

Background Report VII: September 5, 2017 - April 30, 2018

Post-ISIS States

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Acronyms

Asayish	Kurdish police
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
DBP	Democratic Regions Party (Turkey)
EU	European Union
GoI	Government of Iraq
HDP	People's Democratic Party (Turkey)
HPG	People's Defence Force (Armed wing of PKK)
HNC	High Negotiation Committee (Saudi-backed Syrian opposition)
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (coalition led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
JFS	Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly called Al-Qaida/ Al-Nusra
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran)
KNC/ENKS	Kurdish National Council (KDP-linked coalition of parties)
KPC	Kirkuk Provincial Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
NGO	Non-government organisation
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PMUs	Popular Mobilisation Units or Hashd al-Shaabi
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (Turkey-backed opposition)
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Turkey)
TSK	Turkish Military
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)

Note:

The term Islamist extremists denotes individuals who want to impose and enforce an extremely rigid, ultra-radical interpretation of religion on all aspects of personal and public life using violent and/or political means. Mainstream Muslims consider the ideologies and practises of these individuals as being outside of Islam.

All monetary figures are in USD.



Figure 1: [Map](#) of who controls what territory in northern Iraq and Syria

Summary

Major developments between September 2017 and April 2018 in Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey are that:

- **Declarations of victory against ISIS** in Syria were made by Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 7, and in Iraq by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on December 10, after ISIS had been removed from all major towns. Yet ISIS remains in the desert on either side of the Iraq-Syria border, and in pockets of Kirkuk, Baghdad, Damascus, Hama and Idlib. 'Thousands' have crossed into Turkey, where some have been re-trained to fight Kurds in Syria. ISIS also has a presence in north and West Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia.
- **The United States (US) was outmanoeuvred by Iran** and Iraq in October 2017 when the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) led IRGC-linked Iraqi militias and Iraqi armed forces to militarily take control of Kirkuk and other disputed territories in Iraq. **The US could be out-bullied by Turkey**, which launched Operation Olive Branch on Afrin in northern Syria on January 20 and threatens US troops to the east.
- At a time when the **US needs cooperation** from Middle Eastern countries to combat ISIS, stop the Syrian civil war and fund reconstruction, on December 6, US President Donald Trump declared the US recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.



IRAQ

- **In Iraq's national elections on 12 May 2018, candidates include known terrorists representing the political wings of Iranian Revolutionary Guard-linked militias.** One is Hadi al-Amiri. His Badr organisation has infiltrated ministries (e.g. defence and interior). The US' preferred prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, attempted and failed to form an alliance with Amiri's coalition. All three potential prime ministers, Amiri, Abadi and his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, have alienated Sunni Arabs and Kurds.
- **The Government of Iraq (Gol) militarily took control of the disputed territories** and imposed a siege on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in October 2017. The Gol demands the KRI forgo its constitutionally recognised regional autonomy, and fails to enact other parts of the constitution.
- The Gol seeks funds through **investment and donations for reconstruction** but has done little to rebuild damaged Sunni Arab-majority cities, or provide adequate services across the country.
- The Gol has **not enacted** major sections of the constitution of Iraq (2005).

SYRIA

- **The United Nations-sponsored Geneva process and the Russian-initiated Astana-Sochi negotiations have made no progress towards a political transition** in Syria due to the intransigence of the Assad regime and an equally uncompromising Opposition that inadequately represents the spectrum of Syrian society. Regional and international stakeholders work at [cross-purposes](#). The US chose to outsource solutions to the civil war, but Russia does not have full control of its allies. Russia and (pro) Assad forces continue to attack de-escalation zones. Eastern Ghouta (Damascus) fell to the regime in April. The regime's next targets are Daraa and Idlib. The forced disarmament and evacuation of opposition militias and civilians, and Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo have led to massive demographic changes. Although the Assad regime now claims control of 56 percent of Syrian territory, to secure this territory the regime relies on local and foreign militias.
- **War in Syria has mutated into multiple proxy wars involving Russia, the US, Iran, Israel and Turkey**, as well as the on-going hot wars between the Assad regime and a radicalised opposition, Turkey against the Kurds, and the US-led coalition and the Kurd-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against ISIS. The US remains in Manbij and east of the Euphrates to fight ISIS, curb Iran and have future negotiating power. On February 7, US airstrikes killed and injured around 300 Russian military contractors in Deir Ezzor. Three days later, the IRGC allegedly flew a drone into Israeli airspace, and Syrian air defence downed an Israeli F-16 fighter jet. Since October Turkey has coordinated with a transnational jihadi coalition in Idlib, and since January 20 has conducted an air and ground offensive leading to the occupation of the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin using Turkish soldiers, ex-ISIS and other Islamist extremists. Russia allowed this in exchange for Turkey getting opposition militias to co-operate in negotiations, and evacuations. The multiplicity of pro-regime and



opposition militias, Turkey forming a new National Syrian Army, and Israel's concerns about Hezbollah and Iran in Syria indicate ongoing conflict.

- **After an alleged regime chlorine and sarin attack on Douma on April 7** and before an investigation, **on April 14, the US, UK and France bombed four sites** associated with chemical weapon research and storage.

TURKEY

- **Turkey will hold presidential and national elections on June 24**, 17 months earlier than scheduled.
- **Turkey maintains a state of emergency** in which 12 parliamentarians have been stripped of their seats in parliament, 11 being pro-Kurdish HDP MPs, and 16 elected MPS have been imprisoned, 15 being HDP MPs. Government appointments have replaced more than 100 elected mayors. Since July 2016, 152,000 public servants have been dismissed from their jobs and 169,000 people have been detained, with 78,000 remaining in prison, and 50,000 having been released on bail to face a future court hearing.
- **Military operations** against alleged Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) members continue in eastern Turkey.
- **Turkey has expanded its occupation of northern Syria and offensive in northern Iraq** to 'neutralise' Kurdish 'terrorists', most being US-led coalition allies in the war against ISIS.
- **Turkey has gathered more than 50,000 Islamist extremists** in northern Aleppo, close to its border, providing salaries for some of them, but does not have full control over them.

IRAN

- **Protests in Iran** against poor economic conditions, clerical rule and Iran's costly expansionist activities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen spread to more than 60 Iranian cities between 28 December 2017 and January 2018. Thirty-five protesters were killed in the first few weeks and 3,700 protesters were arrested. A number of imprisoned protesters allegedly committed 'suicide'.

AUSTRALIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ & SYRIA

- As of June 2017, Australian Defence Forces had about [780 personnel](#) deployed in Operation Okra, including Special Forces, as part of the US-led coalition's Operation Inherent Resolve.
- On 22 December, the Australian Defence Minister announced **the end of Australian airstrikes in Iraq**. Six Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F/A-18F Super Hornets returned home in January, although support aircraft will continue to operate in the Middle East, as will the Australian Army's training mission in Iraq.
- The **Australian Government has made no public statements** about its position on Assad, or Turkey's offensive on US-led coalition allies in Syria and occupation of northern Syria.



CONCLUSION

Removing symptoms like ISIS will not stabilise the Middle East. The root causes of wars and terrorism need to be addressed during reconciliation and reconstruction, these being governance, justice and economic opportunities. To develop strategic frameworks the interlinked nature of the issues requires more inclusive negotiations at the international, regional and sub-national levels. Negotiations need to include women, and those from diverse political, military, legal, economic, academic, religious and socio-cultural spheres, depending on the issue. No one individual, institution or country should be a final arbiter of who is and is not included.

Based on negotiated outcomes, clearly defined goals need to be implemented by employing internationally co-ordinated levers on different stakeholders, including those who fail to protect civilians, and/or refuse to compromise on a specific issue and/or refuse to take a specified action in a timely fashion. Levers include internationally co-ordinated trade and investment incentives and penalties (e.g. sanctions and boycotts), potential for court actions¹, no-fly zones, peacekeeping forces, mandatory mediation, diplomatic isolation or incorporation, and military red lines, all based on explicit criteria for their continuation or removal.

Reconstruction needs to be linked to:

- The implementation of a constitution that supports plurality and a decentralisation of power and resources;
- Working with communities, respected leaders in different sectors, and all levels of government to support transparent, efficient and inclusive governance, the formation of non-sectarian political parties, local security forces governed by strict codes of conduct, judicial independence, property rights, civil society, local and diverse sustainable industries, businesses, and employment; and
- Transparency in international organisations involved in the reconciliation and reconstruction processes by way of independent assessments of their budgets and expenditures, activities and impacts.

The outcomes would include 'islands' of stability (scale being critical for success), which could offer alternative models for other places. In the case of Syria, internationally monitored elections should be delayed until the Syrian people have developed non-sectarian political parties so people can participate meaningfully and not face future problems as a result of sectarian parties monopolising government.

¹ Russia has blocked the UN ordering Assad and his colleagues to appear before the International Criminal Court, but Syrian activists hope that at least some high ranking Syrian officials hiding in Europe can be put on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity under the EU's 'universal jurisdiction' capacity to take to court individuals that have committed serious crimes in any country. Then there is the possibility of the UN Security Council approving a special international court (as it did for Rwanda) or a hybrid court comprising Syrian and international experts (as it did for Cambodia).



Why what is happening in the Middle East is relevant to Australia

Kurdish Lobby Australia often gets asked why problems in the Middle East are relevant to Australians. There are military, humanitarian and economic reasons. Australian Defence Forces has been involved in World War I, World War II, the Iraq-Kuwait War, the invasion of Iraq, and the war on terrorism, at great military cost. Unless root causes are addressed, Australia is likely to be involved in future wars, and terrorism will remain an international threat that Australia cannot afford to ignore. For instance, there is an ISIS presence in 'most provinces' of Indonesia.

