start political negotiations between the state and the PKK.

- iii. Attacks on Kurds in northern Syria, again putting strain on Turkey-KRG relations, with other Kurds demanding the KRG help the people of northern Syria.

As a result of, or in addition, the KRI has internal crises, including:

1. The deactivation of the Kurdistan Parliament since October 2015 over disputes between parties related to President Barzani remaining president after his term expired and the powers of the president. Other parties have failed to nominate an alternative president. Divisions were exacerbated by contrasting responses to the GoI 2017 budget.
2. A lack of transparency regarding income and expenditure.
3. A debt of about \$19 billion, with the KRG facing oil company law suits for about \$13 billion.
4. A reluctance to decentralise power to provinces and districts.
5. Inability to pay Peshmerga and public servants, including teachers, their full salaries, resulting in a teachers' strike that prevented schools from opening.
6. Deforestation as a result of people cutting down trees for fuel because of no salaries and a lack of fuel subsidies.
7. Internal land disputes between the KRG and civilians and between ethnicities that do not get resolved because of an inadequate judicial system.
8. A shortage of electricity and water services since 2014.

KRG's responses to the internal crises have been to:

1. Sign agreements with two international auditing firms, Deloitte and Ernst & Young in October and November to audit oil and gas extraction, marketing and revenues and provide monthly reports, to increase transparency.
2. Work with the World Bank to institute structural reforms in macro fiscal policy, customs, tax, public financial management and IT infrastructure and services, including instituting an electronic payroll system for public servants.
3. Launch investigations into alleged abuse of Kurds occupying Arab and Assyrian houses and shops in Nineveh province.
4. Sign a MOU with Germany and the UN on 31 October to invest and build a \$1.6 million electricity project and a \$3 million water project.
5. Reduce the fiscal gap between income and expenditure by increasing non-oil revenues - raising fees, penalties, water charges and electricity tariffs for industrial consumers; and reducing petroleum product subsidies.
6. Sign a loan agreement with UK Export Finance for UK water engineering company Biwater to provide water treatment plants to Erbil and Sulaimani. This will be the first direct international loan to the KRI.

The KRI exported about 650,000 bpd of oil in 2016. In 2017 it will become a major gas exporter. Kurdish leaders maintain that the KRI suffers from having no legally recognised sovereignty, which prevents the KRG from borrowing money, entering deals with sovereign countries, printing or devaluing money, or attending international conferences that discuss the defeat of ISIS, the delivery of humanitarian aid and plans for post-ISIS

reconstruction. Several times President Masoud Barzani has announced the need for a referendum on independence. Opposition parties argue that parliament must resume operating before a referendum takes place, although all Kurdish leaders want to establish a KRG-Gol committee to negotiate independence. However, no territory with such a large debt and a lack of international support has achieved independence in recent history. Apart from ex-President Mitterrand and his wife, Israeli leaders are the only national leaders that express open support for an independent Kurdistan. Although the US launched airstrikes to protect Erbil from ISIS in August 2014, the US and its allies insist the KRI remain part of a unified Iraq. Meanwhile 30 countries have opened consulates in Erbil, including the US and Japan. Another six have 'honorary consulates', and six having foreign trade offices. Australia is not one of them, despite its expertise in agriculture, water and soil conservation, oil, gas and mining industries, law, health and social services, and despite having extensive trade with the Middle East.

While there is potential for a negotiated separation between Kurdistan and Iraq, there are many external and internal stakeholders working to exacerbate divisions, thus increasing the likelihood of conflict post-ISIS if negotiations do not take place in the near future.

Ways forward

Abadi claims Iraq needs \$35 billion for reconstruction. Other sources claim \$22 billion is needed for Anbar alone. In 2015 – 2016 Iraq put aside \$1.34 billion for reconstruction. The World Bank and UNDP have allocated \$445 million to Iraq for reconstruction. Even if the necessary amounts are forthcoming, without an overall clearly specified security and reconstruction plan linked to political milestones, billions of dollars will be wasted and the people of Iraq will be subjected to further sectarianism, terrorism and war, with the potential for Iraq to become an increasingly radicalised Shia theocratic state. To avoid such futures, all of which have international security implications, it is imperative that the international community become involved in developing a plan for post-ISIS security and reconstruction by working with provincial and district governments and employing incentives to reduce Gol resistance and/or incapacity to:

- Establish peace and security e.g. possibly with international finance, trainers and peacekeepers working with local forces;
- Enact the constitution and define how resources and powers are to be shared;
- Negotiate autonomy for provinces or regions secured by regional forces answerable to a ministry within an elected administration;
- Form a Gol-Kurdish committee to negotiate the status of the KRI and disputed territories in accordance with Article 140 of the constitution;
- Negotiate a withdrawal of Hashd al-Shaabi and Turkish troops from Nineveh, Salahaddin and Diyala;
- Negotiate a system of minority representation, whether within the tiered levels of government or in the formation of independent councils;
- Support secular political parties;
- Develop mechanisms for reconciliation, e.g. concerning families of ISIS members, or ISIS supporters that did not personally commit a crime;

- Rapidly develop a well-functioning independent judiciary to process ISIS members, Hashd al-Shaabi and others who committed murder, rape etc.;
- Support NGOs and civil society; and
- Support local businesses and local employment.

For the Kurdistan Region, international support and incentives are required to reform parliament; finalise, pass and enact a constitution; make government more transparent; unify Peshmerga; and establish an independent judiciary.

Syria

Introduction

Figures vary on the number of Syrian civilians killed since 2011. Between March 2011 and November 2016, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 203, 097 civilian deaths, claiming pro-Syrian regime forces killed 189,000, Opposition militias killed 3,668, Russian forces killed 3,558, ISIS killed 2,998, unidentified groups killed 2,591, US-led coalition airstrikes killed 669 (another report says 768) and Kurdish-led forces killed between 215 and 512 civilians.

In 2017, regime and pro-regime forces control about one third of Syria but two thirds of the population; ISIS controls another third of Syria; Kurds and their allies control about 29 percent of Syria, leaving opposition militias in control of Idlib city and rural pockets in Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Daraa and Quneitra. These and past opposition held areas have been subject to six years of regime airstrikes, barrel bombs, ground offensives and siege tactics. The bulk of the UN's \$4 billion disaster relief fund has been channelled to Damascus without oversight or audit.⁴ Only 30 percent of people in need receive aid.

UN Security Council Resolution 2254 called for the lifting of sieges, the creation of humanitarian corridors, the drafting of a new constitution, and an 18-month transition of power followed by elections. These aspirations were put on hold between April 2016 and February 2017 because stakeholders were unable to politically or militarily compromise. This remains the case after Astana I and II and Geneva IV.

Military realities

The military realities involve four major stakeholders that can be further sub divided. These are:

1. **Pro-regime forces** consisting of 125,000 regular army troops and 150,000 pro-government militia fighters defending a third of Syria. Of the latter there are about 50,000 foreign fighters, consisting of 25,000 Lebanese Hezbollah and 25,000 Iranian-trained fighters from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon. Although the fall of Aleppo in late December put the Syrian regime in control of Syria's five largest cities and

⁴ See Sparrow, A. (2017) Enabling Assad: The UN's failure in Syria, *Foreign Affairs Today*. Access: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-01-11/enabling-assad?cid=nlc-fatoday-20170111&sp_mid=53174048&sp_rid=Z2luYWxlbnM5veEBnbWFPbC5jb20S1&spMailingID=53174048&spUserID=MjEwNDg3MDg0OTM0S0&spJobID=1082008284&spReportId=MTA4MjAwODI4NAS2

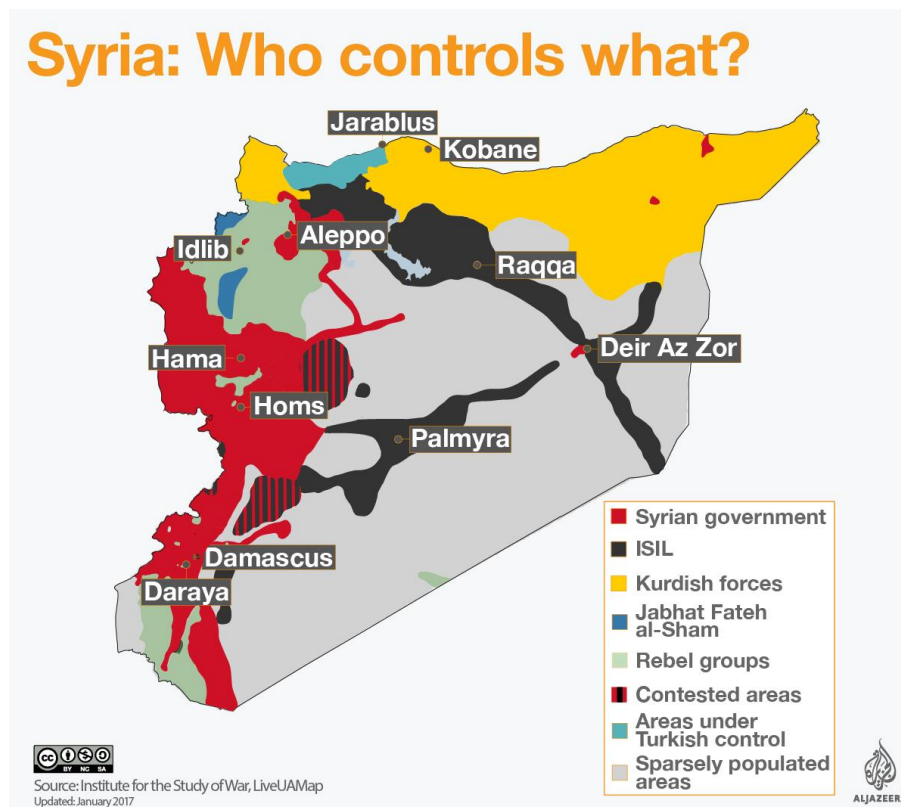
strengthened the regime's negotiating position, the regime's reliance on militias means it does not have complete control over its own territory, or adequate forces to launch multiple offensives to significantly expand its territory unless it receives outside reinforcements.

2. Sunni opposition militias numbering between 100,000 and 150,000 fighters. According to a report by the Institute for the Study of the War (ISW) published in March 2016, out of hundreds of groups only 23 are 'main' or 'potential' powerbrokers. These command about 90,000 fighters and can be classified into four ideological categories:

- * Transnational Salafi-jihadists (20 percent) e.g. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS);
- * National Salafi-jihadists (31 percent) e.g. Ahrar al-Sham;
- * Political Islamists (24 percent); and
- * Secularists (25 percent), unevenly spread, with only 4 percent of opposition forces being secularist in northwest Syria, compared to 87 percent of opposition forces in the south.⁵

* Up to 60,000 fighters who profess no ideology or are linked to local clans.

3. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) numbering up to 70,000, including 45,000 Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Defence Units (YPG/YPJ), and 23,000 Arabs, Turkmen and Assyrians, with about 10,000 Arabs coming from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Defending up to 29 percent of Syria's territory, the US claims it is only arming the 'Syrian Arab Coalition' component.



⁵ See map at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects#.WDSgaWQQfvo.twitter>

4. **ISIS**, numbering up to 30,000 ISIS fighters across Syria and Iraq according to the CIA, although taking into account local fighters, ISIS could be as many as 200,000 across both countries. Although ISIS has lost significant territory, ISIS remains capable of launching counteroffensives, as did two to 4,000 ISIS fighters who recaptured Palmyra (Homs) between 9 - 11 December, a day after US-led coalition airstrikes destroyed 168 ISIS oil tankers in the Palmyra region. In early January ISIS suicide attacks focused on the government strongholds of Tartus, Jableh (Latakia) and Damascus, killing at least 34 people. ISIS has also focused on infrastructure, for example, blowing up a gas plant near Palmyra, which supplies gas to one third of Syria including Damascus. On 14 January ISIS began a large-scale attack on the besieged city of Deir Ezzor, killing 160 people in five days and in February ISIS attacked four regime airbases and advanced in Deir Ezzor province.

Political machinations

Efforts to negotiate ceasefires and a political solution have been fraught. The breakdown of the ceasefire in Aleppo city before the 19 September deadline was the shared responsibility of all players. The Assad regime blocked humanitarian aid, did not withdraw regime forces from Castello Road and conducted an airstrike on a UN aid convoy before unilaterally calling an end to the ceasefire. Russia appeared to have insufficient influence over the regime and pro-regime forces. US-led coalition airstrikes on Assad's forces near Deir Ezzor were a costly mistake but worse was the US failure to split moderates from extremist militias or get opposition militias to withdraw from the Castello Road. All parties, including the UN, failed to negotiate a safe passage for besieged civilians.

Russian entry into Syria in September 2015 was based on the premise that 'Either Assad is in Damascus or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is. ... There is no third option.' Saudi Arabia's announcement of an Arab coalition to fight terrorism came to nought. The US sent mixed messages about the future of Assad, was ineffectual in stopping Turkey attacking the SDF or separating extremists and moderate Opposition groups and was petulant or inflammatory regarding Russia's actions in Syria. For example, on 3 October, following the breakdown of the September ceasefire the US announced that it was suspending all ceasefire negotiations with Russia, US State Department spokesperson, John Kirby, asserting that if a cessation of hostilities did not take hold, extremists could expand their operations to include attacks on Russian interests.

The UN has been in a state of paralysis throughout the war, with numerous UN Security Council resolutions (e.g. two on 8 October, one at the end of November and another on 6 December) calling for a ceasefire and delivery of humanitarian aid being vetoed by either Russia or the US and its partners. All resolutions have been words without consequences.

Russia supported UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura's proposal for militant factions to leave Aleppo in exchange for a halt to aerial bombardments. JFS rejected the proposal. The 15 October meeting in Lausanne between foreign ministers from the US, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and Egypt failed to find a solution, as did the 16 October meeting between John Kerry and European countries.

Meanwhile, Russian officials were establishing lines of communication with opposition militias and the Syrian Kurds. Between 23 February and 25 December 2016 the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic negotiated 1,075 'truce agreements' signed by the Syrian regime and opposition militias in Latakia, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Quneitra. These agreements require rebels to disarm and evacuate. As the Syrian regime determines they move to Idlib and northern Aleppo, these agreements enforce demographic change. Opposition militias in eastern Aleppo refused to sign a truce agreement.

Opposition groups based in Moscow and Cairo support Kurds joining UN-supported negotiations, and a pluralist, secular, democratic Syria. Between June and December 2016, Russia initiated four rounds of talks between the regime and the Kurds. For instance, on 17 September, eight Russian officials, Syrian regime representatives and representatives from northern Syria met at the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia province to discuss a new constitution. The Commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel Oldvornikov Alexandrovich, allegedly spoke in support of a federal system and special status for northern Syria as being the only way to preserve Syria's unity. The Kurdish delegation proposed:

1. Constitutional recognition of the national and political rights of the Kurdish people and other minorities.
2. Recognition of the democratic self-rule system in northern Syria.
3. Recognition of the self-protection units and the Asayish [Kurdish police] forces as legitimate military forces.
4. The need for co-ordination between the self-rule system and the Syrian regime.
5. Changing the name 'Syrian Arab Republic' to 'Syrian Democratic Republic', and forming a government based on a federal system.