On the humanitarian front, Australia's European allies and countries neighbouring Syria struggle with a refugee crisis, for which Australia must share responsibility. If the international community does not want a refugee problem, it has to fix the causes of why people leave their homes, friends and family for an unknown future.

[Australia's trade with the Middle East](#) (excluding Turkey) was worth AUD\$14.7 billion in 2015, and is growing. More than 350 Australian companies operate in the Middle East, while Middle Eastern investment in Australia reached AUD\$21.9 billion in 2013. Three of the six most important shipping routes go through the Middle East. Between 2010 and 2050, the population of the Middle East is expected to grow by 80 percent, and oil-dependent countries want to diversify their economic base. This opens up huge opportunities for Australian farmers, other businesses and industries, including those working in water and land management, agriculture, mining, health, education, transportation, financial and professional services, tourism, oil, alternative energies, engineering and construction. Doing business in the Middle East is impacted by armed conflict, personal relationships and reputation. Hence, Australian Government policies are critical for expanding opportunities.

What the Australian Government Can Do

The Australian Government can:

- Conduct informed and consistent diplomacy at the consular level, and make judicious public statements clearly stating Australia's position. For instance, Australia could point out to Turkey that its support and use of Islamist extremists could become a security threat to Australia, given the ISIS presence in south east Asia, including the [Philippines](#) and [Indonesia](#).
- Advocate the 'responsibility to protect' principle at international forums. This potentially includes implementing enforceable no-fly zones, deploying international peacekeepers, and a co-ordinated carrot and stick approach;
- Based on a respect for human, cultural and political rights, support the participation of minorities in political negotiations;
- Help develop an international strategic framework within which the different sectors can support the development and/or enactment of constitutions, and community-based reconstruction;
- Match the [cost of Operation Okra](#), which will reach [AUD\\$940.7 million by 2018 – 2019](#), with humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Syria.



Overview

ISIS

In 2015, an estimated 65,000 ISIS fighters, including 40,000 foreign fighters, controlled 50 percent of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq and Syria. In July 2017, head of US Special Operations Command, General Raymond Thomas, estimated that the US-led coalition and its allies had killed 60,000 to 70,000 ISIS fighters, with an estimated 5,600 ISIS families having returned to 33 countries. By December 2017, media reports suggested only 3,000 ISIS fighters remained in the desert on either side of the Syrian-Iraq border, with unknown numbers spread throughout Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The demise of the caliphate leaves behind traumatised civilians, including children indoctrinated by ISIS. These people live in fear of retribution, and must live or return to cities reduced to rubble and laced with ISIS-planted IEDs and unexploded munitions from Russian and US-led coalition airstrikes.

Despite the December statements of victory over the caliphate, ISIS fighters continue to conduct offensives and terrorist attacks in Iraq and Syria. These have become more frequent in the disputed territories of northern Iraq since October 2017, after Iran-backed militias and Iraqi military pushed out the Kurdish Peshmerga and police, and in Syria, since Turkey's offensive on Afrin began in January, as a result of Syrian Kurdish fighters and their allies leaving Deir Ezzor to defend Afrin, causing the US to announce an 'operational pause'.

A number of factors could cause a re-emergence of an ISIS (like) threat. These include the scale of destruction of Sunni Arab cities and towns in Iraq and Syria, and Shia governments not prioritising their rebuilding and in other ways remaining sectarian and repressive. In Syria, the Assad regime has forcibly displaced Sunni Arab populations and in April passed a law that will make most of them property-less. In Iraq, Sunni Arabs have repeatedly called for the withdrawal of non-local Shia *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilisation Units) from Sunni Arab-majority provinces, but the Shia Government of Iraq (GoI) has not done so. Instead it has legitimised these forces into an independent security force without defining their future role.

Another factor is Turkey's problematic links to [ISIS](#) and other [extremists](#). Since January 2015, Turkey claims to have detained more than 5,000 foreign ISIS suspects and deported more than 3,290 of these to 35 countries. In October 2017, Turkey's Interior Minister [Suleyman Soylu](#) claimed that Turkey had conducted 2,431 anti-ISIS operations, which prevented 22 ISIS attacks inside Turkey in the previous year. Yet in January and February, Turkey released 28 ISIS members charged or suspected of attacks in [Istanbul's Sultanahmed Square](#), Ankara, Gaziantep and Diyarbakir. In early March, a former ISIS fighter told [Patrick Cockburn](#) that most fighters in Turkey's offensive on Afrin were ISIS members who had been re-trained and armed by Turkey. The transnational jihadi coalition, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) also played a role in Afrin, as did Ahrar al-Sham and other jihadi militants. Many extremists have joined a Syrian 'National' Army, trained and salaried by Turkey, which operates in



Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo. Their stated intention is to replace the Assad regime with a Sunni Arab caliphate. By empowering these fighters, Turkey may be creating a future terrorist threat.

Cost of War²

Iraq, Syria and Turkey are in a state of war. In Iraq, the total number of combat related deaths in the fight against ISIS between January 2014 and December 2017 is estimated to be between 90,583 – 128,489 people. To August 2017, the United Nations (UN) estimates that 29,470 civilians have been killed and more than 54,000 wounded. Iraqi Body Count claims 67,376 civilians were killed in the same period. Of the 600,000 Iraqi armed forces and police, at least 26,000 have been killed and 28,000 injured. Another 8,000 Hashd al-Shaabi and 1,837 Peshmerga have been killed and 10,546 Peshmerga have been injured.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates 5.8 million Iraqis have been displaced, although 3.2 million have returned home. About 90 percent return to damaged houses, with limited or no water and electricity. Most of the war damage has occurred in Sunni Arab provinces. The [Gol](#) estimates the war with ISIS has damaged 90 percent of Anbar, including Fallujah and Ramadi, 60 percent of Nineveh, including Mosul, and 50 percent of Salahaddin, including Tikrit. US-led coalition airstrikes are largely responsible for the scale of destruction.

In Syria, the civil war and war against ISIS have [killed or wounded 11.5 percent](#) of the 2011 population of 22 million. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has documented 346,612 deaths between March 2011 – December 2017, and estimates another 137,000 undocumented deaths i.e. war in Syria has killed more than 400,000 people or 2.4 percent of the 2011 population. Until December 2017, of those who died because of war, 101,429 were civilians, 118,141 were pro-government forces (other sources say up to 169,644), 121,241 were opposition militias (other sources say up to 163,539), and 4,581 were fighters in the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), with nearly a quarter of these being YPJ fighters. Another two million people have been wounded. An estimated 5.5 million people have fled the country and six million are internally displaced, not counting hundreds of thousands displaced in 2018, including 200,000 Kurd. Otherwise, most of the displaced are Sunni Arabs. Human Rights Watch estimates that between 2011 and 2017, at least 106,000 people have been arrested or 'disappeared'. Then there are the millions who have suffered from sieges, with more than [1.7 million children](#) unable to attend school.

The [World Bank](#) estimates that the civil war has damaged or destroyed 27 percent of all housing stock, half of all medical facilities, 63 percent of all educational facilities and five major power plants in eight provinces. Electrical infrastructure is so damaged that major cities receive only a few hours of electricity a day.

² All statistics presented in this section are estimates from a variety of sources.



In the war against ISIS, the scale of destruction does not reflect the numbers of ISIS fighters killed, but rather the intensity of airstrikes. For instance, 80 percent of Raqqa was severely war damaged in the process of killing an estimated 1,367 ISIS fighters. The Manbij campaign incurred far less damage because US led coalition airstrikes were not as prevalent west of the Euphrates, yet the Kurdish-led SDF managed to kill an estimated 4,000 ISIS members.

The US war on terror since 2001 has been variously estimated to cost between \$2.1 trillion and [\\$5.6 trillion](#). The war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria between August 2014 and February 2017 cost the US between [\\$14.3 billion](#) and [\\$30 billion](#), at a rate of [\\$13.6 million a day](#). The [US Defence budget](#) request for 2019 is \$686 billion. Of this, the [Pentagon budget](#) (2019), allocated \$15.3 billion in support the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, including \$850 million for training the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga, \$300 million for the Kurdish-led SDF to fight ISIS and \$250 million for border security in Syria. Another \$10.9 billion is to 'replenish troop supplies'. The Pentagon is seeking an additional \$1.8 billion for precision guided missiles to defeat ISIS. An estimated [10,000 US troops](#) are stationed in Iraq and [3,000](#) (or more) are stationed in eastern Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. The US-led coalition also employs [5,500 military contractors](#), who serve mainly in support roles. About half are US citizens. A NATO training mission in Iraq was announced in February 2018. As of October 2017, there had been 13 American combat deaths, eight of which occurred in 2017.

War in Syria has cost Russia an estimated [\\$2.2 billion](#), or on average, \$2.5 to \$2.8 million a day between September 2015 and January 2018. In Syria, Russia has between [3,000](#) and [5,000 Russian military personnel](#) and at least 2,500 private [military contractors](#). By 1 October, 2017, between 37 and 76 Russian military personal had been killed, and in 2017 alone, the private military firm, Wagner, had 54 combat deaths, with 100 – 300 more on February 10, 2018. Syria has become a testing ground for Russian weaponry. Eyewitnesses and *The War Zone* allege that Russia used an Aviation Thermobaric Bomb of Increased Power (ATBIP) to bomb ISIS in Deir Ezzor on September 7. On December 11, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Ministry of Defence to begin a withdrawal of Russian military personnel that mainly involved [Chechen military police](#). However, more Russian warplanes have since arrived in Khmeimim airbase and Russia is expanding Khmeimim airbase and its Tartus naval facilities.

The wars in Syria have cost Iran more than any other country outside Syria. Iran has deployed [13,000 Iranian forces to Syria](#), including an estimated 3,000 IRGC, and supports between [70,000](#) and [200,000](#) local and foreign mercenaries, estimated to make up 80 percent of pro-regime forces. The local Iran-backed [Syrian Hezbollah militias](#) include *Quwat al-Ridha* in Homs, *al-Ghalibun* in Damascus, and *313 Brigade* in Daraa. Foreign mercenaries include up to 9,000 Hezbollah from Lebanon. Others come from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen. By the end of 2017, combat had killed more than [700](#) Iranians, including [400 senior officers](#).

The cost of supporting and arming these forces is \$15.9 billion annually, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, Iran has given \$15 billion in emergency funding and a credit line of between \$2.5 and [\\$5.6 billion](#) a year for supplying oil, food and medical supplies. Iran may only get a fraction of these costs back, as the Assad regime has favoured Russia in resource, trade and reconstruction agreements.

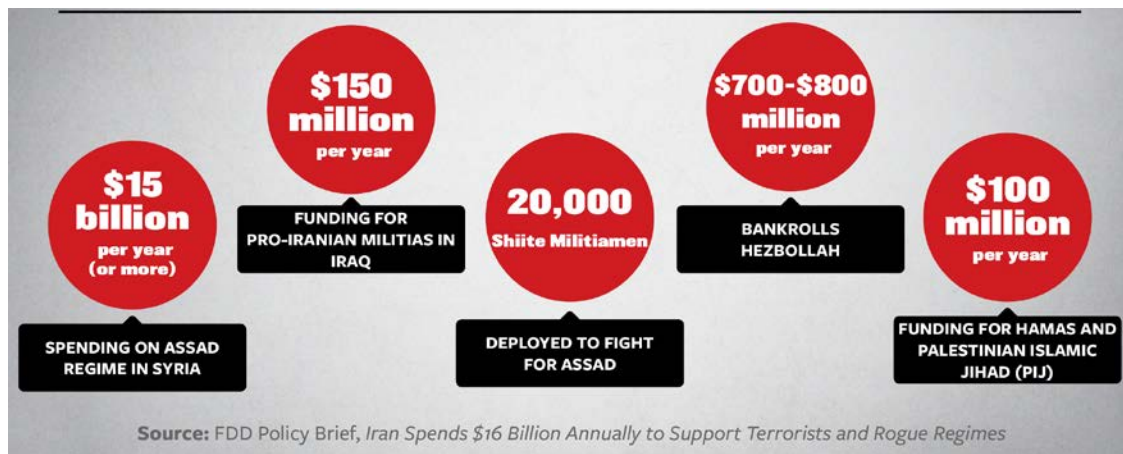


Figure 2: [Costs](#) of Iran's forward defence strategy

In Syria, Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016 – March 2017) killed 71 Turkish Land Forces and Turkey's Operation Olive Branch (January 20 – ongoing), had killed at least 77 Turkish military personnel by April 2. Turkey is also training, weaponising and paying the salaries of a new Syrian 'National' Army and other militias. In northern Iraq, Turkey is conducting airstrikes, and setting up bases to confront the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). An unknown number of Turkish soldiers have died in Iraq since 2015 (as have PKK and Iraqi civilians).

Inside Turkey, between July 24, 2015, and March 2017 the UN claims that 2,000 civilians have been killed and 500,000 displaced, including 100,000 that lost their homes to military action and post-military demolitions. By January 2018, the civil war in eastern Turkey had killed between 991 Turkish security forces (Turkish government), 1,045 security forces (Crisis Group) and 9,327 security forces (PKK). In the same time period between 1,181 PKK fighters (PKK), 1,658 (Crisis Group) and 7,071 PKK fighters (Turkish government) were killed. Another 3,020 were captured (Turkish government). Of the cities and towns impacted by the war, [70 percent](#) of Cizre, Silopi, and Nusbayin have been destroyed. Kurdish neighbourhoods of Diyarbakir have been reduced to rubble. [SADAT](#), a company of private military contractors that answers to Erdogan's chief consultant, trains militias in Syria. The financial costs of these operations are unknown, but Turkey increased its 2017 defence budget by [nearly 50 percent](#), from \$7.9 billion to \$11.5 billion in 2017. Another \$4.7 to \$4.9 billion was allocated to the defence budget in 2018.



Reconciliation and Reconstruction

If members of the international community committed the equivalent planning, expertise and spending on reconciliation and reconstruction as they do on military operations and support for these operations, there could be more than enough strategies and funds to rebuild Iraq and Syria. The sheer scale of what needs to happen requires a re-assessment of the status quo. Re-assessments need to include how armament and oil interests corrupt in-country officials and institutions, how international organisations like the UN and aid agencies operate in-country, and how to the root causes of war and terrorism can be most effectively addressed during the process. Ideally, reconciliation and reconstruction could be used to build communities, dismantle patronage networks and disperse powers and resources.

Arriving at and enacting these re-assessments requires credible diplomacy based on clear thinking that generates implementable response options. For example, US officials call Iran and the PKK 'terrorists', when terrorism is defined by the UN as 'criminal acts ... calculated to provoke a state of terror in the *general public*'. In contrast to the terrorist label, Iran could be viewed as a state using proxy forces and political infiltration as a [forward defence strategy](#), having gone through a devastating eight-year war with Iraq and feeling [threatened](#) by Sunni Arab states, Israel and the US. PKK could be viewed as a non-state actor fighting in-country security forces (and ISIS in Syria and Iraq) in defence of human, cultural and political rights. Such views open up response options. Further contributing to a deficit in response options is that US President Donald Trump has an 'America first' philosophy based on economic and military power – what [Barry Posen](#) calls 'illiberal hegemony'. Trump underrates diplomacy³ and promotes minimalist intervention, for which others must pay.

Under these circumstances, US allies must take more responsibility for developing credible diplomacy backed by action within a hierarchy of strategic frameworks. To inform these frameworks, the international community would benefit from re-embracing former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans' architected 'responsibility to protect' principle, with an emphasis on prevention, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2008⁴. To enact this principle, the international community must make significant [commitments](#) of funding, expertise and time.

Before it is too late, given what is currently happening in Iraq and Syria (as will be outlined), there is an urgent need for the international community to support transitional justice. This requires research and analysis of the crimes committed, the roles of different perpetrators and their impacts, amnesties for those not involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity, and appropriate court processes for

³ The Trump administration has yet to appoint a US ambassador to 45 countries, including Turkey, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with Australia having no US ambassador between 2016 and 2018.

⁴ Evans, Gareth (2008) *Responsibility to Protect*. Brookings Institute.



perpetuators and victims, the latter being heard without fear of retribution. Other victim and community needs include the restitution of property and the establishment of local security forces governed by strict codes of conduct, with those who act outside the codes being charged with a criminal offense. In the process, in-country lawyers and judges need to be up skilled to support an independent, impartial judiciary.

The GoI and the World Bank estimate Iraq's reconstruction will cost between \$88 and \$100 billion. The GoI wants this amount in the form of investment and donations. It has identified 212 investment projects, including 41 projects related to building residential complexes, oil refineries, petrochemical factories, airports, railways, bridges and subways, as earmarked by the Ministry of Planning. Priority should be given to projects that provide essential services, housing, and diversified sustainable industries that create jobs (not a feature of the oil industry). An International Conference of Iraq Reconstruction organised by the UN, European Union (EU) and World Bank was held February 12 – 14 in Kuwait. At the conference there were [representatives](#) from 76 countries, 51 international aid organizations, 107 associations and institutions, and 2,300 companies, including at least 150 US companies.

International aid organisations committed \$330 million in humanitarian aid, far short of the UN's requirement of \$1.05 billion to address pressing needs. Countries pledged \$30 billion for reconstruction, mostly in the form of credit lines. Again, these pledges were far short of what is required. For instance, [US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson](#) pledged a \$3 billion financial package from the US Export-Import Bank in the form of loans, loan guarantees and insurance funds for American firms investing in Iraq. This was in contrast to the US post-WWII Marshall Plan that was valued \$140 billion in today's dollars, of which 10 – 15 percent was in the form of loans, the majority of funds being in the form of grants to finance goods imported from the US. Given the extent Iraq is already in debt, the GoI may reject many of the loan offers.

Donors and investors have good reason to be cautious. The GoI has not enacted large sections of the constitution; GoI ministries have a history of mismanagement and corruption; there has been no significant reconstruction of destroyed Sunni Arab-majority cities; and the GoI has allocated minimal revenues for reconstruction in its 2018 budget. Iran's growing influence and Russia's increasing involvement in the oil, gas and defence sectors, along with the potential for civil unrest, are deterrents, hence the need for political reforms.

Syria faces even greater challenges. Reconstruction in Syria will cost between \$200 and [\\$400 billion](#), although some estimates go as high as \$650 billion i.e. two to six times that of Iraq. President Assad has repeatedly claimed that only Syria's allies (Russia, Iran and China and possibly Jordan, India and Brazil), mandated non-government organisations (NGOs) and approved local businesses will participate in the Public-Private Partnerships overseeing the process. The process will reinforce patrimonialism, involve property seizures, and further marginalise Sunni Arabs, Kurds and others. In 2016, [Russia signed contracts](#) worth nearly \$1 billion for



reconstructing infrastructure, and was given priority in being awarded future contracts. Two Kremlin-linked energy firms are already operating in the oil, gas and mining sectors. Iran has offered a \$1 billion credit line to buy Iranian products, and Iranian firms, some linked to the IRGC, have signed deals to rebuild Syrian telecommunication networks, [five power stations](#), electricity networks, and 55 schools. Iran also hopes to sign agreements in mining and agriculture. In August 2016, a Chinese-Arab business group announced a \$2 billion commitment for the construction of industrial zones. There is a lack of funds as the US, UK, EU, and the Gulf States refuse to invest in regime-controlled territory, and will not commit to significant reconstruction until there is a political transition in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

In the reconstruction phase, those responsible for the scale of destruction of cities like Raqqa and eastern Aleppo in Syria, and Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul in Iraq, must be held to account, and take responsibility for rebuilding these cities, ideally introducing sustainable housing, water and energy systems, working with local and regional governments and NGOs. In doing so new industries using efficient technologies and local capacity can be developed.