Despite Russia setting up meetings between Kurds and the regime in January, the regime is not serious about negotiating autonomy with the Kurds, refusing to meet with Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and SDF representatives. The Syrian regime, Iran, Turkey and the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) oppose a federal system. The US claims it does not support any unilateral proposal. Barred from all internationally supported negotiations, the PYD holds private meetings in Europe and Washington to discuss a federal system.

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, resumed talks in November and early December with no public outcome. Within the US, different stakeholders debated proposals to bomb regime forces, provide air cover for no fly zones or increase support for the opposition. The proposals were rejected as they could lead to conflict with Russia or prolong the war.

Preparations for trying the Syrian regime for war crimes focused on the regime's use of chemical weapons and other military actions in eastern Aleppo. In October and January, the UN Security Council released information gathered by the Joint Investigative Mechanism, formed by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, that provided evidence the Syrian regime had violated the 1997 treaty

banning the development, production, stockpiling, and use of a toxic chemical in war and the 2013 UN Security Council Resolution 2118 demanding Syria's chemical disarmament. There was evidence that the regime had used sarin on Ghouta in August 2013 and either sarin or chlorine in April 2014, March 2015 and July 2016. In January the US placed sanctions on 18 senior military, intelligence and government officials and five military institutions for their alleged use of chemical weapons.

Regarding other war crimes, on 22 December, the UN General Assembly voted to set up a panel and investigative mechanism to gather evidence. Russia, China, Iran and Syria opposed the measure. Turkey supported the measure. The EU placed arms and oil embargoes, and investment restrictions on Syria, and by 14 November, the European Council of Member States had put 234 Syrians on a blacklist, including 17 out of 32 Syrian ministers, as well as military commanders and other officials, subjecting them to travel bans and asset freezes.

But the most significant development has been Turkey's U-turn on Syria since Erdogan and Putin met on 8 August. After repeatedly calling for the overthrow of Assad and being the main conduit for supplies to opposition militias and ISIS for five years, Turkey's influence had been marginalised until Operation Euphrates Shield commenced on 24 August. But the operation was not going to plan (see later) and Russia convinced Turkey to use MIT's contacts with opposition militias in eastern Aleppo to negotiate a withdrawal. After relentless bombardment and siege tactics, the militias finally agreed to withdraw from eastern Aleppo beginning 5 am Wednesday 14 December.

Turkey's willingness to play Russian roulette had domestic consequences. Having spent years fostering anti-Assad sentiment and since September 2015, anti-Russian sentiment, on 19 December, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, was assassinated in Ankara by Mevlut Mert Altintas, an off-duty-Turkey police officer shouting 'Allahu Ackbar' and 'Do not forget Aleppo'. He was killed in a shoot out with fellow police officers. The next day Russia sent 18 investigators to help in the investigation. Outstanding questions include why there was so little security assigned to the ambassador; why the attacker was killed rather than captured; whether the attacker acted alone and if not, who was behind him. The government immediately pointed to Gulenists. Others conjectured the assassination was organised by at least one or more parties who opposed the Russia-Turkey realignment.

These events did not prevent the foreign ministers of Turkey, Iran and Russia meeting in Moscow on 20 December to discuss a countrywide ceasefire. The troika claimed to agree on all points outlined in the Moscow Declaration including the importance of establishing a unified, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian secular democratic Syria; the need for a political solution according to UN resolution 2254; commitment to opposition militias withdrawing from eastern Aleppo, and partial withdrawals from Fuaa, Kafraia, Zabadani and Madaya; expanding ceasefire areas and humanitarian assistance; and to fight ISIS and JFS. Omitted from the Declaration were claims that Russia supports a federal structure (an incentive for the opposition to stop fighting) over which the Assad regime would maintain control until elections were held, after which less polarising Allawites would hold power (an incentive to allow decentralisation).

After 20 December, Russia and Turkey worked on a countrywide ceasefire, which would include, on Turkey's insistence, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, previously labelled terrorists by Russia. The ceasefire began at midnight 29 December, following parties signing three agreements that stated:

- There would be a countrywide ceasefire between the Syrian regime and armed opposition militias excluding ISIS and JFS and groups co-ordinating with JFS.
- Russia and Turkey would monitor and enforce mechanisms for the ceasefire.
- If the ceasefire held, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Syria and the 'opposition' would hold political negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Initially, about 13 opposition groups signed the agreements. By early January, Russia claimed 104 militias had signed up i.e. Russia had effectively separated those wishing to negotiate from those who did not. Opposition militias warned that if JSF was excluded then the ceasefire would not hold. This was born out in Wadi Barada, Idlib, Damascus and Quneitra.

After the ceasefire, the regime continued its airstrikes and use of Iran-backed Hezbollah in Wadi Barada northwest of Damascus, having accused JFS and/or other opposition militias of polluting Damascus's major water supply with diesel, causing the city's water supply to be cut on 22 December and a water crisis for 5.5 million people. The Syrian regime similarly continued to bombard eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, eastern Aleppo, central Homs and north of Hama city, claiming it was targeting JFS. Opposition militia disagreed. On 31 December opposition spokespeople claimed if airstrikes continued, the ceasefire would be 'null and void'. On 2 January, 10 opposition groups signed a joint declaration saying talks were frozen until the regime abided by the ceasefire. Despite the continuation of regime attacks throughout January and February, Russia, the UN and others chose to continue with talks.

The Russia-Turkey-Iran mediated talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 23-24 January and 15-16 February intended to consolidate a country-wide ceasefire, address humanitarian issues and organise the release of about 13,000 prisoners (although Amnesty International reports that between 5,000 and 13,000 prisoners were hung and others were tortured or starved to death between 2011 – 2015, which the regime denies), leaving talks on governance, a new constitution and elections to UN-supported meetings in Geneva. Russia wanted the Astana talks to only include militias. After meetings in Ankara and Riyadh, HNC representatives were allowed to attend as advisors.

In the Astana talks only Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Syrian regime and the HNC had active roles. Turkey insisted that PYD, SDF, YPG/YPJ be excluded. For Astana I, the opposition delegation was headed by Mohammed Alloush, a leader in the Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam, a coalition of about 50 Islamist and Salafi movements. Ahrar Al-Sham and other militias refused to attend. Astana I and II concluded with no signed agreement. The opposition rejected a Russian drafted constitution presented for future discussion and Turkey opposed the word 'secular' being included in a description of a future Syrian government. As a result, on-going military issues are that:

- Assad claims that opposition groups are violating the ceasefire and he is forced to militarily take control of the entire country, i.e. his position has not changed. Russia does not appear to have sufficient influence over the regime and pro-regime militia. The regime continues to heavily bomb Deraa, Homs, Idlib, Guouta, Douma (Damascus), Hama and Aleppo.
- Aid delivery continues to be blocked by regime bureaucracy, pro-regime and opposition forces.
- Sunni opposition groups call for Iranian forces and Iranian-backed pro-regime militias, including Hezbollah to withdraw from Syria. Iran-backed militias, were not signatories to ceasefire agreements and continue fighting.
- Turkey wants to take control of SDF-liberated Manbij and Raqqa to create a Turkey-controlled 5,000 square kilometre safe haven, where 'Turkmen and Arabs can live as brothers'. Russia, Syria and Iran oppose these intentions. Since Astana II, the Syrian regime has called for all Turkish troops and hardware to be withdrawn from Syria, and for Turkey to stop building a 511 kilometre concrete wall on Syrian soil in northern Idlib, Aleppo and east of the Euphrates River, with 290 kms of the wall completed.
- The opposition militias and their political representatives have little bargaining power as they control very little territory and their political representatives are based outside the country. Nor is the 'Opposition' unified militarily or politically, with clashes and assassinations escalating during and after Astana I, especially after four militia groups announced a merger with JFS on 28 January. This new front is called Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham or the Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant, led by ex-Ahrar Al-Sham commander, Abu Jaber Hashem al-Sheikh, with several other prominent Ahrar Al-Sham figures also defecting. The group's intention is to create a Sunni Sharia State of Syria. Concurrently, six other militia groups announced a merger with Ahrar Al-Sham. With JFS and Ahrar Al-Sham excluded from negotiations, they will continue to disrupt any ceasefire and future negotiations, attracting militants from any group that abandons the goal of toppling President Assad.

For the first time, the UN-supported Geneva negotiations held 23 February – 2 March, included 10 militia representatives in the 21-member HNC delegation led by Nasr al-Hariri, and five representatives from the Cairo group and five representatives from the Moscow group. Again, Turkey succeeded in excluding PYD, SDF, YPG/YPJ and their allies from the talks. Also excluded were Ahrar al-Sham and many other militias. The regime was in the strongest position. The HNC refused to form a joint position with the Cairo and Moscow groups and insisted talks focus on a political transition. The regime insisted that the opposition groups form a joint position and talks focus on combating terrorism, especially following the 24 February suicide attacks on heavily secured intelligence and military offices in Homs city, killing 42 of military personnel. The JFS coalition claimed responsibility for the attacks, as it did for the attacks in Damascus that killed 74 people on 11 March. The outcome of Geneva IV was that four working groups would be established to independently discuss transitional governance, the constitution, elections, and terrorism/ceasefire. Hence, political challenges continue to be that:

- Assad claims he is open to all possibilities, except his presidency. Russia proposes Assad remains president until elections are held. The HNC insists Assad must step down within six months of any agreement and a coalition of regime and opposition officials and civil society administer Syria for 18 months during which time a constitution is drafted.
- There is no agreement on even the basics of a constitution, making it difficult to establish a transitional arrangement. Officially the HNC advocates a decentralised system that protects minority rights. However, Salafi opposition groups want a Sunni Arab majority government based on Sharia law. The Russian drafted constitution cuts 'Arab' from 'Arab Republic of Syria'; calls for cultural, administrative and legislative decentralisation to the local level and autonomy for the 'self-ruling systems' of northern Syria. The president would no longer have to be Muslim, and could only serve one seven-year term. Many of the president's powers would be transferred to a new body, which would be appointed by the president. Syria would have a bicameral system that included the Assembly of Regions. Sharia law would be one source of law. The Kurds and their Assyrian, Turkmen and Arab allies want their federal system to be officially recognised and for them to be given an opportunity to negotiate a federal system for Syria both, of which would go beyond the Russian proposal of cultural rights and having a local police force.
- Safe zones would be difficult to implement without regime approval and a large international force. Turkey is against creating a safe zone in Kurdish majority areas.

There are plans for further talks in March in Astana and Geneva. These will be impacted by developments around Damascus, and in Idlib, northern Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa.

Idlib

After the fall of Aleppo, Russia veered the regime into focusing on ISIS and JFS as much as possible as it was imperative that Idlib did not become a repeat of eastern Aleppo. Throughout January and February Syrian, Russian and US airstrikes targeted and killed JFS commanders and fighters in Idlib, and JFS targeted Fua'a and Kafraya with missiles and artillery. The majority of fighting between opposition militias and the assassination of leaders and the killing of each other's prisoners occurred in Idlib.

Idlib is a province of about 2.5 million people and, like Aleppo, abuts the border with Turkey. The province is run by 144 administrative councils, with most of the province, including Idlib city, being controlled by at least 50,000 opposition militias, among them at least 10,000 JFS and 10,000 Ahrar al-Sham, who implement Sharia Law. Thousands of other opposition militants and civilians have arrived in Idlib since the fall of eastern Aleppo, and since the Astana talks, clashes between rival militants have escalated. Meanwhile, Turkey's Red Crescent and other aid groups are establishing tent cities for IDPs, but most remain without shelter or a livelihood. They face multiple checkpoints run by different militias, the escalation of clashes between militias, and regime airstrikes. Turkey is attempting to attract militias and civilians from Idlib into northern Aleppo to establish a Turkey-controlled safe haven.

The fall of eastern Aleppo city

The fall of Aleppo city is considered a turning point in the civil war. In September, the Russian ambassador to the UN claimed there were 2,000 JFS and another 1,500 opposition fighters in eastern Aleppo. These were fighting pro-regime forces and attacking the Kurdish controlled neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsoud.

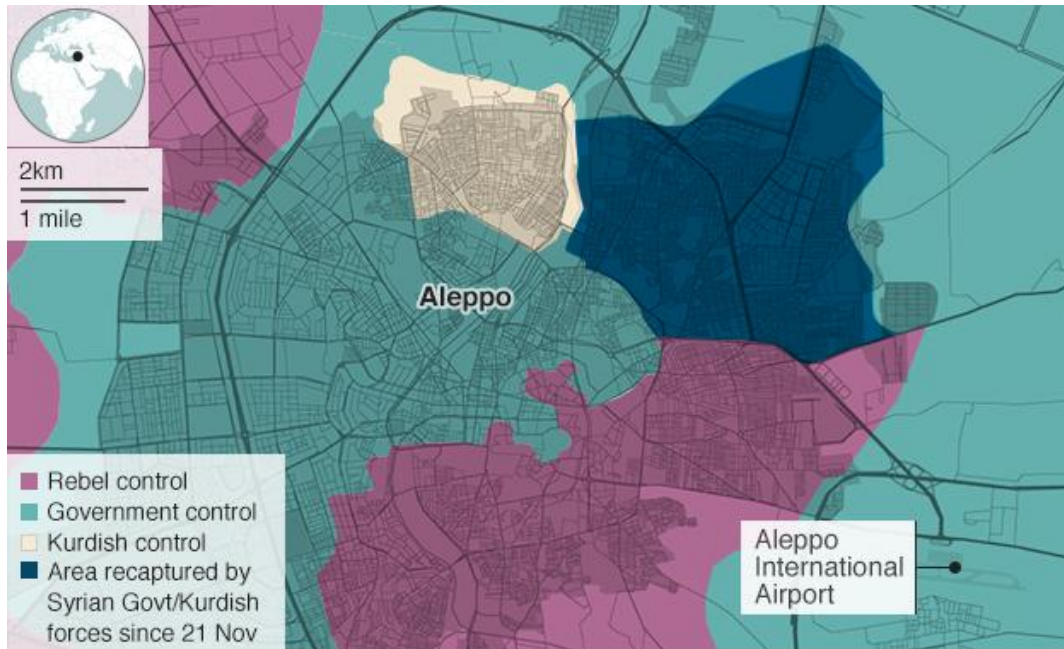
Following the failure of the September ceasefire, Russia wanted a 48-hour ceasefire in Aleppo for aid delivery but the US had walked away from negotiations. Between 19 – 30 September, the regime made significant advances, killing 1,000 people and damaging water and electricity supplies and ten hospitals. In retaliation, opposition militia temporarily cut the water supply and fired mortars and 'hellfire rockets' (gas canisters filled with nails, stones and iron) into residential areas of western Aleppo.

On 5 October, the Syrian army claimed aerial and artillery strikes would be reduced to allow citizens to leave. No one left. Instead, opposition militias advanced, and the regime bombardment and siege of eastern Aleppo resumed. On 18 October, Russia instigated an eight-hour cessation of attacks each day to allow civilians, fighters, the sick and wounded to evacuate. Rebels refused to withdraw. On 20 October, Russia announced all airstrikes would cease for 11 hours a day for four days to allow civilians to leave. Russia claimed opposition militias were stopping civilians from leaving and the UN refused to oversee corridors for evacuations, citing security concerns. Instead, the opposition embarked on a new offensive and Russia announced there would be no more humanitarian pauses, although Russian warplanes would not resume airstrikes over Aleppo. The Russian moratorium on airstrikes was extended until 4 November, providing citizens and militias a last chance to leave through six corridors for civilians and two corridors for militias, even after 2,000 opposition fighters launched a major offensive to break the siege on 28 October using car bombs, mortars and rockets, backed by tanks and armoured vehicles on residential areas, hospitals and schools in western Aleppo which killed at least 41 civilians in three days. But by 12 November the regime had rolled back rebel gains, partly because the opposition militias were attempting to seize positions and weapons from each other. On 20 November, the Syrian regime rejected a UN proposal to allow the opposition to set up a local administration in eastern Aleppo if jihadists evacuated.