The process is critical to long term outcomes. For instance, the UN and international NGOs do not always engage with local governments, NGOs or informal groups. This [needs to change](#). Long term, success depends on tapping into what positively motivates and strengthens people and communities, including their histories, cultures, religions and politics, and the preference for social harmony. By reassessing the status quo in the provider-recipient relationship, and having independent assessments of budgets, processes, outcomes and impacts, specific solutions can evolve.

Top down, if authoritarian governments refuse to reform, or develop or enact a constitution, then the international community must re-evaluate the sanctity of sovereignty and consider supporting protectorates and autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria. After ten years, the people could vote on whether they want to remain part of Iraq or Syria, or form a confederation or become independent states, either inside current borders or across borders. Many claim this would be disruptive, but so is demolishing a condemned apartment block to avoid injury and death to its occupants.



FULL REPORT

Iraq

Overview

Iraq is facing an uncertain future. By December 2017 ISIS no longer controlled any Iraqi towns, but ISIS terrorist attacks have increased. In October, IRGC-backed militias and Iraqi security forces took control of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, causing a further breakdown in relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq (GoI). IRGC-backed political leaders are running in the national elections in May, and their Shia militias have been officially recognised as a parallel security force. Throughout Iraq there is high unemployment. Many Iraqis in the south say the current situation is worse than under Saddam: 'With Saddam Hussein you at least knew who the enemy was and knew how to avoid trouble. Now, there are too many enemies. Bombs and shootings can happen anywhere at anytime.'

The outcome of the national elections on May 12 is critical. Whoever wins, Iran's influence is entrenched outside the Kurdistan Region (KRI) and the international community will need to link reconstruction to the GoI implementing the constitution (2005) and undertaking major reforms, meanwhile building from the community up.

ISIS

In the Mosul offensive (October 2016 – July 2017), between 9,000 and 11,000 civilians died according to morgue statistics, although more remain buried under rubble. US-led coalition airstrikes, and US and Iraqi bombardments killed about a third of these civilians. ISIS killed another third. This excludes between 11,000 to 13,000 bodies found in at least 133 mass graves. More than 3,000 individuals remain 'missing'. About the same number remain missing in Ramadi and Fallujah. Mass graves continue to be found in Sinjar, around Mosul, Hawija and Salahaddin.

On November 3, the town of Qaim in Anbar province was liberated (the same day that the Assad regime announced the liberation of Deir Ezzor city). But the liberation of Rawa, also in Anbar province, and the last city in Iraq that ISIS controlled, was delayed until November 17 because of dust storms and ISIS holding around 10,000 people as human shields.

On December 9, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi finally declared victory over ISIS (without mentioning the contribution of the Peshmerga) but ISIS attacks continue in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Diyala, Nineveh and Anbar. According to the UN, ISIS attacks killed 69 Iraqi civilians in December (24 in Baghdad and 15 in Kirkuk) and injured another 142. Between January 1 and March 26, there were [100 attacks](#) recorded by IHS Jane,



including 27 in Kirkuk and 21 in Nineveh. On January 15, twin ISIS suicide attacks in Baghdad killed at least 38 people and wounded more than 100.

Taking the disputed province of Kirkuk as an example, despite Abadi announcing victory over ISIS in the district of Hawija in October, ISIS fighters were not systematically cleared from Hawija, and [an unknown number remain hiding](#) among ISIS sympathisers in villages and towns, while others have regrouped in the Hamrin Mountains, where an estimated [1,800](#) fighters now call themselves the [White Flags](#). Whereas Peshmerga had local knowledge and networks that prevented ISIS attacks, Iraqi security forces and non-local *Hashd al-Shaabi* do not. Consequently, ISIS attacks have been occurring on a daily basis in villages, Kirkuk city, oil facilities, and along the roads and highways, with ISIS setting up fake check points. In December ISIS killed [civilians](#), [Hashd al-Shaabi](#), a police chief, Colonel Fazil Sebawi, and his son and five body guards, as well as two Sunni Arab tribal leaders, Walid Nuri and Mohammed Hameed Salih Jabouri. Between January and March, the K1 military base came under heavy rocket fire that blew up a weapons cache; [ISIS ambushed and killed 27 Iran-backed Shia militants](#) and launched an attack on a Kirkuk oil field killing at least two police officers and continued to kill [civilians](#) at [fake checkpoints](#) On [March 24](#) ISIS kidnapped and killed eight Federal police on the Kirkuk Baghdad Highway. The [Badr Organisation](#) called for a security plan. The Gol did not respond. On [April 10](#), ISIS took control of two villages. On [April 11](#), ISIS killed five *Hashd al-Shaabi* militants, and the next day, killed 16 people attending their funeral. Those running in the national elections are also being [targeted](#). [ISIS members](#) who are killed or captured can be locals or foreigners, including Turkish nationals. Frequent attacks by ISIS in the first three months of 2018 meant civilians continued to evacuate villages in Daquq and Dibis, and other [disputed territories](#), heading for the KRI.

By March, the [US and UK](#) were urging the Gol to let Peshmerga co-ordinate with Iraqi security forces in the disputed territories. On March 27, [Abadi](#) announced that security cells under the leadership of the Gol's Counter Terrorism forces would include Peshmerga. This was a reversal of his previous position that Peshmerga would not return to the disputed territories. Kurdish leaders demanded that Peshmerga return as [equal partners](#), as was the case before 2014. [Hashd al-Shaabi leaders](#) and [Turkmen](#) were divided on the matter, and [Iraqi Counter-Terrorism](#) rejected a return of Peshmerga, so the joint initiative has not been actioned.

If the Gol is to succeed in the counter-insurgency phase, it will require the cooperation of the local population to gather intelligence, and the deployment of highly skilled military operators employing small unit tactics. This is not happening in the disputed territories, or the Sunni Arab provinces where *Hashd al-Shaabi* insists they will remain, despite not having the trust of the local population.

Iraqi Elections, May 12

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi insisted that national elections be held on 12 May, despite the hyper-militarised environment and more than three million Iraqis remaining displaced by war. Abadi has overseen a victory against ISIS but also cuts to salaries and pensions, a youth unemployment rate of 18 to 70 percent,⁵ a crime wave, inadequate services, the expanding influence of Iran and its paramilitaries, a parliament that wanted to introduce laws that would allow the marriage of nine-year old girls, and a population that has lost trust in their political leaders and government. Even the Shias of oil-rich, but neglected Basra want more control over their affairs.⁶

These elections are critical. The next parliament and its ministries must lead Iraq through a quagmire of debt, corruption, post-ISIS insecurity, sectarianism and reconciliation, poverty, crime, poor services (even in [Baghdad](#)), and the reconstruction of whole cities.

Twenty-four million eligible voters will be given the opportunity to choose between [7,000 candidates](#) representing 209 parties that have registered to run as 27 lists or blocs. Candidates will compete for 329 seats in a unicameral parliament, of which eight seats are reserved for minorities and a quota of 25 percent of all seats for women. About 200 parties are based on religion, including the ruling Islamic Dawa Party, but such is Iraqis' disillusionment with political Islam, especially among [young people](#), most parties have shed reference to their Islamic roots.

Shia-based parties registered 14 lists, with [five](#) being significant contenders. The Iran-backed Islamic Dawa Party (which heads the current State of Law Coalition) will run on two lists. Nouri al-Maliki (prime minister 2006 – 2014), will head one list, his coalition having been weakened by Hadi al-Amiri, an IRGC-backed leader from the Badr Organisation, having split off to form his own coalition. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi heads the other list called *Nasr* (Victory), the [only list](#) running in all 18 provinces. On 14 January, in a meeting attended by IRGC Quds force commander, [Qasem Soleimani](#), *Nasr* formed an alliance with Hadi al-Amiri, and his new *Al-Fatah* (Conquest) Coalition, established by the political wings of the IRGC's elite proxies on 23 November.

That Abadi would contemplate such an alliance should have alarmed the US and its allies, but on 15 February, the Coalition of the Mujahadeen withdrew from the *Nasr* alliance after Abadi announced a second alliance with Shia cleric, Ammar al-Hakim, and his National Wisdom Movement, formed in 2017 and calling for reconciliation with Sunni Arabs. Yet, another blow for Abadi came on January 29, when [Hakim](#)

⁵ The [UN](#) claims that oil accounts for 65 percent of Iraq's gross domestic product and one percent of its workforce.

⁶ In early January, the Governor of Basra, Asaad al-Eidani, demanded the implementation of the Iraqi constitution, including the distribution of the budget and that the province be allowed to establish a federal region in accordance with Article 119. The GoI has repeatedly rejected calls by governors and provincial councils to form autonomous regions.



announced his party's split from *Nasr* to form his own *Hikma* Coalition. The next day, six other parties quit *Nasr*. These splits are thought to be over Abadi refusing a quota system, and demanding that candidates be ranked by integrity, skills and experience, which likely meant Abadi wanted to rank candidates according to his own preferences.

In Iraq, the parliament elects the Presidential Council, which then must unanimously agree on a prime minister.⁷ In the 2014 elections, Abadi received 4,000 votes, and was not selected as prime minister, but the US insisted that before they supported Iraq to fight ISIS, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had to step down. (The US and Iran had previously insisted that Maliki become prime minister after the inconclusive 2010 elections.) The US' favoured prime minister – Abadi – gained popularity in being able to declare the defeat of ISIS, and in non-Kurdish areas, for his harsh response to the Referendum on Independence held in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and some disputed territories, when he used military force to take over the disputed territories. The advance into Kurdistan was only stopped by US mediation. He then laid siege to the KRI with the stated intention of stripping it of its constitutional autonomy. These actions cost him his Kurdish allies. Abadi also lost the support of many Sunni Arabs when he issued [a decree that formalised Hashd al-Shaabi militia](#) as a parallel security force outside the Iraqi security forces on March 9, despite US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, telling Abadi in October 2017 that on-going US support depended on Abadi dissolving the *Hashd al-Shaabi*. Also against US wishes, the Gol purchased Russian T-90 tanks, and has expressed interest in purchasing the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile defence system.

There are two other Shia contenders for prime minister: Maliki and Amiri. With Maliki being seen as corrupt and sectarian, and having overseen harsh treatment of Sunni Arabs and Kurds, and ISIS taking over 40 percent of Iraq in 2014, Hadi al-Amiri is Abadi's most significant competitor. Amiri has been in parliament since 2010 as part of the State of the Law Coalition. Among Shia Arabs he is very popular. He is seen as a war hero, having been a military commander of the Badr militia fighting on the frontlines of the war against ISIS and military takeover of Kirkuk. Although the Gol's Popular Mobilization Commission Law prohibited *Hashd al-Shaabi* militants from running for political office, Amiri was able to form his *Al-Fatah* (Conquest) Coalition because Iraq's High Electoral Commission (IHEC) licenced the political wing of the Badr organisation in February 2017, and granted an additional six licenses to smaller parties associated with IRGC-backed militias on November 6. This has allowed [500 candidates](#) with links to Shia militias loyal to Iran, Iraqi clerics or the Gol to run in the election. Candidates include at least 62 Iran-backed militia commanders, who have officially resigned from their military posts, although Amiri

⁷ If the council fails to nominate a prime minister within two weeks, a parliamentary majority must nominate a prime minister. The nominated prime minister is given one month to nominate a Council of Ministers. Failure to do this means the Presidential Council has to unanimously endorse another candidate.



was still acting as a military commander in October 2017. Many of these 'former' commanders are US-designated terrorists.

As well as his war hero status, Amiri can build on the post-2003 infiltration of Badr members into the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, and thus the Iraqi Armed Forces and police, during the de-Baathification process. This has led to one former Badr detainee of a US detention facility in Iraq, Qassem al-Araji, being the current Minister of the Interior, and another US designated Badr terrorist, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, serving as operational commander of all *Hashd al-Shaabi* under the prime minister. In addition, Amiri and other Shia candidates benefit from their multiple media outlets that exploit people's disillusionment with the corruption and incompetence of the current government.

Nevertheless, some Shia are critical of Amiri's close ties to Iran, and Amiri is not popular among Sunni Arabs and Kurds, having overseen war crimes and crimes against humanity in fighting ISIS in Nineveh, Anbar and Salahaddin, and having had an integral role in the military takeover of Kirkuk and other disputed territories. He would not be favoured by the US. Repeatedly he has declared that post-ISIS not a single US soldier will remain in Iraq.⁸ On this matter, [Sunni Arabs are divided](#), and Kurds are firmly in favour of an on-going US presence. Even if Amiri does not become prime minister, he and the Shia paramilitaries will wield significant power.

Another major player in Iraqi politics, Muqtada al-Sadr, is not running for election although his political party, the Sadrist Movement, is running. With [al-Sadr](#) claiming it is time to inject new blood into Iraqi politics, the Sadrist Movement took an unprecedented step by forming an alliance with the secular Iraqi Communist Party, the alliance registering as the Alliance of Revolutionaries for Reform. Muqtada al-Sadr advocates that state and religious institutions must be separate (a view held by [Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani](#) in contrast to the much less qualified Supreme Leader of Iran Grand Ayatollah Khamenei). Sadr also calls on all foreign fighters to leave Iraq, whether from Iran, Turkey or the US.

Many Sunni Arab political leaders wanted the election delayed so that 2.78 million IPDs and the 260,000 Iraqi refugees could return home. Abadi refused. The US is pushing for the GoI to allow IDPs to vote for candidates representing their home province, but many have [lost their IDs](#) they would need to vote. Sunni Arab leaders also wanted non-local *Hashd al-Shaabi* to withdraw from Diyala, Nineveh, Salahaddin and Anbar before the election, but the militia leaders refused to do so and the GoI has taken no action.

[Sunni Arabs political leaders](#) are also divided, having registered ten lists. There are [two main blocs](#). One is the secular (mixed Shia and Sunni) National Coalition led by former vice president, Ayad Allawi (Civil Assembly for Reform), current Parliamentary Speaker Salim al-Jabouri (Islamic Party, the Iraqi Branch of the Muslim

⁸ This has led US bases to increase their security. As a sign of things to come, *Hashd al-Shaabi* allegedly lay siege to a US military base northwest of Baghdad on [April 16](#).



Brotherhood) and former Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq. The other block is the Iraqi Decision Alliance led by Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi and Sheikh Khamis al-Khanjar, which will [only run](#) in Sunni-dominated provinces. Each other bloc is running in a particular province, and in Anbar, a [quarter of all candidates](#) are running for the first time. Another [374 potential candidates](#) were barred from running because of their alleged links with the Baath Party, although some [with Baath links](#) have been allowed to run. Sunni blocs will need to form a post-election alliance to carry any weight in the next parliament.

In contrast to the single Kurdistan Alliance that ran in the 2005, 2010 and 2014 elections, in 2014 achieving 63 seats in parliament, parties from the KRI have registered three lists. After discussions failed to produce a joint list, the two main KRI parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) will run on separate lists. Gorran (Movement for Change), Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal), and a new party established in 2017 called the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, formed a third list, called *Nishtiman* ('Homeland'), headed by former KRG prime minister Barham Salih. But *Nishtiman* will only run in Sulaimani, Halabja and the disputed territories. In contrast, the KDP will not run in 'occupied' Kirkuk. One positive development is the unprecedented number of women heading some provincial lists. The reduced security environment in the disputed territories will disadvantage all three lists, which will also be challenged by [four Arab lists](#) with 52 candidates running in the KRI for the first time. If the three Kurdistan lists can form a united front after the elections, and the Shia blocs fail to form a post-election alliance, [Kurds](#) will once again be kingmakers. A sign that the Kurdistan lists could unite is that despite Gorran, Komal and the Kurdistan Islamic Union withdrawing from the Kurdistan Parliament in December - January, all parties were united in their opposition to the 2018 budget, which cut the revenue allocated to the KRG from 17 percent to 12.6 percent. Unfortunately, their unity failed to prevent the budget from being passed, and in the upcoming elections, none of the three top Shia contenders for prime minister are popular among Kurds.

There have been numerous calls to boycott the election entirely, not because Iraqis reject democracy but because of their intense dissatisfaction with the same old faces running for parliament, the way parliamentary and ministry positions are allocated, that *Hashd al-Shaabi* leaders have become involved in politics, and that the government has been unwilling or unable to address corruption and poor services. Even [Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani](#) has called for people not to vote for the same old politicians who have overseen corruption and sectarianism. His spokesman said, 'I would rather trust a faithful Christian than a corrupt Shiite. A person who does not pray and fast but can be trusted ... is deserving of my vote.' People worry that the US and/or Iran will influence the election outcome. Given that no one party is likely to achieve a majority, and given the process of how a prime minister is selected, this is a real possibility. The dilemma for Iraqis that want to boycott the elections is that there is no law stipulating a minimum voter turnout to validate an election result.



There is fear of widespread election coercion and fraud. After campaigning began, [reports](#) emerged that *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Diyala – where half of all Sunni Arab IDPs have yet to return – were threatening to charge voters with terrorism if the voter does not endorse their preferred candidate. In Diyala and elsewhere, [Hashd al-Shaabi](#) have blocked Sunni Arab IDPs from returning, and terrorised others back into exile. In Basra, rival candidates have been harassed, and there were two assassination attempts on candidates in one day. A [female candidate](#) on Abadi's list withdrew her candidature after being the target of fake sex tapes that were spread on social media. [ISIS](#) is also threatening to target candidates and polling stations, and [claimed responsibility](#) for an assassination attempt on a Turkmen candidate in Kirkuk. Salahaddin officials complain of a lack of polling stations. Other reports suggest tens of thousands of fake voting documents have gone on sale.

In the current parliament, Sunni Arab and Kurdish parliamentarians regularly do not attend sessions in protest against the legislation being discussed (as happened over the budget) so the parliament does not have a quorum to deal with legislation. The workings of the next parliament could be further delayed and subsequently hindered by the need to form post-election alliances. Another major concern for the 15 – 22 percent of Iraqis who are Sunni Arab, the [27 percent](#) who are Kurd and other minorities, is that some Shia political leaders are advocating majority rule, rather than the power sharing arrangement that is currently in place.

These multiple factors indicate that whoever achieves a majority in the parliament, and whoever becomes prime minister (with US and Iranian approval), will make little difference to Iran's expanding influence in the political, military, economic, social and religious spheres. The best the US can hope for is that Abadi wins and continues his balancing act, which increasingly favours Iran.

As for provincial elections, Sunni Arab leaders' concerns led to their delay until December 2018. In March the [Parliament](#) agreed that Kirkuk would vote for the first time since 2005. In Kirkuk, the electoral roll is the biggest issue given the displacement of Kurds and others under Saddam Hussein, the influx of Kurds post-2005, and the displacement of Kurds since October 2017.