With eastern Aleppo being subject to thousands of airstrikes, artillery rounds, ballistic missiles, cluster munitions dropped from helicopters and a month of no food or medical supplies, thousands of civilians were fleeing to the YPG/YPJ defended neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsoud. On 25 November and 3 December, Sheikh Maqsoud came under fire from rockets containing mustard gas, as well as mortars and 'hellfire rockets' from Ahrar al-Sham and JFS, killing 11 civilians and two YPG fighters.

Between 26 – 28 November, pro-regime forces captured 40 percent of the opposition-held area of eastern Aleppo. Kurds informed the Syrian regime they were opening a humanitarian corridor for civilians to escape to Sheikh Maqsoud. Within 24 hours, 6,000 civilians used this corridor. Sultan Murad and JFS withdrew from eight neighbourhoods bordering Sheikh Maqsoud saying they did so to protect civilians. In one of these neighbourhoods (the Turkmen neighbourhood of Şeyh Xıdır) YPG forces claimed they found a headquarters used by Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) and the

Grey Wolves (extreme Turkish nationalists). In another neighbourhood (Bustan al-Busha) regime and Kurdish forces met, YPG partially withdrawing to avoid confrontation, but allegedly coming to an agreement that YPG would defend the newly acquired neighbourhoods.



Source: IHS Conflict Monitor (28 Nov)/news reports

BBC

Between 26 November and 5 December regime airstrikes and artillery killed 319 people in eastern Aleppo and opposition shelling killed 69 people in western Aleppo. On 28 November, Russia announced it was working on four corridors to allow civilians to evacuate and that it supported a ceasefire to deliver humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, pro-regime forces were detaining men in the newly claimed government areas, and opposition militias were allegedly abducting and killing some fleeing civilians.

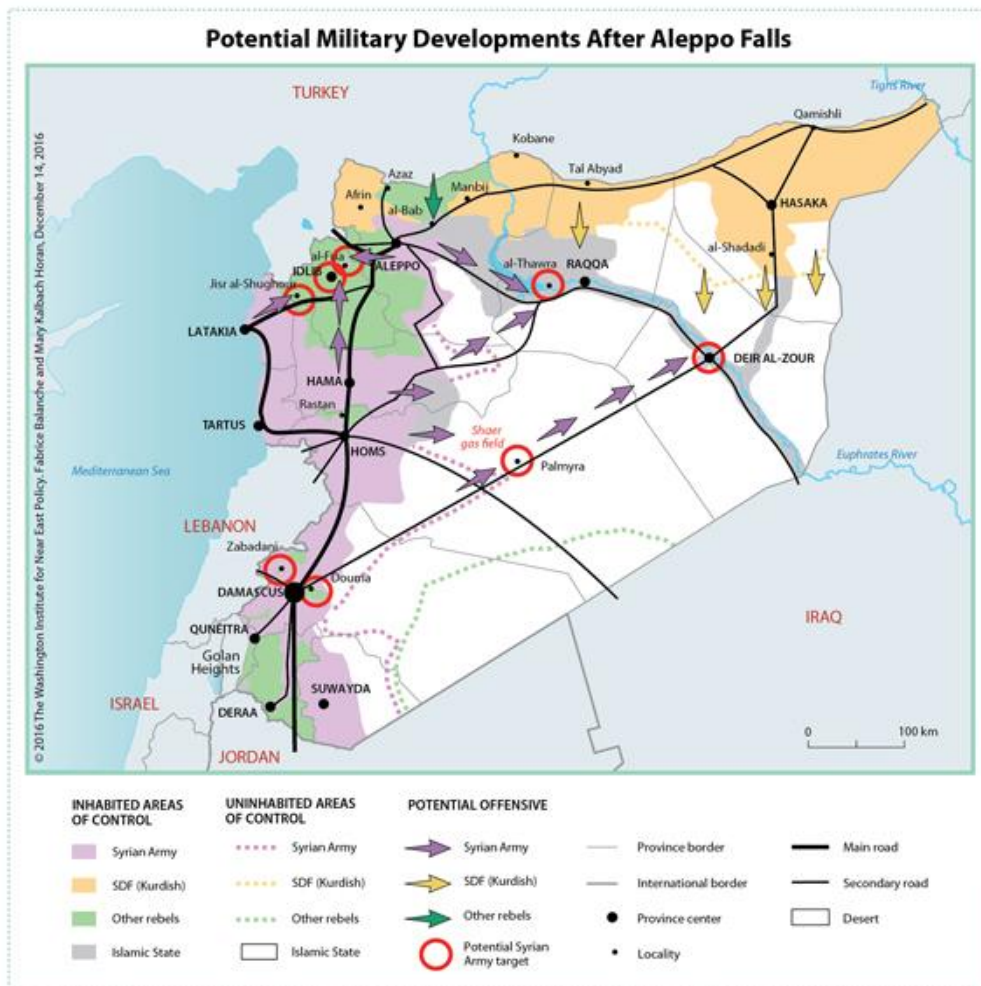
On 1 December UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, reiterated a previous call for JFS to leave the city. Instead, opposition militias announced a new alliance, calling it the Aleppo Army, led by a FSA commander, and reclaimed half of Sheikh Said neighbourhood by 6 December. The next day opposition militias called for a five-day truce to evacuate civilians and negotiate the future of the city. As airstrikes, tanks and artillery pounded opposition-held areas, pro-Assad Iraqi militia were accused of executing people in the street and 82 civilians in their homes. Civilians poured out of eastern Aleppo in the rain and cold and by 12 December the regime was in control of 98 percent of eastern Aleppo.

Following three weeks of negotiations between Russia, Syria, Iran and Turkey, to which the US, EU and UN were not privy, on Tuesday 13 December the regime's pounding of eastern Aleppo ceased. All opposition militias agreed to withdraw with their families and light weapons, beginning 14 December. Convoys of 200 fighters, 108 wounded and 643 civilians were taken to a rural area west of the city controlled by Turkey-backed militias. Overseen by the International Red Cross and Syrian Arab Red Crescent, another 2,000 to 10,000 people evacuated before several delays were caused by disagreements between

Russia and pro-regime militia; Iran introducing new conditions; pro-regime militia killing, detaining, robbing and beating evacuees; and opposition militia and pro-regime militia firing on convoys. Russian diplomacy enabled evacuations to resume after each delay.

On the 22 December the regime demanded that all YPG leave Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhood by the end of the year. This has not occurred. 22 December was also the day that the last fighters and civilians were evacuated from eastern Aleppo. Some 25,000 people had been taken to the Turkey-backed opposition controlled area in the west; 30,000 people had crossed into regime areas; up to 30,000 had gone to Sheikh Maqsoud; at least 7,000 had arrived in Afrin, and an unknown number went to Idlib, northern Aleppo and Turkey (i.e. the UN estimation of 250,000 people being trapped in eastern Aleppo was an overestimation). According to Russian, Syrian and HR sources, the opposition left behind mass graves and IEDs that killed 63 Syrian soldiers and militias between 22 and 25 December but in early January civilians began returning to eastern Aleppo, the Syrian regime allowing mobile medical units into neighbourhoods and allowing the UN and other humanitarian agencies to provide bread and meals.

Opposition militias blamed their most severe loss since 2011 on divisions between militias, regime infiltration, a lack of support from external allies, the attrition of experienced fighters and ammunition, including 1,500 militias recruited into Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, and the regime's incessant attacks. In March, a UN report claimed both the regime and opposition had committed war crimes



Source:
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-assad-target-idlib-after-aleppo#.WFMHdRi1tx0.twitter>

Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo

Turkey entered Syria twelve days after the SDF liberated Manbij ostensibly to fight ISIS, but ISIS withdrew or joined the Turkey-backed militias and Turkey took over empty towns and villages. Instead, Turkey-backed forces attacked local Kurdish and Arab fighters in the Jarablus Military Council, YPG/YPJ and the SDF with the intention of preventing Kurds and their allies administering a contiguous area along the border and to establish a Turkey-controlled 'safe haven' in the Azaz–Jarablus –Al-Bab – Manbij triangle.

After Turkey had crossed into Syria, the US, Syria and Russia gave approval for a limited incursion in return for Turkey ceasing to supply opposition militias. The US conducted supporting airstrikes until Turkey's attacks on the SDF became too frequent. Since 24 August, Turkey-backed militias, called FSA in many reports, have proved to be divided, undisciplined and unwilling to take casualties, with an unknown number having deserted. This led Turkish military to take on a front line role. By 16 October, with Turkey amassing two mechanized infantry brigades, an armoured brigade and a commando brigade north of the border, 1,000 Special Forces, other troops and Turkey-backed militia took the deserted town of Dabiq and 14 villages.

Having initially withdrawn from Jarablus and Al-Rai, ISIS began a counteroffensive, retaking 12 villages by 23 September, killing up to 35 militias at the border crossing of Atme, and using a car bomb to kill 25 civilians and Turkey-backed militias in Azaz. ISIS allegedly used chemicals to attack militias east of Al-Rai on 26 November, and two days later attacked Al-Rai killing 15 civilians. On 8 January ISIS launched a massive fuel tanker bomb outside an Azaz courthouse killing at least 48 civilians, JFS fighters and other militants.

From September, 1,000 Turkish Special Forces and soldiers and 3,000 militias advanced on ISIS-controlled Al-Bab and SDF-liberated Manbij despite Russia and the US repeatedly warning Turkey it was unacceptable for these forces to take Al-Bab and Manbij. But nothing went to plan. In November, Turkey-backed militias clashed with each other between Al-Bab and Manbij. In Jarablus, after Turkish-backed militia killed a number of civilians, days of protests resulted in the militias temporarily withdrawing on 24 December. Since then, Turkey has established a Jarablus civilian assembly that includes former ISIS members and Turkey is training a new police force for its 'safe haven'. In the last week of February Turkey-trained police were accused of confiscating food from 60 trucks heading for the Al-Bab – Manbij area.

Between 24 August and 14 February, 69 Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria and another 386 had been wounded. At least 469 Turkey-backed militants had been killed and 1,712 wounded. This is a high toll compared to the US losing one soldier since 2014 and Russia losing 23 soldiers since 30 September 2015.

Turkish sources claim that between 24 August and 30 December, Operation Euphrates Shield killed between 291 – 306 YPG and 1,294 – 1,362 ISIS fighters. Other sources claim that Turkish forces killed 277 civilians in the same period, but Turkey's repeated attacks on civilians as well as local Kurdish and Arab forces were met with silence from the

international community. On 10 March, the Syrian regime asked the UN to demand Turkey's invasion forces leave Syria.

Al-Bab

Al Bab lies 30 kilometres south of the border and 40 kilometres northeast of Aleppo city, on a highway linking Latakia to Hasaka and another highway going to Raqqa. Al-Bab had a pre-ISIS population of up to 100,000 residents. By the end of 2016, about 10,000 people remained in the city under the control of about 800 ISIS. From September, three forces advanced on Al-Bab: Turkey and Turkey-backed militias from the north, Syrian regime forces from the south and Kurdish-led forces from the west and east.

To liberate Al-Bab, the SDF had established the Al-Bab Military Council made up of local Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen fighters. By 19 October, these forces had liberated ISIS-held Arima, 20 kilometres east of Al-Bab, Shebha Dam and five villages. On 20 October Turkey launched 26 airstrikes on YPG/SDF targets 30 kilometres west of Al-Bab, just hours after the three villages had been liberated. Turkey claimed to have killed 160 to 200 YPG fighters. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed the airstrikes killed 20 YPG fighters and 20 civilians.

In response to Turkey's airstrikes, the Syrian regime warned it would use any means to take down Turkish aircraft flying in Syrian airspace. Both Russia and the US made statements opposing Turkey's airstrikes and advance, but between 20 – 23 October, Turkey-backed forces launched more than 300 tank and artillery shells, mortars and missiles on SDF forces in liberated villages around Al-Bab and Tel Rifaat. In the same period Turkey hit 27 ISIS targets in Buri and 19 YPG targets in Marea, claiming to have killed 11 ISIS and three YPG. On 25 October a Syrian army helicopter dropped barrel bombs on Turkey-backed militia in a village five kilometres southeast of Dabiq, killing two militias and wounding five. Throughout November, Turkey's militants continued to clash with ISIS and local Arab SDF elements around Al-Bab. The Al-Bab Military Council claimed that clashes had forced 12,500 families to flee, with 3,000 IDPs arriving in Afrin.

By the 11 November, Turkish forces were within two kilometres of northern Al-Bab and regime forces were within 12 kilometres of southern Al-Bab. On 12 November, Turkey resumed airstrikes on Al-Bab after a hiatus since 20 October. On 20 November, Turkey claimed its forces had cut the highway between Al-Bab and Aleppo. Four days later, an airstrike killed at least four Turkish soldiers and wounded ten northwest of Al-Bab. Initially, Turkey blamed the Syrian regime, then ISIS claimed responsibility, but on 7 December Turkey announced it was an Iranian drone.

On 10 December, Turkey-backed militants announced they had cut the highway between Al-Bab and Manbij and had entered Al-Bab. Over the next three months they would enter and be driven out, with ISIS having built trenches laced with IEDs to block armoured vehicles, and making use of vehicle borne explosives, tunnels, anti-tank missiles and supplies from Raqqa, with rain and fog also preventing Turkey advancing. Turkey suffered heavy losses. For instance, clashes with ISIS on a hill outside Al-Bab on 22 December killed 14 Turkish soldiers and wounded 80, in addition to killing 35 Turkey-backed militants. This was despite the presence of 200 Special Forces, 700 commandoes,

400 tank personnel and 2,000 militants. The next day Turkish airstrikes on the city killed 88 civilians including 24 children. With ISIS repeatedly forcing Turkish forces to retreat, Turkish state media claimed up to 8,000 Turkish soldiers had joined the campaign in January. Other reports claimed that some Turkey-backed militants were selling ammunition and explosives to ISIS and that 50 Turkish army officers, sergeants and specialists had resigned.

Having not coordinated with the US on Al-Bab, from the end of December Turkey demanded US-led coalition air support. When the US prevaricated Erdogan accused the US of supporting ISIS and other terrorist groups and questioned whether the US should be allowed to continue using Incirlik airbase. US responses were unusually strident but on 9 January the US sent in surveillance aircraft and on 17 January the US announced it had conducted several airstrikes near Al-Bab.

On 27 January Erdogan claimed that liberating Al-Bab would 'finish the job ...' After a phone call with US President Trump on 8 February, Erdogan had a change of heart, saying that after Al-Bab, Turkey would target Manbij and Raqqa. The advance on Al-Bab resumed. In the next two days ISIS killed five Turkish soldiers; another three were killed by a Russian 'accidental' airstrike and pro-regime forces killed at least seven. On 15 February, Turkey's chief of general staff, General Hulusi Akar, announced Turkey had taken Al Bab, but this claim was immediately contradicted, with ISIS launching a counteroffensive.