Justice

[By January 2018 an estimated 19,000 people](#) had been arrested on suspicion of having links to ISIS, including 8,500 from Nineveh. As many as [90,000 people](#) are subject to arrest warrants because of their alleged links with ISIS. People who [share a name](#) with an alleged ISIS member fear arrest. A Human Rights Watch report in December claimed at least 7,374 ISIS suspects have been tried or convicted since 2014, and 92 ISIS convicts have been executed. Trials were conducted in a specialized court in Mosul and another in Baghdad. These courts can hold 100 trials a day, with 60 percent of all individuals being found guilty, sometimes after a 15-minute hearing. No distinction is made between a fighter, a multiple rapist and a cook – all face the death penalty under Iraq's counter terrorism laws. Families of



those arrested are not informed of the whereabouts of the alleged ISIS member, and victims are not given their day in court.

Nasiriyah Prison holds an estimated 6,000 prisoners on death row. According to a Human Rights Watch report, 42 prisoners in Nasiriyah Prison were executed on one day in September, and another 38 prisoners were executed on one day in December, prompting international observers to call for the cessation of the death penalty, suspecting a lack of due process. Among those in prison are thousands of women who married ISIS members. In late February, Iraq's Central Criminal Court issued death sentences to [16 Turkish women](#), who were found guilty of joining ISIS and aiding terrorist attacks.

The KRG has arrested [2,652 people](#) for their alleged links to ISIS. Of these, 1,100 have been charged and 870 have been released after a court found them innocent. Another 682 remain under investigation, but the GoI has ordered the KRG to hand over all ISIS prisoners. The process began in March.

The UK government encouraged the UN Security Council to form an international investigative team to support Iraq in gathering evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide against ISIS. However, many trials will be finished before the team starts work and the team will be unable to hand evidence to Iraqi courts because of the deeply flawed trials and use of the death penalty. The team will only examine crimes committed by ISIS, and not the serious crimes committed by *Hashd al-Shaabi* and Iraqi Security Forces, the latter accused of indiscriminate killings of ISIS suspects in the last weeks of the Mosul campaign. Suspected ISIS members continue to be picked up and tortured to get a confession, and ISIS prisoners are subject to ill treatment and torture.

There are a host of other issues related to justice. Mosul doctors and teachers go unpaid as they wait for the Baghdad authorities to clear them of ties to ISIS. In Fallujah, 4,600 policemen were fired when they returned to the city. The families of ISIS members are forced into IDP camps. In these camps [women and children](#) with suspected links to ISIS are subject to rape or sexual exploitation in return for receiving humanitarian aid and cash. By [late April](#), the GoI had confiscated 18,000 homes, shops and farms of ISIS family members, including those owned by an alleged ISIS member's children, spouse, parents, siblings and cousins. The houses are being given to security personnel or made into offices.

In the past, such discriminatory practices radicalised Sunni Arab individuals. With extortion and other abuses at security points being common practise, there is a real need to train local security forces but on March 1, the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution requesting a [timetable](#) from Prime Minister Abadi for all foreign troops to withdraw from Iraq.

Reconstruction

Tikrit, Fallujah and Ramadi remain piles of rubble. To restore water, sanitation, electricity, schools, health, transport and municipal services, in June 2015 the UNDP established a [Funding Facility for Stabilization \(FFS\)](#). Twenty-three donors contributed \$420 million for 1,100 projects in 28 locations, but the fund is short by \$300 million. Also in 2015, the World Bank approved \$350 million for similar infrastructure projects and in October 2017 committed another \$400 million.

In June 2017, the US Congress objected to the US providing most humanitarian aid through the UN because insufficient aid was getting to religious minorities such as Yazidi and Christians, leading to only 20 percent of displaced Christians returning to their homes in Nineveh after Mosul was liberated. In December, US Vice President Mike Pence announced that Congress had passed *The Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act*, which authorizes the US State Department and Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide non-government faith-based entities in Iraq and Syria direct humanitarian assistance.

In 2017, Haider al-Abadi and Muqtada al-Sadr visited Saudi Arabia to foster trade and investment. At the end of August, Saudi Arabia opened one border crossing that had been closed since 1990, and Jordan opened its border crossing with Iraq that had been closed since 2014. But the border crossing openings have resulted in agricultural produce flooding into Iraq, when Iraq already faces difficulties in developing its agriculture sector. Many blame corrupt officials, traders and other businessmen making money from importing foodstuffs, poor quality seeds and fertilisers.

To advise and assist the training of civilian security forces, [the EU Advisory Mission](#) Iraq met with UN, NATO, US-led coalition policy advisors and representatives of the GoI Ministry of Interior in February to formulate a five-year plan. The EU is also involved in humanitarian aid delivery, [stabilisation, reconciliation](#) and the provision of education, health care, and water through UN agencies. A UNESCO initiative called *Revive the Spirit of Mosul* focuses on bringing expertise to assess the damage of iconic sites in Old Mosul so they can be restored or reconstructed through the training and employment of local people.

A lack of international commitment to funding reconstruction was outlined in the [Overview](#). In the absence of outside help, Iraqi citizens endeavour to rebuild their lives. For instance, the Kurdish-speaking Yazidis have rebuilt 20 of 23 temples in the Bashiqa area east of Mosul, with help from private donations.

Such piecemeal reconstruction does not address the enormity of tasks, while many programs do not recognise that host communities, as well as IDPs, are without services and need support. This does not help reconcile communities. For instance, in southern Iraq there has been increased fighting between rival Shia tribes over state construction contracts, and land ownership, which may reflect on process and

undermines the government's plans to attract new foreign investment to the oil and gas sector.

Consequences of the Kurdistan Region's Referendum on Independence

For details of actions taken by the GoI after the Referendum on Independence, see KLA report: [Why international support is required to resolve disputes between the GoI and KRG](#).



Figure 3: [Iraqi forces](#) converging on K-1 Military Base, Kirkuk, October 16, 2017

In the absence of negotiations

The KRI and disputed territories held a referendum on independence on September 25, 2017. The UN, and all countries except Israel, dismissed that 92.7 percent of all voters supported independence. The UN Security Council issued a unanimous statement about the destabilising effect of the referendum. The GoI and the Iraqi Federal Court called the referendum unconstitutional, the court deeming that the Iraqi constitution (2005) did not allow for a unilateral declaration of separation by any part of the country. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and other KRG officials claimed they respected the Federal Court's rulings but called for all disputes over internal borders, external border crossings, oil and national revenue distribution to be resolved by negotiations within the framework of the constitution. KRG officials proposed the joint administration of the two international airports and five official international border crossings and claimed to be amenable to forwarding Kurdistan's oil revenues to Baghdad. However, the KRG objected to SOMO (the state



oil and gas company) monopolising all KRI oil contracts, operations and exports, claiming it was a violation of Article 112 and an agreement made with the GoI in 2007.

The GoI position is that before significant negotiations can take place the KRG must guarantee it will not seek independence in the future, and must turn over all border crossings, oil infrastructure and future revenues to the GoI, but that the KRG would remain responsible for its \$5.5 billion debt — \$4 billion to Turkey and \$1.5 billion to the Russian gas company, Gazprom. The UN, US, UK, France, Germany, Netherlands, EU Parliament, Russia and the International Monetary Fund urged the GoI and KRG to begin negotiations, and offered to support the process. In December, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel went so far as to say that the peaceful and democratic resolution of Iraq's internal conflicts with Erbil was a precondition of Berlin's support for Iraq. To date, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has refused any external 'interference' in 'internal' matters.

In late December and January, GoI delegations visited Erbil and KRG delegations visited Baghdad to discuss 'technical' issues including the return of IDPs, the status of Erbil and Sulaimani international airports and the five official international border crossings for which the GoI continued to demand exclusive control, as well as an oil-for-budget agreement. KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani pointed out that Najaf Provincial Council has exclusive control of Najaf international airport, which receives millions of Shiite pilgrims every year. In January, delegations from the KRG education and health ministries handed over payroll lists based on the biometric digital record system introduced in 2017 to cancel double salaries and ghost employees. A committee of seven, including two from the KRG, was assigned to audit these lists before the GoI paid salaries.

The closure of Erbil and Sulaimani international airports between September 29 and March 13 impacted humanitarian aid deliveries, international NGO staff and journalists, tourism, other business, and visits of heads of state. For instance, Baghdad blocked German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel from travelling to Erbil in November, and Belgium Defence Minister Steven Vandeput from travelling to Erbil in January. Finally, after much international pressure, on March 13, the GoI agreed to open the airports to international flights provided they were subject to Iraqi Civil Aviation Law (as they already are), that representatives of the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority (ICAA) be stationed at the airports, and that the ICAA have access to monthly airport revenue data. So far, the streamline visa process adopted by the KRG since 2005 remains in place, in comparison to the lengthy process of obtaining an Iraqi visa.

Iran reopened its three official border crossings with the KRI (Haj Omran, Bashmagh and Parvez Khan) on January 2 after closing the crossings on October 14 following a GoI request to do so. In contrast, Turkey did not close Ibrahim Khalil, its only border crossing with Iraq.

Who controls the border crossings and revenue from customs remains unresolved. The GoI has yet to send representatives to jointly manage the crossings, and [claims](#) that Article 114 of the constitution refers to joint control of customs, not border crossings. However, because the GoI will pay all salaries of those administering the crossings, the GoI claims it is entitled to all revenues. Other issues, including the status and security of the disputed territories, and all matters related to oil remain unresolved.

A Military Standoff

On 16 October, a day before the Syrian Kurds announced the liberation of Raqqa, Iraqi security forces and *Hashd al-Shaabi* led by IRGC generals advanced on Kirkuk and other disputed territories in Iraq with overwhelming force. These areas had been defended or liberated from ISIS by Peshmerga since 2014. In the following 12 days, the advancing forces took control of 51 percent of territory defended by the Kurds, including oil fields and critical border crossings. A [US State Department audit](#), published on February 5, confirmed that as many as nine US M1 Abrams battle tanks and other lethal equipment provided to Iraq's military had ended up in the hands of IRGC-backed *Hashd al-Shaabi*. As a result, Abrams manufacturer, General Dynamics, suspended maintenance support for 160 tanks.

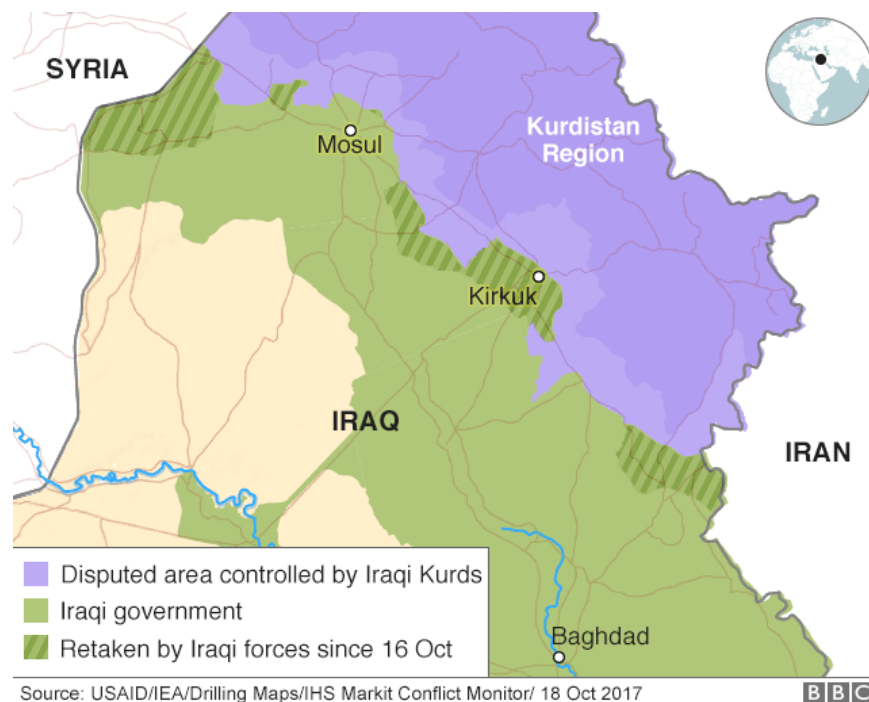


Figure 4: [Map](#) of disputed areas taken by military force in October 2017

Although Iran, through the IRGC, had orchestrated the military advance that returned KRI borders to those of 1990 – 2005, US officials claimed that the US fully supported the military movements to return borders to those that existed pre-ISIS 2014. US policy left the Kurds shocked, besieged and without their biggest



bargaining chip in negotiating with the GoI: the territory and oil of the disputed territory of Kirkuk.

US mediation prevented Iraqi forces entering the KRI and since October 27, there have been no military clashes between Peshmerga and Iraqi forces. However, these forces continue to face each other along two front lines, one being in Nineveh, from Faysh Khabur border crossing to Mosul Dam, where Peshmerga face about 7,700 Iraqi forces with Abrams and T-72 tanks, scores of other armoured vehicles, 100 artillery pieces, and dozens of missile and rocket launchers. The second front line is between the KRI and Kirkuk/Diyala. In mid-December, the Kurdistan Security Council claimed Iraqi forces were building up near Makhmour, which the GoI denied. On December 3, Iraqi forces advanced towards the Garmian area of Sulaimani province, focused on re-establishing control over two checkpoints in Diyala, which have been under KRG control since 2003. Peshmerga moved into the area to stop the advance. By late December, Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga were in a standoff near the town of Kalar, in northern Diyala, the GoI claiming they were there to fight ISIS. At the time, there were no ISIS fighters in the area.

On November 28, 'hundreds' of US troops arrived by helicopter and Humvees at K-1 military base outside Kirkuk city. According to Iraqi MP, Mohammed Haji Othman, their mission was 'to maintain the security of citizens and stability in the city'. The GoI denied the deployment and on November 29, Maliki released a statement claiming that the US presence was destabilizing the country and all US troops must withdraw. Voice of America quoted Coalition Spokesperson Colonel Ryan Dillon as saying that the Coalition forces were deployed to K-1 in coordination with the Iraqi army. Basnews reported that on December 1, some of these forces were deployed to Siddiq Airbase, 35 kilometres west of Tuz Khurmatu.

Displacement and ethnic cleansing in Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk

According to UN figures, by the end of October, 181,000 people remained displaced from Kirkuk, with 172,000 people having returned to their homes. By mid December, 154,000 people remained displaced. Most returns were to Kirkuk city, with no discernable return movements to Tuz Khurmatu, 80 kilometres south of Kirkuk city in the province of Salahaddin.

Having taken control of Tuz Khurmatu on October 16, *Hashd al-Shaabi* had prevented civilian movement, confiscated 3,000 houses, looted 2,000 houses, burnt 400 houses and bombed 50 houses, with many of these houses belonging to volunteer Peshmerga or those who co-operated with Peshmerga. More than 180 Kurdish-owned restaurants, shops and other businesses met similar fates. The offices of Kurdish political parties were burned or taken over by Iraqi forces. All Kurds left the town. Up to 20 government workers would return only in the day to work. Sunni Arabs were told it was safe to return, but in late November and bomb in Tuz Khurmatu killed up to 80 Sunni Arabs, injuring another ninety. This came after a car bomb killed 32 people and injured 75, including six Iraqi security personnel on November 21. In early December, Salahaddin police arrested 17 Tuz Khurmatu police



officers for their participation in the referendum, and issued arrest warrants for another twelve police.

In late December, Hadi al-Amiri promised that Shia militias would withdraw from Tuz Khurmatu and in mid-January Iraq's Rapid Response Force was deployed to Tuz Khurmatu, initially clashing with *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* militants who did not want to leave. The Rapid Response Force arrested the head of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* in Tuz Khurmatu, Hasan Karim, and then entered Kurdish neighbourhoods, where they disarmed Arabs and Turkmen, looted homes and arrested Kurds. On January 10, in the absence of Kurdish and Arab members of Tuz Khurmatu's seven-member council, the council voted in favour of removing the Kurdish mayor, Shalal Abdul. The On January 18, the GoI announced that federal police would take over the security of Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk city. Many of these police are linked to the Badr organisation.

After being forced to evacuate Tuz Khurmatu, some Kurds decided to fight back. On December 1, Kurdish 'volunteers' clashed with *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* near Tuz Khurmatu, and on December 10, two *Hashd al-Shaabi* militants were wounded in a mortar attack in Tuz Khurmatu, with fighting against *Hashd al-Shaabi* also occurring in a nearby village. *Hashd al-Shaabi* responded by shelling the areas where the resistance groups were operating. In Kirkuk city, in the Kurdish suburb of Rahimawa, an unknown group used RPGs, hand grenades, machine guns, and rifles to attack Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Forces and *Hashd al-Shaabi* on December 7.

Kirkuk Provincial Council has not met since October 2017. KDP officials refuse to return because their offices have been taken over by *Hashd al-Shaabi*. By December 31, the Governor of Kirkuk and 80 Kurdish officials, as well as the mayors of Daquq, Tuz Khurmatu and Mandali had been removed from their posts, as had five Kurdish managers of the North Oil Company. Arabs and Turkmen replaced them.

The Arabisation of Kirkuk since October includes Sunni Arabs from IDP camps being allowed to settle in Kirkuk city and decrees by the Baghdad-appointed governor allowing the Federal Police to give Kurdish families in some villages 72 hours to leave their homes. Arab and Turkmen provincial officials currently running Kirkuk city claim that under Kurdish rule, 22,000 Arabs were displaced from the province, although they admit that only 6,000 land disputes were resolved between 2005 and 2017. On a field trip to Kirkuk in 2016, I found many Kurdish landowners had negotiated a shared arrangement with Arab farmers, and IDPs living among the host community claimed that their hosts were their only source of help – not the government or humanitarian organisations.

Security in the disputed territories

With the withdrawal of Peshmerga and Kurdish police from Kirkuk and other disputed territories in October 2017, there was a loss of intelligence and local networking that had prevented ISIS attacks and other violence since 2014. From



October, Iran-backed militias, and, nominally, Iraqi police and security forces, have been in charge of security. As well as the daily ISIS attacks already described, the security situation has deteriorated with assassinations, robberies, kidnappings, including of women, other criminal activities, fire fights and clashes between militias. For instance, on December 20, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* and local Turkmen militants clashed near Tuz Khurmatu causing the Baghdad-Kirkuk highway to be closed.

Since the military takeover of Kirkuk city, at least [40 Kurdish citizens](#) have been assassinated or kidnapped, and 19 Turkmen have been assassinated. *Hashd al-Shaabi* militants have arrested Kurdish police, Kurdish officials of political parties and journalists. Those celebrating Newroz in Kirkuk city in 2018 were subjected to security forces firing live bullets over their heads, and physical alterations if they waved the flag of Kurdistan. The Kurdistan flag is now banned in Kirkuk.

Violence in Nineveh and Diyala has also increased. On February 10 at least seven Kurdish youths were killed and four were wounded in Khanaqin after an unidentified armed group opened fire on them. [In Sinjar](#), the *Hashd al-Shaabi* imposed their own patronage networks and administration, appointing a new district director and other officials. They demanded the Yezidi militia be incorporated into the *Hashd al-Shaabi*. Turkey's threats on Sinjar in late March caused the Iraqi army to move into Sinjar, and the PKK to withdraw on the understanding that the Yezidi Protection Units that the PKK had trained be incorporated into the Iraqi army.