On 23 February ISIS announced it was withdrawing from the city through a corridor left open by Turkish forces and Turkey claimed its forces were in complete control of ISIS's last stronghold in Aleppo province. The next day, two ISIS car bombs targeted a militia checkpoint eight kilometres northwest of Al-Bab killing 83 people (two Turkish soldiers, four militants and 77 civilians). In three months of fighting, airstrikes and shelling 90 percent of Al-Bab was destroyed and 419 civilians had been killed. Other civilians had hidden in basements. At least 30 percent of the city was not cleared of IEDs. In the first two days after 'liberation', IEDs killed 14 civilians and hundreds escaped Al-Bab, heading for Afrin. Turkey claims it will oversee the administration of Al-Bab, as it is doing in Jarablus and Al-Rai.

Manbij

Manbij is 45 kilometres northeast of Al-Bab. Since SDF liberated the town in mid-August, people have come to Manbij for safety and the local administration has established services, including the reopening of 240 schools. Manbij women have formed an all-female council to promote and protect women's rights, in parallel with the Arab majority Manbij Civilian Council, which aspires to a 50:50 composition of men and women. Fifty US Special Force advisors have trained a local security force, including women recruits. By March, up to 90,000 IDPs had arrived in Manbij to escape fighting in the surrounds.

Meanwhile, local Arab majority Manbij Military Council (MMC) forces have been fighting ISIS, Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militant, with attacks by Turkey warplanes, artillery and militias continuing to kill civilians and fighters, including volunteer fighters Michael Israel (a US citizen), and Anton Leschek (a German citizen). On 7 December,

Turkey-backed militants allegedly used phosphorus bombs on three liberated villages west of Manbij.

After Turkey took Al-Bab, on 25-26 February, regime and pro-regime forces advanced northeast taking the town of Tadeif and other ISIS-held territory to prevent Turkey advancing on Manbij. On 26-27 February Turkish soldiers and militias used artillery and machine guns to attack regime forces in Tadeif resulting in 22 pro-regime militias being killed. Russia intervened to end the fighting. On 27 February, a reinforced SDF took nine ISIS-held villages south of Manbij and by 28 February, pro-regime forces had reached SDF/MMC forces, opening a route between Aleppo and Manbij/Kobani and Afrin, and also blocking Turkish forces from advancing south. But Turkish forces and ISIS were concurrently attacking SDF/MMC liberated villages further north. To create a buffer zone, protect villagers and avoid a direct confrontation with Turkey, on 2 March the MMC negotiated with Russia to surrender to regime border guards six villages 22 kilometres west of Manbij that were being attacked by Turkey.

The SDF had repeatedly warned the US they would need to withdraw from the Raqqa offensive to help the MMC defend Manbij if Turkey attacked. Between 28 February and 4 March SDF reinforcements, additional US advisors (bringing the total number to 500), tanks, a convoy of Strykers, other armoured vehicles and heavy weapons arrived in Manbij, becoming a visible presence 'to deter aggression'. On 4 March, aid convoys heavily guarded by Russian troops arrived in southern Manbij. On 8 March 200 US Rangers arrived. However, these flag waving manoeuvres did not stop Turkish forces attacking MMC positions, with Turkey claiming to have killed 71 'YPG' between 2 – 9 March but by 11 March the SDF/MMC had successfully retaken all positions.

Raqqa

The province of Raqqa contains the Al-Habari and Al-Thawra oil fields and two dams that generate hydroelectric power. In 2011, the sprawling city on the east bank of the Euphrates River was home to 260,000 people, with an estimated 220,000 remaining in the city in 2017. The majority are Sunni Arab. Kurds were 20 – 25 percent and Christians 1 percent of the population. In March 2013, opposition forces led by the Al-Nusra Front (i.e. JFS) took control of Raqqa after the Syrian army withdrew and other units were defeated. Two councils were established, one by local activists and another by the Turkey-based Syrian National Council (SNC). When Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi defected from Al-Nusra in April 2013, Al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham withdrew from the town. Local activists in the FSA went underground and by May 2013 ISIS was in complete control of Raqqa, making it the first provincial capital in Syria and Iraq to be taken by ISIS.

On 22 October 2016, President Erdogan announced that Turkey would help liberate Raqqa and create a terror free zone around Raqqa as it was doing in northern Aleppo, on condition that no Kurdish forces be involved in liberating Raqqa. But many Turkey-backed militants demanded the US declare the Syrian regime a priority target before they took part in the offensive. Likewise, the SDF agreed to take part in the offensive on condition that Turkey and its militias were not involved.

On 5 November, the SDF in Ein Issa announced the start of Wrath of Euphrates, with chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staf, General Joe Dunford, reassuring his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, on 6 November that 'The coalition and Turkey will work together on the long-term plan for seizing, holding and governing Raqqa'. In Phase One, a 30,000 strong SDF consisting of 25,000 YPG/YPJ, and 5,000 Arab militias, local tribes and the Syriac Military Council, supported by communication and supply lines from Rojava, 300 US Special Forces and Special Forces from the UK, Germany and France intended to isolate Raqqa. Although there was danger in leaving Al-Bab, Manbij and Rojava exposed to Turkish and ISIS aggression, in the SDF's view as long as ISIS controlled Raqqa it was a threat to northern Syria and if the SDF did not go on the offensive, Turkey would.

The following images of returning people were taken on 16 November.



The SDF advanced south from Ein Issa and Suluk, with supplies and troop transport coming through Qamishli. To liberate villages the SDF would send word for people to evacuate, clear the village of ISIS and IEDs and allow people to return. After meeting moderate resistance from car bombs, and killing 150 ISIS fighters, by 19 November Phase One was completed with the liberation 560 square kilometres of territory, including 30 villages, and three towns (Hazima, Taweelah and Tel al-Saman).

On 24 November, a US soldier was killed by an IED in Ein Issa. On 30 November the SDF entered a northern suburb of Raqqa where clashes with ISIS resulted in the deaths of five YPG/YPJ fighters. The SDF did not advance further. Reasons given were the need for heavy weapons, and ongoing US-facilitated talks between Turkey and the SDF.

Phase Two was launched on 10 December to enforce a full blockade of arms and fighters reaching Raqqa; train 4,000 new recruits, 90 percent being Raqqa Arabs, and incorporate other local Arab units into the SDF. Another 200 US personnel arrived in addition to the 400 Special Operations personnel already supporting the offensive. Phase Two involved SDF advancing south from SDF-liberated Tishreen dam, along the Euphrates to the largest dam in Syria, Tabqa dam, 25 kilometres upriver from Raqqa. In early January SDF overcame a massive three-day assault by ISIS within four kilometres of Tabqa dam, in which 49 ISIS fighters were killed. On 8 January four helicopters transported US Delta Special Forces to a location between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor where they killed 25 ISIS militants and an official, and captured others. By the 17 January the SDF had liberated 2,048 square kilometres and 197 villages, having killed 260 ISIS fighters and captured eighteen, with 42 SDF fighters having lost their lives (including the US serviceman, and a British and Canadian volunteer). Another two US volunteers were killed later.

Meanwhile, the US increased airdrops of weapons and ammunition, and supplied armoured vehicles and troop carriers to what the administration called the 'Syrian Arab Coalition' now estimated to number 23,000 fighters within the SDF. US spokespeople claimed fighter selection was not based on ethnicity but they were 'mainly local Arabs'.

On 5 February, SDF embarked on a third phase involving a two-pronged offensive from the north and east, with US airstrikes destroying four bridges into Raqqa and targeting Tabqa city. By 22 February the SDF had liberated 15 villages in Deir Ezzor, and with help from the Deir Ezzor Military Council had cut the main road between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor city. By 6 March they had reached the Euphrates, and were within 10 kilometres of Raqqa. These significant advances were made without flak jackets, helmets, night-vision equipment, mine detectors, anti-tank missiles, mortars or heavy weapons. To liberate Raqqa they need heavy weapons and armoured vehicles, but for this US President Trump must sign Section 1209 that gives permission for the US to arm non-state actors.

The US has built a hard landing strip near Kobani capable of receiving C 130 and C 17 cargo planes. On 1 March commander of US forces in Iraq and Syria, Lt. Gen. Steven Townsend, announced Syrian Kurdish and Arab forces would liberate Raqqa, in keeping with the preferred plan of the Pentagon. On 8 March, at least 200 US Marines with 155 mm M777 Howitzers were deployed 30 kilometres from Raqqa (another 200 Rangers being deployed to Manbij) in support of the SDF. But a fierce debate ensued in Washington with opponents arguing that the increased US presence is illegal, as it does not have UN, US Congress or Syrian government approval, and there were too many risks including mission creep, unclear long term goals and the alienation of Turkey, whose officials continued to put extreme pressure on the US to withdraw their support for the SDF. It appears there will be no decision on arming the SDF until after the 16 April referendum on an executive presidency in Turkey, if then, given Raqqa has been isolated.

Inside Raqqa, there are between 3,000 and 10,000 ISIS fighters, although by mid-February ISIS non-combatant personnel were retreating south to Deir Ezzor. The retreat gathered pace in mid-March. There have been two reported incidences of Raqqa

residents taking action against ISIS. On 30 November, unknown assailants broke into a Sharia Court killing the ISIS chief and another six ISIS court officials. On the same day, clashes broke out between unknown gunmen and ISIS fighters in the south of the city, resulting in three gunmen being killed and two being arrested. Dozens of residents were arrested for spying for the SDF and some have been publicly executed.

Raqqa residents claim ISIS has sealed off the town with checkpoints and travel bans, a media blackout, the closure of internet cafes and restrictions on internet and satellite dishes. On 12 December an airstrike on a water pipe left most of Raqqa's residents without water. Thousands of residents were selling their possessions to pay people smugglers to take them to Al-Houl camp in Hasaka. On arrival, they are subject to security measures to prevent ISIS infiltration. In the camp there is a lack of tents, drinking water, health care and medicines. With up to 1,000 IDPs arriving each week, the UNHCR is working on expanding the camp to accommodate 100,000.

Who liberates and administers Raqqa takes on a long term commitment that impacts internal and international relations. The SDF has already established a local civil council to administer the city and surrounds, a local judiciary, and a local police and military force, as it did for Manbij, Tel Abyad, etc. SDF representatives claim it will be up to Raqqa residents to decide whether they want to join the federal system of northern Syria.

The recent developments in Manbij and Raqqa are significant. While some observers see the more visible presence of the US in Syria as potentially leading to a conflict with Russia, that is not necessarily the case. Both countries wish to prevent Turkey expanding its Syrian territory and both looking favourably on the Kurds and their allies. If the US decides to use the SDF to take Raqqa, this would prevent Assad regaining control of the country on Assad's terms. This may not conflict with Russian priorities regarding protecting its interests in the west. Russia has long advocated for a decentralised Syria and an autonomous region for the Kurds and their allies.

Rojava

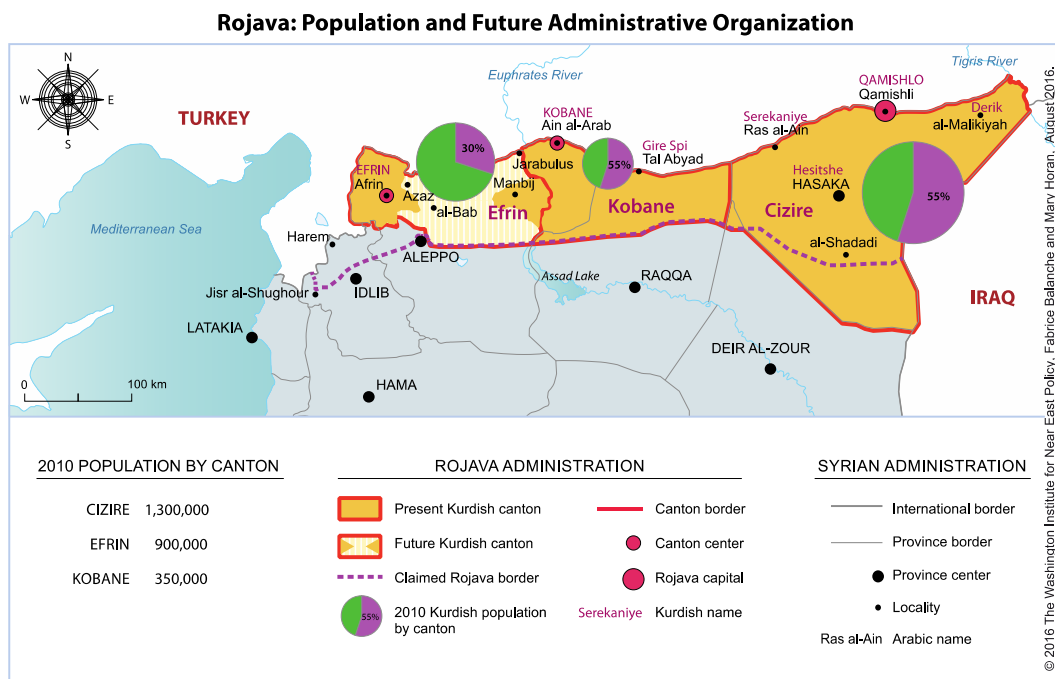
When ISIS held towns and villages in northern Syria Turkey took no action. Turkey only attacked after Kurdish led forces liberated them from ISIS. Turkey's attacks involve airstrikes, artillery, Turkish security forces, Turkey-backed militants, armoured vehicles, helicopters and sniper fire. In 2015, Turkey attacked the areas under the Kurdish-led multi-ethnic administrations in northern Syria 22 times. In 2016, Turkey attacked these areas 191 times, killing at least 120 civilians. Attacks became more frequent after the start of the Raqqa offensive. In the last ten days of December, Turkey PM Binali Yildirim and President Erdogan promised that Turkey would eliminate 'all Kurdish terrorists' from northern Syria. In the first two months of 2017, Turkish forces attacked Rojava 89 times. The main targets were villages in and around Afrin, Tel Abyad, Kobani and Qamishli.

In addition, ISIS attacked Rojava 493 times in 2016 using mortars, missiles, heavy weapons, mines, explosive-laden cars and suicide bombers. For instance, on 3 October, ISIS attacked a Kurdish wedding in Hasaka city, attended by many SDF fighters, killing at least 31 people, including five children and 11 women. In most other attacks ISIS was repelled but on 4 January ISIS attacked a YPG headquarters in Hasaka province killing

'dozens' of YPG fighters. In contrast, in the second half of January, Asayish in Afrin released 74 Turkey-backed militants they had taken prisoner, as a good will gesture negotiated by the multi-ethnic Jaysh al-Thuwar, who fights under the SDF umbrella, with another 80 prisoners released in mid-March.

Turkey has amassed tanks, armoured personnel carriers and soldiers along the border. Turkish security forces have cleared Syrian agricultural land and are building a road and concrete wall, complete with watchtowers from Idlib to Hasaka. Turkey is adamant that Kurds must not hold land west of the Euphrates as this would give them access to water.

To maintain security in northern Syria, men are mandatorily conscripted into the YPG. This has caused dissent. Otherwise there are 10,000 local police in Cizre, 3,000 in Afrin and 2,000 in Kobani. Half of Cizre's police are Arabs. About 30 percent of Asayish are women. The Rojava administration pays their salaries as well as the salaries of primary school teachers who are allowed to teach in Kurdish, Arabic and/or Aramaic, although Arabic remains the language of high school tuition. In November, Rojava University in Qamishli opened with the faculties of oil, petrochemistry, agriculture, education, language and literature, and the Syrian regime agreed to reopen Hasaka University. Kurdish names of towns and villages are being reintroduced, their names having been changed to Arabic names in the 1960s, and businesses are adopting Kurdish names, a practice previously banned by the regime. On 26 November, PYD opened another office in Oslo, having already established offices in Moscow, Prague, Stockholm, Berlin and Paris. On 27 – 29 December, a 165-member assembly representing the ethnic and political groups in northern Syria met in Rmeilan, Hasaka, to finalise a constitution for a renamed Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria.



Despite the aforementioned challenges, northern Syria hosts tens of thousands of Syrian IDPs and Iraqi refugees. Besieged by Turkey, with the KRI border intermittently closed, it relies on international aid groups such as Mercy Corps based in Turkey. On 7 March, the Turkish government shut down Mercy Corps.

Whilst developments in northern Syria are impressive, the federal system faces challenges in handling political dissent. The Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council (KNC) considers it has been sidelined by the Rojava administration since a 2014 power-sharing agreement, partly because the KNC does not have a military presence, with a 3,300 strong Peshmerga-trained Rojava brigade remaining in the KRI, but also because the KNC is perceived to be working for Turkish interests. As a result 30 KNC leaders were arrested by Asayish and PYD supporters allegedly raided the offices of two KNC parties and smashed office equipment in early. Another test will be how the administration reconciles with Sunnis who do not support a secular federation.

Ways forward

The World Bank estimates that reconstruction in Syria will cost \$200 billion. In view of this, the Syrian regime has passed laws to attract investment, construction and public private partnerships. While questions remain about how much leverage Russia, Iran and the US have over the Assad regime, Opposition militias and Turkey, given the extent Syria requires aid, investment, loans and expertise for reconstruction there would seem to be plenty of leverage to address the political, economic and social challenges. International support for physical reconstruction could be contingent and focused on regions where parties are willing to establish well trained security forces (if need be, supported by UN peacekeepers), pluralist local administrations, a reconciliation process, an independent judiciary and sustainable businesses that employ locals. In some regions, the process could start immediately, and be an incentive for others to follow. At the national level, only those wanting to negotiate a constitution that addresses internationally recognised values, and who are willing to compromise on the details, should participate in a power sharing arrangement. This may exclude some members of the Assad regime and some Salafi militias, especially those whose allegiance is not to Syria.

Turkey and the HNC oppose the inclusion of PYD, SDF and their allies in international negotiations, let alone power sharing arrangements, when by any measure these stakeholders have earned the right to be included. The international community need to remember that in 2003 – 2005 Turkey and many Sunni Arabs fiercely opposed a federation of Iraq and a semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq, yet Turkey has benefitted from peace, trade and a Turkish business presence in the KRI, and Arab IDPs have flocked to the safety of the KRI since 2014, with Iraqi Sunni Arab leaders now wishing to establish autonomous regions like the KRI. Moreover, the claim that Kurdish-led forces have gone beyond their traditional territory in Syria is misleading. Most of the areas in question were Arabised in the 1960s. Even Raqqa has a sizable Kurdish population. But ethnicity is not the issue. Syrian Kurds and their allies emphasise multi-ethnic representation within a federal system. Hence, it is not about what proportion of the population is Kurd, but what proportion of the population wants a secular democratic federal system of governance. A federation would allow numerous pathways of local governance to be pursued.

The US and Russia have a number of shared interests. Both countries want to defeat ISIS and JFS. Neither wants to be bogged down in a war in Syria or for Syria to become an extremist Sunni State. Both are federations themselves and respect Syrian Kurds' aspirations for a secular federation in northern Syria, if not throughout Syria. However, for Syria to become a federation the regime and oppositions need to be convinced that it is in their best interests. There are 404 local councils currently operating in Syria. A preliminary constitution drafted by Russia acknowledges local administrations as fundamental to a decentralised system. The HNC claims it wants a decentralised system. The biggest obstacle is the Assad regime. If the regime cannot be incentivised to conform to a time line of political milestones (e.g. with aid, investment, loans and expertise) then disincentives (non-investment, sanctions, boycotts, asset freezes, cases being brought before international criminal courts, etc.) may be more convincing. If not, Russia and Iran need to be persuaded to withdraw their support for the regime in return for their interests to be taken into account.

Turkey

Introduction

The people of Turkey are experiencing a collapsing economy, terrorist attacks, extreme polarisation and repression, the last undermining their public institutions including the security forces. In addition, Kurds in the east are suffering from a civil war. Externally, Turkey's fickle and belligerent foreign policies are causing tensions with neighbouring states and international allies. The powder keg is largely the consequence of the rhetoric, policies and words of one man: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose primary motivation, by his own admission, is power: domestic, regional and global.

Erdogan's popularity with about half the population of Turkey was built on growing economic prosperity between 2002 and 2013, Islamist appeal,⁶ making peace with the Kurds between 2013 and 2015, then attacking Kurdish towns that declared self-rule, hence feeding nationalist sentiment. Yet, post- coup, Erdogan has embarked on a purge that is worse than what followed the 1980 coup. For those who oppose Erdogan Turkey has become 'a giant prison'. Even some of Erdogan's supporters question his realignment with Russia, his U-turn on Syria and repression of all who oppose him.

Until the post-coup purge, the EU and US made every attempt to appease Erdogan. Now that Turkey is lurching towards a constitutional dictatorship, the dilemma for the EU, US, Russia and others is that if they satisfy Erdogan's demands, Erdogan is likely to manufacture new demands, further exploiting West – East relations and destabilising Turkey and the region.

⁶ Turkey has 90,000 mosques compared to 48,000 in Iran, which has a comparable population. The Turkish state plans to build thousands more mosques. The number of students going to religious schools has increased from 60,000 in 2002 to 1.2 million in 2016.

The purge continues

Turkey has been in a state of emergency since 19 July 2016, with the current period ending on 19 April 2017. Between 19 July and February 2017, the Turkish state closed, seized or disabled 4,246 institutions and 600+ companies; suspended from duty or sacked 128,398 civil servants, including 350 diplomats; and arrested 91,658 people, with many originally sacked, arrested or detained having their spouses and/or children also sacked or arrested. Arrests and detentions are ongoing. For instance, three decrees on 6 January caused another 7,930 dismissals from the armed forces, 14 ministries and other institutions for alleged links with Gulenists. On 10 February another 4,464 civil servants were dismissed. These dismissals, arrests and detentions have proceeded without proper investigation or incriminating evidence. They are based on suspicion, hearsay, anonymous tipoffs, secret testimonials, managerial discretion and lists drawn up by administrators. If overseas Turkish citizens subject to arrest warrants do not return to Turkey within 90 days, they lose their citizenship. Prisoners have restricted or no access to lawyers, the first coup-related trials commencing on 26 December. The purge is so widespread that there are cases where a prosecutor for a suspected Gulenist is also on charges of being a suspected Gulenist!

The human cost of the purge is immense: unemployment, poverty, suspicion and suicide. Prisons are so overcrowded that the government plans to build another 174 prisons. Many political prisoners are being kept in solitary confinement. Between 27 November and 2 December United Nations' special rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, visited several prisons and found incidences of abuse and torture of both male and female prisoners. The purge is causing divisions between individuals and widespread dysfunction within institutions. In the climate of fear, civilians are arming themselves while thousands of sacked soldiers are unemployed.

Crackdown on elected Kurdish politicians and mayors

The purge initially focused on suspected Gulenists, but then the AKP government turned on Kurdish parliamentarians, elected mayors, party officials and civil servants, activists, media outlets and institutions. Hence, on 24 November, 15,000 public servants were dismissed for suspected links with PKK. Between July 2015 and December 2016, 8,711 members and supporters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were arrested, with 2,906 having been detained in prison pending trial. (In the same period, Turkey has convicted seven ISIS members according to the Ministry of Justice.) Over three days following the 10 December twin bomb attack on an Istanbul football stadium and nearby park, 600 people linked with HDP were detained. They included two MPs (Caglar Demirel and Besime Konca), two Democratic Regions Party (DBP) co-mayors and the HDP Vice Co-chair and lawyer, Aysel Tugluk. In 2017, suspensions, sackings and arrests of individuals associated with HDP and DBP continue. Often an MP or mayor is arrested, imprisoned, released, and then rearrested.

Of 59 HDP MPs who lost their parliamentary immunity in May 2016, only ten are not subject to investigation. On 4 November 2016, HDP co-chairs and Amed (Diyarbakir) and Van MPs, Selattin Demirtas and Figen Yüksekdağ, and 10 other HDP MPs were arrested. Another 22 have been arrested since, as shown in the lists below.

12 HDP MPs arrested on 4 November 2016

1. Selahattin Demirtas	HDP Co-Chair, Amed MP	
2. Figen Yüksekdağ	HDP Co-Chair, Van MP	
3. Ziya Pir	Amed MP	Released on a bond
4. İmam Taşçier	Amed MP	Released on a bond
5. Nursel Aydoğan	Amed MP	
6. Idris Baluken	Amed MP	
7. Sirri Sureyya Onder	Ankara MP	Released on a bond
8. Abdullah Zeydan	Hakkari MP	
9. Selma Irmak	Hakkari MP	
10. Gulser Yildirim	Mardin MP	
11. Ferhat Encü	Sirnak MP	
12. Leyla Birlik	Sirnak MP	Released on bond 4 Jan.

List of 22 HDP MPs arrested 5 November 2016 – 28 February 2017

1. Behçet Yıldırım	Adıyaman MP	
2. Caglar Demirel	Amed MP	
3. Nimetullah Erdogmu	Amed MP	Acquitted 23-01-17
4. Altan Tan	Amed MP	
5. Nihat Akdoğan	Hakkari MP	
6. Besime Konca	Siirt MP	
7. Leyla Zana	Agri MP	Released on a bond
8. Ayhan Bilgen	Kars MP	Released on a bond
9. Nadir Yıldırım	Van MP	Released on a bond
10. Meral Danis Bestas	Adana MP	Released on a bond
11. İmam Taşçier	Amed MP	Released on a bond
12. Ayse Acar Basaran	Batman MP	Released on a bond
13. Mehmet Emin Adıyaman	Igdir MP	Released on a bond
14. Huda Kaya	Istanbul MP	Released on a bond
15. Ahmet Yildirim	Mus MP	Released on a bond
16. Osman Baydemir	Urfa MP	Released on a bond
17. Dilaver Tashdemir	Van MP	Released on a bond
18. Necat Tanish	Van MP	Released on a bond
19. Adem Geveri	Van MP	Released on a bond
20. Lezgin Botan	Van MP	
21. Dilek Öcalan	Urfa MP	
22. Ibrahim Ayan	Urfa MP	

List of 17 HDP MPs in prison as of 28 February 2017

1. Selahattin Demirtaş	Co chair, Amed MP	Edirne F Type Prison
2. Figen Yüksekdağ	Co chair, Van MP	Kandıra F Type Prison
3. Nursel Aydoğan	Amed MP	Silivri L Type Prison, Istanbul
4. Caglar Demirel	Amed MP	Kandıra F Type Prison, Kocaeli
5. İdris Baluken	Bingol MP	Kandıra F Type Prison, Kocaeli
6. Nihat Akdoğan	Hakkari MP	Silivri L Type Prison, Istanbul
7. Selma Irmak	Hakkari MP	Kandıra F Type Prison, Kocaeli
8. Abdullah Zayden	Hakkari MP	Edirne F Type Prison

9. Gülser Yıldırım	Mardin MP	Kandira F Type Prison, Kocaeli
10. Ferhat Encü	Sirnak MP	Kandira F Type Prison, Kocaeli
11. Besime Konca	Siirt MP	Kandira F Type Prison, Kocaeli
12. Lezgin Botan	Van MP	Detained 30 January
13. Ayhan Bilgen	Kars MP	Rearrested 31 January.
14. Meral Daniş Beştaş	Adana MP	Rearrested 31 January.
15. Behçet Yıldırım	Adıyaman MP	
16. Dilek Öcalan	Urfa MP	
17. İbrahim Ayan	Urfa MP	

Note: F Type and L Type prisons are high security prisons.

Hours after the 4 November arrests, a car bomb exploded and three or four men opened fire on a Turkish police headquarters in Amed (Diyarbakir) killing 11 people, including two police officers and a local Democratic Regions Party (DBP) politician, Recai Altay. Altay was among 44 HDP and DBP representatives, including six HDP MPs, detained in the complex. ISIS claimed responsibility on 5 November. This was the first time ISIS claimed responsibility for any attack inside Turkey although questions remain as to who was actually responsible and how an explosive laden minibus was able to pass security.

HDP Co-chairs Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yüksekdağ and many others are being kept in solitary confinement. They are not allowed any contact with other prisoners or communication with the outside.

In provincial elections in 2014, HDPs sister party, the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) won the mayorship of 102 local administrations, including 11 provincial capitals. Since July 2016, 94 mayors and six deputy mayors have been imprisoned, as listed below.

List of 94 imprisoned co-mayors noting province and municipality, 28 February

1. Mukaddes Kübilay	Agri	Agri Metropolitan Municipality
2. Hazal Aras	Agri	Diyadin Municipality
3. Murat Rohat Özbay	Agri	Doğubayazıt Municipality
4. Delal Tekdemir	Agri	Doğubayazıt Municipality
5. Fırat Öztürk	Agri	Tutak Municipality
6. Yüksek Mutlu	Amed	Akdeniz Municipality
7. Gültan Kışanak	Amed	Büyükşehir Municipality
8. Fırat Anlı	Amed	Büyükşehir Municipality
9. Aygün Taşkın	Amed	Ergani Municipality
10. Abdurrahman Zorlu	Amed	Hani Municipality
11. Mehmet Ali Aydın	Amed	Kayapınar Municipality
12. Sadiye Süer Baran	Amed	Culp Municipality
13. Harun Erkus	Amed	Lice Municipality
14. Selim Kurbanoglu	Amed	Yenisehir Municipality
15. Affullah Kar	Amed	Kocaköy Municipality
16. Abdulkirim Kaya	Batman	Gercüş Municipality
17. Zeynep Oduncu	Batman	Gercüş Municipality
18. Hüseyin Olan	Bitlis	Bitlis Metropolitan Municipality

19. Ahmet Demir	Bitlis	Ovakışla Municipality
20. Servin Karakak	Bitlis	Ovakışla Municipality
21. Mehmet Emin Avras	Bitlis	Güroymak Municipality
22. Özcan Birlik	Bitlis	Mutki Municipality
23. İhsan Uğur	Bitlis	Hizan Municipality
24. Felemez Aydın	Bitlis	Yolalan Municipality
25. Nurhayat Altun	Dersim	Dersim Metropolitan Municipality
26. Mehmet Ali Bull	Dersim	Dersim Metropolitan Municipality
27. Burhan Kocaman	Elazığ	Karakoçan Municipality
28. Cennet Ayık	Elazığ	Karakoçan Municipality
29. Tülay Karaca	Erzurum	Tekman Municipality
30. Mehmet Sait Karabakan	Erzurum	Karayazı Municipality
31. Zeynep Han Bingol	Erzurum	Karayazı Municipality
32. Dilek Hatipoğlu	Hakkari	Hakkari Metropolitan Municipality
33. Nurullah Çiftçi	Hakkari	Hakkari Metropolitan Municipality
34. Hilal Duman	Hakkari	Çukurca Municipality
35. Servet Tunç	Hakkari	Çukurca Municipality
36. Dilber Uzunköprü	Hakkari	Esendere Municipality, Yüksekova
37. Akif Kaya	Hakkari	Esendere Municipality, Yüksekova
38. Adile Kozay	Hakkari	Yüksekova Municipality
39. Seferi Yılmaz	Hakkari	Şemdinli Municipality
40. Kasım Ağgün	Iğdır	Hoşhaber Municipality
41. Ali Çam	Iğdır	Hoşhaber Municipality
42. Ahmed Turk	Mardin	Mardin Met. Municipality. Released 3-2-17
43. Zeynep Şimşik(Şipçik)	Mardin	Dargeçit Municipality
44. Abdulkерim Erdem	Mardin	Derik Municipality
45. Sabahat Çetinkaya	Mardin	Derik Municipality
46. Emin Irmak	Mardin	Artuklu Municipality
47. Leyla Sevinç	Mardin	Artuklu Municipality
48. Leyla Salman	Mardin	Kızıltepe Municipality
49. İsmail Asi	Mardin	Kızıltepe Municipality
50. Süleyman Tekin	Mardin	Ömerli Municipality
51. Cengiz Kök	Mardin	Nusaybin Municipality
52. Sara Kaya	Mardin	Nusaybin Municipality
53. Mehmet Aydın Alökmen	Mardin	Savur Municipality
54. Yüksel Mutlu	Mersin	Akdeniz Municipality
55. Rahmi Çelik	Mus	Bulanık Municipality
56. Figen Yaşar	Mus	Bulanık Municipality
57. Mehmet Tanriverdi	Mus	Esentepe Municipality
58. Sabine Ekinci	Mus	Varto Municipality
59. Hüseyin Güneş	Mus	Varto Municipality
60. Halis Coşkun	Mus	Malazgirt Municipality
61. Memnune Söylemez	Mus	Malazgirt Municipality
62. Tuncer Bakirhan	Siirt	Siirt Metropolitan Municipality
63. Selva Erdoğan	Siirt	Baykan Municipality
64. Enes Cengiz	Siirt	Veysel Karani Municipality
65. Serhat Çiçek	Siirt	Gökçebağ (Civanîka) town municipality

66. Seyran Argan	Sirnak	Beytüşşebap Municipality
67. Nurettin Ataman	Sirnak	Beytüşşebap Municipality
68. Nevin Oyman	Sirnak	İdil Municipality
69. Mehmet Muhdi Aslan	Sirnak	İdil Municipality
70. Kadir Kunur	Sirnak	Cizre Municipality
71. Rabia Takas	Sirnak	Başverimli Municipality in Silopi
72. Tahir Aytiş	Sirnak	Başverimli Municipality in Silopi
73. Zeynep Üren	Sirnak	Uludere Municipality
74. Yunus Ürek	Sirnak	Uludere Municipality
75. Abdulgaffur Rüzgar	Sirnak	Görümlü Municipality in Silopi
76. Süheyla Büngül	Sirnak	Görümlü Municipality in Silopi
77. Mustafa Bayram	Urfa	Halfeti Municipality
78. Zeynel Taş	Urfa	Bozova Municipality
79. Fatma Doğan	Urfa	Bozova Municipality
80. Filiz Yılmaz	Urfa	Viranşehir Municipality
81. Emrullah Cin	Urfa	Viranşehir Municipality
82. Halil Akbaş	Urfa	Suruç Municipality
83. Şerafettin Özalp	Van	Özalp Municipality
84. Handan Bağcı	Van	Özalp Municipality
85. Zilan Aldatmaz	Van	Saray Municipality
86. Suna Atabay	Van	Çaldıran Municipality
87. Faruk Demir	Van	Çaldıran Municipality
88. Abdurrahman Çağan	Van	Erçiş Municipality
89. Diba Keskin	Van	Erçiş Municipality
90. Abdulkarim Sayan	Van	Edremit Municipality
91. Bekir Kaya	Van	Van Metropolitan Municipality
92. Celalettin Bartu	Van	Çatak Municipality
93. Evin Keve	Van	Çatak Municipality
94. Dr. Mehmet Ali Tunç	Van	Muradiye Municipality

List of six Imprisoned Deputy Co-mayors, noting province and municipality, 30 January

1. Nazmi Çoşkun	Hakkari	Hakkari Metropolitan Municipality
2. Adile Kozay	Hakkari	Yüksekova Municipality
3. Hüsnü Beşer	Hakkari	Yüksekova Municipality
4. Hilal Duman	Hakkari	Çukurca Municipality
5. Ahmet Toloğ	Sirnak	Silopi Municipality
6. Turgut Babur	Van	Çatak Municipality

Other mayors have been removed from office. Government appointed ‘trustees’ have replaced those removed or imprisoned. Some of these ‘trustees’ have sacked or refused to pay many hundreds of municipal workers, stopped the construction of new homes and roads and closed women’s associations, charities and education facilities. For instance, the ‘trustee’ for Sirnak converted two education-support facilities to Quranic course facilities.

In November, the gender equal co-chair system practised in Kurdish majority municipalities became a crime for which there is a prison sentence of up to two years. Any official documents prepared with the title ‘Co-mayor’ can no longer be processed.

The dismantling of the co-mayor system impacts women's political representation and rights, with Kurdish-majority districts having stipulated a 50 percent quota for women in executive positions and throughout the workforce.

The HDP MPs and mayors are under investigation or have been charged for allegedly spreading terrorist propaganda, being a member of or aiding a terrorist organisation, organising unlawful meetings and demonstrations, defamation and provoking the public to animosity and enmity. For instance, Demirtas is being charged with provoking violence during protests in October 2014, when police attacked a crowd protesting Turkey not aiding Syrian Kurdish fighters during the ISIS siege of Kobani, and inciting hatred and hostility in a speech prior to the June 2015 election when he criticized the *Star* newspaper for its coverage of the election campaign. Prosecutors are demanding lengthy sentences: 142 years for Demirtas and 83 years for Yüksekdağ, despite HDP MPs claiming that the repeal of their parliamentary immunity in May is invalid.

The first to be tried and sentenced was Amed MP, Nursel Aydoğan. On 13 January she was given a prison sentence of 4.8 years for alleged membership of PKK and encouraging people to oppose the government. On 21 February Yüksekdağ was stripped of her seat in parliament after an appeals court upheld her conviction of spreading terrorist propaganda when attending a funeral of a left wing militant accused of being a terrorist.

Protests about these arrests and charges have been few because people fear police brutality and unlawful arrest. On 26 October, several thousand demonstrators gathered in front of Amed city hall to demand the release of 55 Kurdish politicians and activists. Police backed by armoured vehicles used pepper gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd and detained more than 25 people. Demonstrations spread to other cities despite the internet being cut for three days to eight provinces in eastern Turkey, not only hampering private communications but also the functioning of hospitals, courts and businesses. On 20 November thousands turned up for 'We will not surrender' rallies in Kartal Square Istanbul, protesting the arrests and detentions of parliamentarians and co-mayors. Other protests were held in Europe. Since the arrests of elected parliamentarians and mayors there has been an increase in young people going to the mountains to join PKK, as all democratic avenues are being closed.

On 21 November, a Turkish court issued warrants for PYD co-chair, Salih Muslim, and 67 other suspects, including two co-founders of the PKK, Murat Karayilan and Cemil Bayik, over their alleged involvement in a car bomb that hit a military convoy in Ankara on 17 February and killed 29 military personnel and civilians, despite Kurdistan Freedom Falcons claiming responsibility. Turkey is seeking 30 life sentences for each suspect, and requested an Interpol Red Notice to be placed on Salih Muslim, which if Interpol agrees, would make international travel difficult.

Judiciary

The judicial system in Turkey has been seriously undermined. Between mid-July and October 2016, 4,500 judges were dismissed. The chair of the Association of Judges and Prosecutors (YARSAV), the first nongovernmental organization of judiciary members in Turkey, and one of the first institutions to speak up against threats to judicial independence in Turkey, was imprisoned and the association was dissolved by the first

emergency-rule decree. One quarter of all judges and prosecutors expelled after the coup were members of YARSAV. On 6 January, another 1,699 workers in the Ministry of Justice were dismissed.

That the judiciary is now subservient to the President was indicated on 22 February, when the courts dismissed a libel suit against President Erdogan for labelling academics 'traitors' 'terrorist tools' and 'dirtied souls' because they signed a petition calling for peace in eastern Turkey on 11 January 2016. The defendant's case rested on international standards for free speech. Fourteen academics that signed the petition were detained on 15 January 2016. Since then, hundreds more have been imprisoned for signing the petition.

MIT

The National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) is being reorganised and expanded and will answer only to Erdogan. Two new departments were established: one for the coordination of communications between state institutions, and another for Special Operations in Syria and Iraq. The other four departments are responsible for security intelligence, strategic intelligence, technical intelligence and internal administrative services. After the attempted coup, tip offs to the MIT exceed 10,000 per month, up from about 2,000 a month. MIT is also active in Europe, with about 6,000 informants in Germany, home to three million citizens of Turkey.

Police

From 16 July to 2 October 2016, 22,000 police officers were suspended from duty. On 6 January, another 2,687 police officers were dismissed. Along with the purge on judges, the process is breaking the justice system. For instance, nobody has been held responsible for two explosions that killed 105 people at a pro-democracy peace rally in Ankara on 10 October 2015. No perpetrator has been put on trial for the assassination of Amed Bar Association Chair, Tahir Elçi, on 28 November 2015. In the case of Elçi, evidence was not collected, other evidence was damaged and the case file was put under a de facto secrecy decree so defence lawyers had no access to evidence. CCTV footage (which was not made available to the defence) and witness statements point to the high probability that Elçi was shot by a police bullet.

NATO and other Security Forces

From 16 July to the end of September, Turkey dismissed approximately 400 NATO military envoys. On 27 September, 149 NATO military staff in the US, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and UK were ordered to return to Turkey. An estimated 60 Turkish NATO military officials stationed in Germany refused to return. Of 50 Turkish military staff stationed at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, nine remain. The others have been suspended from duty. Some have been arrested and detained. Many were highly qualified officers with master's and doctoral degrees from US military institutes.

As of 17 November, 20,088 security force personnel had been discharged since the attempted coup, including 42 percent of the top 358 military commanders. On 18 December, 500 more armed service personnel were dismissed, as were another 764 personnel on 6 January. The purge and all the internal suspicion and division has implications for the capabilities of the Turkish security forces, and there are unknown

consequences of having up to one third of all security forces having been dismissed (according to the Council of Europe in March) and unable to find a job.

In November, Turkey advertised for 25,000 new recruits, including 1,400 officers, 3,600 NCOs, 7,159 specialist sergeants and 11,907 specialist privates. Two hundred officers and 500 NCOs for Special Forces Command will be recruited from the general public, including from theological colleges. Commanders of the army, navy and airforce will now answer to the Minister of Defence rather than the Chief of General Staff. The Ministry will be able to appoint commanders, with military training centres having been closed and replaced with specialist universities under civilian control.

A trial for 330 security force personnel began at Sincan Prison on 28 February. These soldiers were charged with murder or attempted murder and attempting to remove the government. Suspects claimed that on the night of the attempted coup they were told they were being mobilised because of a terrorist attack. So far, most of those on trial have claimed they were following orders and that they had no connection with the Gulen movement.

Education

By February 2017, 33,065 civil servants from the Ministry of Education had been suspended or sacked. Of these, 3,855 have been imprisoned on charges of terrorism. In October, five primary schools that taught in the Kurdish language were shut down, as was the Kurdish Language Institute in Istanbul in January. Universities have also been decimated by the purge. Some faculties have been gutted, with 5,000 university researchers, teachers and administrators, including most university deans having been dismissed by February 2017. On 29 October, Executive Order 676 abolished the right of public university academics to elect their rectors, transferring this right to the state, i.e. President Erdogan. Many academics have been detained. On 2 November, 137 academics were subject to arrest warrants, 31 being immediately detained. On 18 November, detention warrants were issued for 103 employees of Yıldız Technical University on charges of alleged 'membership in an armed terrorist organization'. Seventy-six of them were detained, pending trial. Many had signed a petition for peace in January 2016.⁷ These actions have implications for the standards of education and research.

Media

After every terrorist act, the AKP government has placed a media ban on the event and shut down Twitter and other social media. The government is also closing down all pro-Kurdish and opposition media outlets in and outside Turkey. On 28 September, a government decree forced Turksat (Turkey's satellite operator) to take 10 TV stations off

⁷ **Ege University:** Cansu Akbaş Demirel, Hanifi Kurt, Aslı Davas, Nilüfer Körükmez, Melek Göregenli, Nilgün Toker, Zerrin Kurtoğlu. **Ankara University:** Leyla Işıl Ünal, Cenk Yiğitler, Bahar Şimşek, Burçin Kalkın Kızıldaş, Özlem Albayrak, Sevilay Çelenk Özcan, Tezcan Durna, Hasan Faruk Alpkaya. **Mardin Artuklu University:** Selim Temo, Cuma Çiçek, Ferhat Yılmaz, İclal Ayşe Küçükırca, Mesut Keskin, Siyaveş Azeri. **Munzur University:** Adnan Şahin, Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, Gülçin Karabağ. **Yıldız Technical University:** Melek Zorlu, Onur Özgür, Ömer Çelebi, Savaş Dede, Gürçağ Tuna.

air, including all Kurdish TV stations⁸. Alevi and Leftist channels and Kurdish radio stations were closed down after being accused of ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’. The Contemporary Journalists' Association (ÇGD) reported that between 1 October and 31 December three journalists were killed, 80 journalists were arrested, 299 journalists were detained, 32 journalists were assaulted, seven foreign journalists were expatriated, 2,622 journalists were sacked and 166 media and publication firms were shut down. According to the Turkish Journalists' Syndicate, the number of jobless journalists has climbed to 10,000 since the attempted coup. Following the October raid on the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper and the detention of 15 staff in Turkey, Berlin-based media giant, Axel Springer SE, announced it would sell its seven percent stake in Dogan TV and make no new investments in Turkey. By the end of November, 23 radio stations, 45 newspapers and 29 publishing houses had been closed down. In December, investigations began in view of prosecuting 433 filmmakers who signed a petition in support of peace negotiations between the government and PKK.

Outside of Turkey, at the request of the Radio and Television Supreme Council of Turkey, the French satellite company Eutelsat halted the broadcasting of the pro-Kurdish MED Nuce TV in Europe on 3 October, a day later suspending the broadcast of IMC TV (another pro-Kurdish television channel that broadcasts in Turkish) and on 9 October, Eutelsat suspended the broadcast of Newroz TV. However, on 15 November, the Paris Commercial Court ruled the closures illegal and issued an order for Eutelsat to reopen the Kurdish channels.

Public institutions and NGOs

By the end of November 129 foundations, 15 universities and 19 trade unions had been closed down, and 1,495 NGOs were banned without any investigation or a judicial ruling. These organisations include the Progressive Lawyers Association, as well as women's and children's groups, many of which had been campaigning against child marriage. The Interior Ministry alleged that 190 NGOs were linked to the PKK, 153 had ties to the Gulen network, eight to ISIS and 19 to the banned far-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Army-Front (DHKP-C). Of the associations accused of links with the PKK, 24 were located in Van and 46 were located in Amed (Diyarbakir), including the Samasik Association, a charity that supports families with no income and whose Foodbank distributes monthly food packages to the poor. The Kurdish Language Research Association and the Kurdish Writers Association was among the banned NGOs.

Companies

Between 1 September and 4 November, scores of businessmen were arrested and more than 600 private companies and others listed on the Istanbul Stock Exchange were taken over by state trustees (e.g. Boydak Holding) or their assets were put under control of a government fund called the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) (e.g. Koza-Ipek Holding). The total value of these companies⁹ is estimated to be at least \$13 billion,

⁸ Jiyar TV, Zarok TV, Hayatin Sesî TV, Van TV, Aralarında Azadi TV, Denge TV and TV 10.

⁹ The companies include Boydak Holding (furniture), Koza Ipek (gold mining, tourism, media), Dumankaya (family companies involved in construction), Naksan (textiles and food), Akfen (tourism, construction and textiles), Kaynak (publishing and logistics), FI Yapi (construction), Alfemo, Yavascular and Kadioglu.

making the state the largest conglomerate in Turkey. The TMSF is tasked to dissolve or sell the businesses, with some AKP businessmen having shown interest.

The AKP government suspects people in another 8,000 companies of having links with the Gulen movement. Each of these company could be subject to a financial audit, the appointment of trustees, and if found guilty, closed or sold. Despite the realignment between Turkey and Russia, in early December Akfel Holding was nationalised. Akfel Holding is Turkey's biggest gas importer, through which the Russian oil company, Gazprom, supplies 20 percent of its gas.

The economy

Turkey's economy is facing significant challenges. Inflation is running at 9 percent, with future inflation rates impacted by a change in the way inflation is measured, the proportion allocated to food, housing, electricity and water (50 percent of the household budget) having been reduced. Between 2015 and 2016, industrial production dropped by 2.7 percent, imports by 6.5 percent and exports by three percent. Tourism declined by 41 percent based on revenue for hotel rooms in the first ten months of 2015 and the same period in 2016. Unemployment is 12 percent with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reporting that 28 percent of those aged 15 – 29 years have no employment, education or training. Youth unemployment in eastern Turkey is 50 percent. Twenty-seven percent of the unemployed hold university degrees.

Turkey's public and private sectors rely on foreign investment, particularly from Europe (especially the UK), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Comparing January – November 2016 with the same period in 2015, foreign investment declined by 42 percent. In November 2016, Moody's and Standard and Poor's cut Turkey's sovereign credit rating to non-investment grade. International capital is leaving the country. In October, Turkey's credit default swaps (indicating the insurance premium or risk on capital when investing in government bonds) reached the second highest among emerging economies after Brazil. Turkey's private sector (involving 27,000 companies) has a net foreign exchange deficit of \$210 billion at a time when the Turkish lira is in free fall, having dropped 17 percent in 2016 and another 10 percent in January against the greenback.

Between 1986 to July 2016, Turkey generated \$68 billion from privatization, but privatization revenues have declined. In February, Turkey transferred the assets of major public companies including Turkey's state-owned bank and telephone operator and its 49.12 percent stake in Turkish Airlines to a new sovereign wealth fund, established during the state of emergency. The new wealth fund is exempt from auditing by the Court of Accounts despite it being a public entity using public funds to finance some of Turkey's 34 megaprojects that rely on opaque Public Private Partnerships. Many projects are going to business people linked to the AKP.

Erdogan's push for an executive presidency

On 1 October, the Turkish Parliament extended the mandate for Turkey's military actions in Syria and Iraq, and in December extended the state of emergency until 19 April. Between 9 – 21 January parliamentarians debated and with 339 votes in favour passed a bill to make 18 amendments to the constitution to introduce an executive presidency. If

passed by a referendum to be held on 16 April (i.e. during the state of emergency), these amendments will abolish the position of prime minister and give Erdogan the right to serve another two five-year terms from 2019. An executive president will have the right to remain the head of a political party, select candidates to run at elections, dissolve parliament at any time, issue legislative decrees, dismiss legislation passed by parliament, implement states of emergency without consulting parliament, determine national security measures and international agreements, appoint and sack ministers, and directly appoint the heads of military and intelligence agencies, universities, senior bureaucrats and judges (including 12 of 15 judges in the Constitutional Court, and half those in the Council of State). The number of parliamentary seats will increase to 660, weakening minority parties. Erdogan has also asked parliament to reinstitute the death penalty.

In return for Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) support the MHP insisted citizenship continue to be defined as Turkish, the language of education must remain Turkish and there must be no changes that would allow Kurds any form of self-rule. The HDP and the Republican People's Party (CHP) oppose the reforms but the imprisoned HDP MPs were unable to vote. The CHP proposed alternative constitutional changes that include the president becoming a ceremonial position elected by parliament (rather than by popular vote, which was introduced in 2014). CHP also wanted mechanisms to ensure freedom of expression, judicial independence, a reduction in the minimum threshold for a political party to be represented in parliament, recognition of Kurdish as a mother tongue, the restoration of original Kurdish names to towns and villages, official recognition of Newroz and police being prevented from using violence against demonstrators. In return, the CHP demanded the PKK disarm.

As parliament considered the amendments, MPs came to physical blows, causing some to be hospitalised. Outside parliament, police used tear gas and water cannons on demonstrators protesting against an executive presidency. Demonstrations in Ankara were banned for 30 days.

For the upcoming referendum, three parties, including the AKP and MHP, support a 'yes' vote, with Erdogan campaigning on the claim that all those who say 'no' are on the side of terrorists and coup supporters. Those who oppose an executive presidency are being sacked or pilloried. Four parties, including the HDP and CHP, some ultra-nationalists and Islamists, support a 'No' campaign. At the end of January, one independent survey put the 'yes' vote at 52 percent and another survey put the 'no' vote at 51 percent. With up to 20 percent of voters undecided, 'No' voters fear what Erdogan will do whatever the outcome.

Terrorist attacks

In 2016 and New Years Eve 2016/17, 17 terrorist attacks that killed 343 people occurred in western Turkey, of which eight attacks targeted public spaces, seven targeted security forces and two targeted Kurds. After the New Year's Eve attack, by mid-February 1,400 were arrested for alleged links with ISIS, in contrast to 2,934 being detained for being jihadi terrorists throughout 2016. The problem is that there are three types of jihadi terrorists operating in Turkey: ISIS, JFS and many of those Turkey backs in Syria, with

individuals moving between groups. For example, Abdulkadir Masharipov, the terrorist implicated in the New Year's Eve attack, had a past history of belonging to groups Turkey supports in Syria.

ISIS was allegedly responsible for six attacks, four occurring before September (see 22 September 2016 report) although ISIS did not claim responsibility for any attack in Turkey until the November attack in Amed (Diyarbakir), that targeted Kurdish MPs and political representatives, and killed 11 people, although who was actually responsible is controversial. But ISIS did claim responsibility for the New Years Eve attack, when just after midnight, a highly skilled gunman using flash-bang grenades and a Kalashnikov rifle killed 39 people and injured another 69 in six minutes in the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. Twenty-seven of those killed were foreigners. Despite the nightclub being across the street from a police station, the 34-year old Uzbek gunman escaped, and remained on the run until 17 January.

No group claimed responsibility for attacks occurring on 24 November, when two people were killed and up to 21 were wounded in a car bomb attack outside the Adana governor's office, and on 19 December, in Ankara, when an off-duty policeman assassinated the Russian ambassador to Turkey. Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a radical offshoot of PKK, claimed responsibility for six attacks between 6 October and 5 January, variously occurring in Istanbul, Antalya, Kayseri and Izmir, which killed 65 people (41 police officers, 14 soldiers and 10 civilians) and injured 230. The most well-known of these is the 10 December car bomb attack outside an Istanbul football stadium and in a nearby park that killed 44 people (36 police officers and eight civilians), and injured another 155. Four days later, Erdogan called for a 'national mobilisation against all terror organisations'. His call inflamed responses to the 17 December car bomb attack at a Kayseri military bus terminal that killed 14 Turkish army conscripts from the First Commando Brigade, which plays a vanguard role in military actions in eastern Turkey. Immediately after the attack, protesters, including army personnel and ultranationalists, helped by police and chanting anti-HDP and anti-PKK slogans, set fire to a HDP office in Kayseri, with HDP staff trapped inside. Explosions and fires occurred in another 18 HDP offices across the country. In each case, police took no action.

Civil war

Government sources claim that in 2016, security forces conducted 37,000 anti-terror operations, 31,000 of these being in rural areas. They claimed these operations killed, captured or wounded 17,000 PKK fighters, 3,000 ISIS and 1,000 leftists. Despite these government figures, Erdogan and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim repeatedly claim Turkey does not have a Kurdish problem - it has a terror problem, ignoring that they have systematically blocked Kurds having any democratic means to attain basic rights and political representation.

The last one and half years in Turkey have been the bloodiest and most repressive since the beginning of the Kurdish uprising in 1984. Between August 2015 and December 2016, the government implemented curfews and sieges 111 times in nine cities and 35 districts, sometimes for more than 90 days, causing the displacement of 500,000 people. Figures vary widely on the death toll. According to the International Crisis Group,

between 20 July 2015 and 16 December 2016, there were 2,481 documented deaths, including 1,021 PKK fighters, 858 police and security personnel and 383 civilians, with the highest number of deaths occurring in Sirnak (628). According to PKK, between July 2015 and October 2016, 3,718 Security forces and 656 PKK fighters were killed.

Both the state security forces and PKK are using increasingly sophisticated weapons. In 2016, this meant PKK was able to destroy a F-16 fighter jet (heading for the KRI, after it took off from Amed airbase), three helicopters, eight tanks and another 158 armoured vehicles, with many more being damaged. Turkish security forces now use drones capable of hitting PKK targets from a distance 6.5 kilometres, drones having killed 90 alleged PKK fighters in the first ten days of October. With security forces brutalising the Kurdish population, PKK hits back with suicide attacks on small military checkpoints. For instance, on 20 October, after Hakkari was bombed by warplanes, HPG (PKK's armed wing) killed 48 soldiers and four village guards in nine attacks in the province. With the security forces continuing to attack rural areas throughout the province, on 31 October, PKK killed 36 soldiers at 11 positions in Hakkari. Confrontations increased after the start of SDF offensive on Raqqa. For example, in November, thousands of Turkish soldiers launched attacks in Sirnak province. Between 1 and 7 December Turkey claims airstrikes killed 41 PKK 'terrorists' in Muş, Bitlis, Elazığ, Hakkari and northern Aleppo (Syria) and another 19 PKK 'terrorists' based in Iraqi Kurdistan. And so it goes on, with no side willing to back down in the current environment.

Whether or not one classifies the PKK as terrorists or as freedom fighters targeting soldiers and police to overthrow oppression and establish democracy, (as did the Peshmerga in Iraq from the 1940s until 2003), the government is using disproportionate force on the Kurdish population. Major urban centres such as Sur, Nusaybin, Sirnak, Cizre and Yüksekova have been destroyed, with most remaining 'forbidden zones' even to residents. According to a report by the Turkish Human Rights Association, in the first nine months of 2016, sieges caused 1,040 civilians to lose their lives and 1,077 civilians to be wounded, whether as a result of extrajudicial killings, not receiving medical aid, suicides, land mines or armed clashes. In addition, 553 people were subject to torture and violence. Meanwhile, PKK actions led to the regrettable deaths of 102 civilians.

Curfews, sieges and security force actions in eastern Turkey are ongoing. On 1 October, 13 villages in Amed Province were placed under curfew and siege, as were 11 more Amed villages at the end of December. In January, 32 areas in Batman province were declared security zones and in February 14 villages in Mardin, Nusaybin and Lice were put under curfew and siege. In two villages civilians were killed, detained and tortured. Rural areas in Bitlis and Amed are being subject to airstrikes and ground attacks and in March, 12 more Amed villages were placed under curfew and siege and 31 areas in Dersim were declared security zones.

A round the clock curfew in the Nusaybin district of Mardin province, beginning on 14 March 2016, continues, involving the demolition of four neighbourhoods. Sur and other neighbourhoods in Diyarbakir city continue to be under curfew with Sur residents being blocked from returning to their ruined homes. The government claims they will be given new residences in high rises on the outskirts of the city. On 14 November, the eight-month 24 hour curfew on Sirnak, was shortened to 10 pm to 5 am.

Ninety thousand residents were forced to leave Sirnak. Some 15,000 were allowed to return. They returned to destroyed houses, shops and schools, no electricity or water. In March the UN published a report confirming that Turkish security forces were responsible for extreme human rights abuses in 30 towns across eastern Turkey between August 2015 and December 2016.



What is left of Sirnak, December 2016. Source: <http://images.al-monitor.com/almpics/2016/12/GettyImages-623142584.jpg/GettyImages-623142584-570.jpg>

International Responses

On 20 November 2016, Erdogan announced that joining the EU was not imperative for Turkey and that he had discussed with President Putin and Putin's special advisor, Alexander Dugin, the possibility of Turkey joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a security bloc originally formed in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with Iran, Pakistan and India currently wishing to join. Since 2012, Turkey has had the status of 'dialogue partner' and in 2017 will assume the presidency of SCO Energy Club. However, on 21 November, at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's annual session in Istanbul, Erdogan demanded NATO step up its fight against terrorism, and not harbour the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Europe.

On 10 October, Putin and Erdogan announced full normalisation of bilateral relations. Ankara approved Russia having 'strategic investment status' for a proposed \$22 billion Russian-built nuclear plant in Turkey. The two countries also signed an accord for the first phase of constructing the \$12.5 billion TurkStream undersea gas pipeline, which will strengthen Russia's position in the European gas market. However, Turkish construction and fresh food trade with Russia has not returned to pre-November 2015 levels, largely because Russia has found new sources. Russia also delayed tourist charter flights until October (the end of the tourist season); Turkish companies remain banned from six Russian sectors, and Russia has not lifted a ban on employing Turkish workers in Russia.

After Putin and Erdogan met in Moscow in March, Erdogan made public his wish for greater military and defence spending ties with Russia.

Despite US spokesmen constantly reassuring Turkey that it is a true ally and friend of the US, relations have deteriorated, particularly over US support of SDF in Syria and the US not handing over Fethullah Gulen. With the general security situation deteriorating in Turkey the US Department of Defence and US State Department ordered all dependents of defence personnel and consulate staff to leave Turkey after the attempted coup in 2016. Whilst US rhetoric has changed little, in March US policies towards Turkey further hardened further, with the US and others blocking Turkey attacking SDF liberated Manbij and favouring SDF forces to liberate Raqqa. This has far reaching implications for US-Turkey relations.

Since September, Europe has had mixed responses to Turkey's trajectory but like the US, is becoming more forthright. In 2016, Italian prosecutors dropped the case of money laundering against Erdogan's son, Bilal, and EU claimed the refugee deal was going well despite only 578 non-refugees having been returned to Turkey from Greece by September. In excess of 47,000 people continued to await processing. Turkey has also failed to provide temporary protection to any returned people or allow inspections of their accommodation.

In October, a Swedish parliamentarian from the Environmental Party, Jabar Amin, submitted a motion demanding Sweden's parliament vote on initiating UN proceedings for Erdoğan be tried at the International Criminal Court and the Council of Europe called for restoring parliamentary immunity to HDP MPs.

On 3 November, a Belgian judge ruled that it was not possible to prosecute Kurdish Television for spreading terrorist propaganda given that there was an armed conflict in Turkey. The judge also set a precedent by ruling that it was not possible to prosecute 36 individuals who had been charged with links to PKK 'terrorist' organisations in 2010, as the PKK as armed insurgents because they abide by the Geneva Conventions, wear uniforms, have a well-defined military hierarchy and conduct operations against one state. Hence, the terrorism law does not apply.

Also on 3 November, the Switzerland Federal Council offered to mediate a peace agreement between the Turkish state and Kurdish leaders but received no response from the AKP government. On 9 November, the EU released an annual report that was highly critical of Turkey's domestic trajectory. Since the imprisonment of 12 HDP MPs, 382 members of the European parliament and national parliaments and councils have formed committees to make regular visits to imprisoned HDP MPs, although after arriving in the country they are sometimes prevented from doing so.

On 24 November, as a result of the purge, the arrests of HDP MPs and 150 journalists and the closure of independent media, all of which was against Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the European Parliament voted to suspend accession talks to bring Turkey into the EU. The Parliament also warned that reintroducing the death penalty would lead to a formal suspension. The vote was not binding and the German Foreign Minister spoke against it. Some European parliamentarians also suggested imposing

economic sanctions on Turkey and the annulment of the refugee deal. On 25 November, the Austrian Parliament voted in support of a military arms embargo against Turkey, and called on the EU to impose sanctions on Turkey. In response, Erdogan threatened to flood the EU with refugees. Also on 25 November, a German court gave a suspended sentence to a PKK representative by taking into account that he was Yezidi, that PKK was fighting ISIS, and that Turkey is supporting suspected terrorists fighting Syrian Kurds in Syria.

In 2017, relations with the EU further deteriorated. Germany accused Turkey of employing imams to spy on Turkish citizens in Germany, and in March, local German municipal authorities cancelled rallies in support of the 'yes' vote in the referendum on an executive presidency. Erdogan accused Germany of aiding and protecting terrorists and conducting Nazi practices. When Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland also objected to having foreign country political rallies on their soil, and AKP parliamentarians were refused entry to attend rallies and meetings, Erdogan accused them of being fascists.

Ways forward

A 'yes' or 'no' vote in the referendum on an executive presidency would likely see Turkey continue on its current trajectory, which poses internal, regional and international security risks that may have far greater consequences than the risks posed by ISIS. Hence, there is an urgent need for clearly premised high level dialogue backed by incentives linked to political milestones. These milestones include ending the purge, introducing the rule of law, releasing all political prisoners, embarking on internationally monitored negotiations with Kurdish leaders (including Abdullah Ocalan) to bring an end to civil war and to formulate sustainable solutions for Kurds who make up 25 percent of the population, as well as other minorities. In addition, both Iraq and Syria call for the withdrawing all Turkish troops and military hardware from their soil.

2017 is the 30-year anniversary of Turkey submitting a formal application to become a full member of the European Economic Community. EU incentives for Turkey to change its current trajectory could include the EU deciding on definitive outcomes rather than endless promises, such as an upgrade of the customs union that would enable free trade of Turkey's agriculture products and Europe's financial and other services. EU and US incentives could include:

- Establishing a counter-terrorism partnership with Turkey;
- Support for trans-border security on Turkey's side of any border;
- Opening high level dialogue with diverse political leaders, Turkish businesses, banks and financial services that benefit from trade with the EU;
- Conditional investment in Turkey;
- Expanding civil society co-operation, cultural exchanges, work-study programs and corporate sponsorships; and
- Support for Syrian refugees inside Turkey and facilitation for their return to Syria as soon as possible.

If incentives fail then co-ordination on the following disincentives should be considered:

- Honest (even if private) criticism of Turkey's current trajectory;
- Cease the delivery of NATO military hardware, NATO coordination with Turkey's military and intelligence; cease relying on Turkish military intelligence and Incirlik airbase;
- Develop mechanisms to expel a country from NATO, using them, for instance, if Turkey continues to take unilateral action in Syria or Iraq, especially if it endangers lives of personnel from NATO countries;
- Avoid holding international conferences in Turkey;
- Discourage tourists from going to Turkey e.g. Australians' pilgrimage to Gallipoli;
- Acknowledge the Armenian genocide, as did the German parliament in 2016;
- Delist the PKK as a terrorist organisation, given that it is an armed insurgency with democratic aspirations and MIT is unreliable in its PKK 'facts';
- Freeze external assets, bar international travel and use the international criminal court for those responsible for human rights violations, the dismantling of institutions (e.g. judiciary, education) or supporting ISIS (e.g. MIT, Powertrans and Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources);
- Avoid and discourage foreign investment in Turkey; and
- Review loans and aid to Turkey.

Iran

Iran has become a key regional player in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, including the Kurdish-majority areas of Syria and Iraq. In Syria, Iran convinced the Assad regime to hand over territory to the YPG in return for YPG not allowing opposition militias to operate from YPG held territory. Iran did this in the knowledge that YPG could be defeated later. In Kurdistan of Iraq, Iran is attempting to influence PUK and Gorran and tried to negotiate with them an oil and gas pipeline from Kirkuk to Iran through Sulaimani, causing tensions with the Turkey-influenced KDP, while also negotiating pipelines with the GoI from the disputed territory of Kirkuk. The Iranian government is also suspected to be behind twin bombs that targeted the headquarters of Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) in the KRI, which killed seven party members on 21 December.

Domestically, Iran continues to employ repressive tactics inside the impoverished Kurdistan region. Kurds are denied government positions because the majority are not Shia. In the province of Kurdistan, unemployment is over 35 percent and per capital income is half the national average. As a result of poverty throughout the region, many people courier goods across the border, with at least 122 couriers having been killed by security forces in 2016. After people demonstrated against the killing of cross border traders, on 9 December, the Iranian regime declared a curfew and a state of emergency in the city of Marivan. No one was allowed to enter or leave the city and all internet and telecommunication networks were shut down.

The Association of Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran estimates at least 500 people were executed in 2016. At least 90 were Kurds, among them 21 who were executed for having

‘enmity against God’. One was executed for being a member of a banned political party. According to Human Rights Watch, six Kurdish civilians who are awaiting execution for being members of the KDP-I have no affiliation with any armed group.

Of the 1,074 political prisoners in Iran in 2016, 40 percent were Kurd. They are often subject to severe torture and deprived of a lawyer. A Kurdish filmmaker was sentenced to 223 lashes and one year in prison for his documentary about graffiti in Tehran, *Writing on the City*. On 29 December security forces raided dozens of houses of Kurdish human rights activists, and arrested at least 20 for having links with banned political parties. Kurdish political activists such as Shorsh Tahamesbi are in prison on charges such as ‘attempting to destroy the integrity of Iran’.

Kurds are underrepresented in the Iranian parliament, are not appointed as governors to Kurdish-majority provinces and find it difficult to run for council elections as the government vets those who run. Communist, socialist and ethnic-based political parties are banned in Iran.

President Hassan Rouhani has made repeated promises to people in the Kurdistan region of Iran that their problems will be addressed, that there will be greater spending on infrastructure and services, but there has been very little action. His Citizens’ Rights Charter, published on 19 December 2016, lacks enforceability, with parliament not implementing laws and cabinet not passing any executive bills in support of the charter. As a result of government inaction, and its sectarian and repressive policies, 2016 saw sporadic outbreaks of Kurdish militancy. For example, on 4 October, Revolutionary Guards killed 12 Kurdish militants. In retaliation, a week later Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) claimed they killed at least 32 Iranian security forces.

Conclusion

The Middle East is in turmoil with a struggle between Shia and Sunni Islam; civil war in Syria, Turkey and Yemen; instability in Libya and Tunisia, a massive flow of refugees into Jordan and Turkey and a war against ISIS. Meanwhile the stateless Kurds are gaining an international profile from being on the front line fighting ISIS and creating islands of relative stability in Iraq and Syria.

The aforementioned crises are primarily the result of dysfunctional secular, theocratic or monarchic governments, and a century of fickle and expedient international responses, making post-ISIS conflict a real possibility. Countries that decided borders, benefit from oil and other resources, fight wars and topple government, only to withdraw (as in Iraq and Libya), or support and withdraw support from autocratic leaders (e.g. President Mubarak in Egypt and Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq) and non-state actors (e.g. the US withdrawing support from Kurdish Peshmerga in 1974) must take responsibility for building a better future, especially given the US-led coalition’s reliance on airstrikes in fighting ISIS that has left cities emptied and destroyed, while killing relatively few ISIS militants. Many are left to evacuate and fight another day.

With the West experiencing its own crisis in confidence, political and economic stagnation and polarisation, international diplomacy continues to be undercut by a lack of long term strategic planning and use of levers that could expedite reforms. In the vacuum Russia has gained military and diplomatic credibility. War, controlled chaos, disengagement and short sightedness are risky and costly options for global security and the economy. Given the interlinked destinies of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, sustained, coordinated effort over decades by international actors working in collaboration with local actors on clearly defined goals would be less costly and benefit more people.

The cultivation of intelligent, trustworthy, civic-minded local leaders from different political persuasions are typically not welcomed by authoritarian governments - hence the need for levers. To succeed, the UN, US and international aid and development organizations must also review their practices, given their often neo-imperialist approach is so often implemented by task experts who lack understanding of the complexities on the ground.

The citizens of the Middle East aspire to and deserve better governments, as indicated by the majority of Iraqis turning out to vote three times in 2005 after 35 years of war and dictatorship. Systems of local and national governance need support to reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the Middle East. For example, the only general proposition shared by Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran is to place a limit on the rights of their own Kurds, while using Kurds in other countries for their own purposes. Hence, Turkey supports the Barzani-led KDP dominated KRG in Iraq and the Barzani-linked Kurdistan National Council (KNC) in Syria, whereas Iran backs PUK and Gorran in Iraq, and has a tactical interest in Turkey's perceived enemies: the PKK in Turkey and the PYD/YPG/J in Syria.

On the Kurdish question, it would be morally reprehensible to betray Kurdish efforts to fight ISIS and establish stable regions. Kurdish issues are as interlinked as the destinies of the countries in which Kurds live. It is no coincidence that the Kurds of Syria and Turkey have experimented with self-rule since ISIS. In the short term, the Syrian experiment has been militarily and politically successful, whereas the self-rule experiment in Turkey has cost Kurds dearly. If Syrian Kurds attain an autonomous multi-ethnic federal region in Syria, it will impact Kurdish and other minority aspirations in Turkey.

Some observers call for Kurds to modify their demands for autonomy within each nation state, despite Kurdish leaders having already modified their dream for an independent nation state that covers all parts of Kurdistan. Instead, those in Turkey, Syria and Iran aspire to autonomous federal democratic regions within current borders. Having experienced the shortcomings of this political framework, the Kurds of Iraq want a negotiated independence, possibly within a confederation of Iraq. To further modify their demands would leave Kurds and other minorities, as well as the general population, victim to four authoritarian states, three of which are totally dysfunctional.

Poorly equipped and unpaid Kurdish forces from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey have been fighting ISIS for 2.75 years, the only forces to do so for so long. But unlike others, they are fighting for survival, as well as values such as freedom from oppression, tolerance and democracy. As such, the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria have become destinations

for IDPs and refugees, despite them being subject to boycotts and military threats. Given the Kurds' numbers, history and sacrifices in fighting oppression, and the nature of the states in which they live, at the very least, Kurds deserve support for some form of self-rule, whether in the form of autonomy or independence. Establishing such regions has numerous benefits, as outlined below.

Military benefits

1. The Kurds have been a consistent ally in the Middle East. They have a good track record in fighting alongside foreign troops, are friendly towards any non-aggressor and welcome western military advisors and permanent military bases. Rewarding such an ally not only reassures other allies that their sacrifices will be appreciated but in building permanent military bases and building military relations, saves costs for future military interventions in a region where two thirds of the population are between 15 - 40 years old and all males receive military training.
2. Ending destabilising insurgencies will save lives and have political and economic benefits for each country. For instance, the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey has cost in excess of 40,000 lives since 1984, and in Iraq in excess of 200,000 lives between 1986 and 1991 alone. Both countries have diverted considerable resources into fighting Kurds, and war damaged infrastructure and services are costly to rebuild.
3. The potential for war between countries will be reduced. For example, Saddam Hussein's betrayal of the autonomy agreement with Iraqi Kurds in 1974 led him to hand over control of the Shatt Al-Arab to Iran in return for Iran not supporting the Kurdish insurgency. This led to Saddam Hussein attempting to reclaim the waterway militarily, resulting in an eight-year war between the two countries. In 2017, in return for Turkey withdrawing its military forces and hardware from northern Syria and Iraq, Iran could do likewise, thus de-escalating the potential for conflict between these two well-armed countries.

Political benefits

4. Whether or not current borders are maintained, support for local and regional administrations that support a relatively high level of security, pluralism, institution building and public services, although yet proven in terms of an alternation of power, accountability and the rule of law, creates 'islands of influence'. Expensive, short-term nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan has failed. Supporting 'islands of influence' is less costly and potentially more effective. For example, Iraqi Kurdish leaders, established diverse political parties under the protection of the no-fly zone and experience in self-government between 1992 and 2003. Party leaders became vital in drafting the 2005 federal constitution of Iraq. Between 2005 and 2014, while the GoI squandered the opportunity to build a strong, pluralist and prosperous federation, the Kurds were relatively successful in providing for their citizens, including ethno-religious minorities. Similarly Syrian Kurds and their allies have been relatively successful in establishing security and multi-ethnic local administrations in northern Syria. If these efforts were refined and consolidated, the results could inspire people in other regions to do likewise.

5. Creating stable regions able to accommodate IDPs and refugees reduces the costs of providing for them, and reduces the flow of refugees to countries outside the region.

Socio-economic benefits

6. Enhancement of women's rights has political-economic and social benefits. In Turkey and Syria, pro-Kurdish political parties insist that all public positions are co-managed by a man and a woman, and that the workforce be built to reflect a 50:50 representation. Women's councils are able to veto any law a mixed council proposes if it infringes women's rights. However, the AKP government is currently undoing the gains made by women in eastern Turkey. In Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority provided small grants to women. This helped women establish businesses and NGOs that continue to thrive, at least in the KRI and Kirkuk, where women are also well represented in the Kurdish parliament and provincial councils.
7. Enhancement of minority rights, which the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria have been relatively successful in doing.
8. Enhancement of energy security, with the Kurdish regions being rich in oil and gas.
9. Enhancement of food security, with the Kurdish regions being rich in water and agricultural land.
10. Less spending on foreign aid, with relatively stable regions more reliant on their own resources.
11. Greater economic and employment opportunities within relatively stable regions, and between these regions and other countries, as proved by KRG – Turkey relations since 2005, and the way Kurds in the diaspora return to the KRI and disputed territories to establish businesses, teach at universities and participate in government, e.g. the Governor of Kirkuk.
12. Preservation of some of the most ancient archaeological sites and significant ethno-religious heritages in the world.

Whether for self-interest or humanitarian considerations, the international community has to support the political and physical reconstruction of Syria and Iraq and address the imperial ambitions of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Helping to build the necessary institutions to create stable, vibrant societies by using levers linked to political milestones need not prescribe the form of governance, but must be linked to clearly defined goals based on fundamental principles: individual and collective rights to security, peace, freedom of expression, political representation, justice and livelihoods.

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