KRG financial difficulties

Iran has gained from the takeover of Kirkuk and other disputed territories at the expense of Turkey and the KRG. On November 10, Iraqi Oil Minister Jabbar al-Luaybi announced that Tehran and Baghdad had reached an agreement to export 60,000 barrels of oil a day by tanker from Kirkuk to Iran until an oil pipeline was constructed to the Kermanshah oil refinery. In 2018, [Abadi allegedly backtracked on the new pipeline deal](#), but the original agreement of exporting oil by truck remains, and in return Iranian exports expensive gas and oil into southern Iraq.

Initially, Turkey approved the GoI taking over Kirkuk's five oil fields. Turkey expected SOMO to export Kirkuk oil through Turkey and discussed opening a new border crossing and a new pipeline through Ovakoy, about eight kilometres from the Faysh Khabur crossing into Syria, but no oil from Kirkuk has been exported through Turkey since October. However, Turkey continues to export KRI oil through the pipeline to Ceyhan. If a new pipeline is not built, the GoI will have to rely on the KRG pipeline, in which Russia and Turkey have a stake. The takeover of Kirkuk could block a planned pipeline from Basra to Jordan.

Based on a decision made by the former PM Nouri al-Maliki without recourse to the Iraqi Parliament or Council of Ministers, the GoI stopped paying the KRG and Kirkuk an agreed distribution of national revenue in January 2014, because the KRG was exporting oil independently of SOMO. Subsequent financial difficulties, in part due to the lack of revenue from the GoI, reduced oil prices, financing a war with ISIS and



[hosting](#) 1.19 million IDPs and 275,000 Syrian refugees caused the KRG to fall in arrears in paying government sector salaries, including Peshmerga salaries.⁹ With an on-going financial crisis throughout Iraq, [in 2015 the Gol cut salaries](#) to some public servants in the south, and ceased sending salaries to ISIS-controlled towns. In February 2016, the KRG announced cuts to all government sector salaries by up to [75 percent](#). Since the cuts, specialist physicians and surgeons in the KRI are paid \$420 a month, reduced from \$1000 a month. Teachers are paid on average \$346 a month, reduced from \$604. In comparison, a medical specialist in central and southern Iraq is paid [\\$2,300](#) a month and a teacher is paid between \$756 and \$1,130.

Since October, the two KRG-administered oil fields in Kirkuk have not operated, reducing KRG oil revenue by about 50 percent, although in January, the [Gol Ministry of Oil](#) did not comply with a parliamentary directive to stop sending oil to KAR Group's oil refineries in Erbil governorate, and is set to double its supply. On January 18, BP and the Gol signed a Memorandum of Understanding for BP to resume a reservoir study in Kirkuk for the purpose of increasing production from Kirkuk to 750,000 barrels a day. This is a repeat of the 1990s, when the Baathist regime maximised its oil production in Kirkuk, without investing in essential infrastructure.

After the loss of revenue from Kirkuk oil fields, the KRG was in a worse financial position. The Gol's budget for 2018 was passed in early March, having been delayed for months because Kurdish and Sunni Arab MPs boycotted the relevant sessions so a quorum could not be formed. Some [50 Shia MPs](#) also opposed the budget bill. All provinces faced budget cuts, but the KRI faced the most severe cut, the revenue proportion to the KRI being reduced from 17 to 14 percent (up from the previous 12.67 percent demanded by Abadi). The budget also proposed to [distribute funds to the four KRI provinces](#) rather than to the KRG, which is against the constitution, and was conditional on the [KRG paying back](#) all revenue received from the Kirkuk oil fields since 2014. The budget also contained a [provision](#) that the Gol will not cover gross payments to foreign oil companies that have an agreement with the KRG, but will cover payments to companies if they sign new agreements with the Gol, but only after the KRG hands over all oil exploration, production and revenues to the Gol. The budget makes a general reference to paying Peshmerga salaries but omits operational costs. On March 13, Iraqi President Fuad Masum returned the budget to parliament for revision, citing [31 constitutional, legal and financial violations](#) related to the KRI. But the parliament ratified the budget and on April 4 President Masum [filed a lawsuit](#) with the Supreme Federal Court against the head of the parliament citing 14 violations contained in the budget, most related to distributions to the KRG.

Back in October 2017, the Gol promised to pay [the full amount of all salaries](#) of the KRG's public sector after an audit of the KRG electronic databases of government employees was completed. The audit was delayed. With KRG public sector salaries having not been paid since August, on December 17, protests began in Sulaimani and

⁹ In addition, the Gol has not paid KRI farmers for wheat sold to the Gol since 2014.



Halabja over the non-payment of salaries, government corruption and a lack of services. Some protestors in Pirmagrun, northwest of Sulaimani, set fire to buildings of Kurdistan's five main political parties. The Governor of Sulaimani called for calm, and the KRG condemned the violence. The next day, security forces used water cannons and tear gas to break up protests in Sulaimani city, and the NRT news channel was raided by police and taken off-air. In Koya, protesters set fire to the mayor's building, offices of KDP and Gorran and lowered the flags of the PUK, the Islamic Group (Komal) and the Kurdistan Islamic Union. In Rania, security forces clashed with protesters, after which, they used live ammunition to disperse the crowd. Between five and 25 protesters were killed and up to 200 were wounded. Activists and journalists were arrested. When protests in Sulaimani continued into a third day, troops and anti-riot police locked down the city, stationing armoured personnel carriers, water cannons and trucks mounted with machine guns at the main crossroads. From Germany, PM Nechirvan Barzani announced, 'The region is going through a difficult period. Your frustrations are understandable and I hear them. But violence is unacceptable. I ask you to hold peaceful demonstrations.'

As of April 9, the only payments to the KRG were the November 2017 salaries for 420 workers responsible for the KRI's 17 dams that supply water to the south, another \$380 million transferred by the Central Bank of Iraq to a new account for the KRG Ministry of Finance on January 3, \$210 million that the Central Bank transferred to its branch in Erbil on January 29, and [\\$268 million](#) sent in March for Peshmerga and government sector salaries. Thus, the GoI has sent only a fraction of the [\\$759 million](#) a month the KRG claims it needs to pay public sector salaries. While this amount is approximately equivalent to the amount the KRG would receive if the GoI paid what it promised to pay, supplemented by the KRG's own oil sales, customs revenues and other sources, the KRG must also pay interest on debts accrued, remittances to energy companies, and operational and maintenance costs for services in all sectors, including health, education, water and electricity.

As a result of not being paid their reduced salaries since December, medical staff and teachers in Sulaimani went on strike on March 25. For the first time, protests spread to Erbil and Dohuk. Protests continued into a third day, with demonstrators demanding the immediate payment of full salaries. Although the protests were peaceful, [security forces](#) came out in strength and tear gas was used and some protesters were [assaulted and arrested](#), prompting the [KRG Minister of Interior](#) to later claim that the perpetrators of heavy-handed tactics would be brought to justice. The KRG announced it would take immediate action to institute regular payments of less reduced salaries. Protesters were not satisfied. Excluding Erbil and Dohuk, protests continued into April, with demands that all civil servants have their [salaries paid in full](#) and that salaries be commensurate with salaries paid in the rest of Iraq. For this to occur, the KRG is reliant on Baghdad distributing the KRG's share of revenue. Following these protests, the US announced it had allocated [\\$365 million](#) to pay Peshmerga salaries in 2018. To this, Baghdad officials voiced their objections.

Baghdad is also sending insufficient or irregular medical supplies. This impacts the care of IDPs and the host community, with 60 percent of maternity patients and 50



percent of cancer patients being IDPs, who are treated free of charge in KRI hospitals. Kurdish health officials have been forced to purchase medical supplies from private companies using loans amounting to \$100 million.

Since October 2017, more than 300 minimarkets, a third of the total, have closed in Erbil, and business is impacted by a new Gol regulation that Kurdish companies need a Gol permit to sell into central and southern Iraq.

With the KRG having over-relied on the US and Turkey for support, KRG leaders have attempted a reapproachment with Iran. On a visit to Tehran in February, KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani gave assurances that the KRG would not allow Iranian Kurdish opposition groups to launch cross-border attacks from Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG has also attempted to ease tensions with the Kurds of Rojava (Syria), and on February 9 sent a cross-party delegation with medical supplies to Afrin, which was fighting Turkish forces.

Politics inside the KRI

Events on and since October 16 have caused much acrimony among Kurdish political parties, with accusations of betrayal flying in all directions. In November, Gorran presented [a list of demands](#) to the KRG, KDP and PUK, that included forming a representative committee to negotiate with Baghdad, the annulment of all decisions made during the deactivation of parliament (2015 – 2017), the cleaning up of electoral lists and reform of electoral laws, the formation of a committee to finalise the KRI constitution, the empowerment of ministers, uniting Peshmerga forces, the decentralisation of administrative and financial powers to the four provinces, and a review of oil and gas laws and agreements. All this was to be done over a seven-month period, after which elections should be held.

The KRG claimed it was instigating reforms of Peshmerga forces, taxation and subsidies, an electronic database system for all departments and expanding the private sector. In December PM Nechirvan Barzani called for parliament to set a date for KRG parliamentary and presidential elections, which the KDP wanted to expedite before the national elections in May. Barzani also requested that Gorran ministers re-join the cabinet, but on December 20, Gorran and Komal withdrew from the Kurdistan Parliament, which impacted 23 Gorran parliamentarians, and six Komal parliamentarians. Gorran claimed they withdrew because the KRG refused to instigate an interim government, with Gorran preferring elections to be delayed until September so electoral rolls could be cleaned and laws reformed. In January, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), which held ten seats, withdrew from parliament. This left only two parties in the 111-seat parliament: KDP with 38 seats and the PUK with 18 seats, along with 11 seats held by ethnic and religious minorities.

With Kurds increasingly disillusioned with the main political parties, new parties formed in 2017. They were the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, led by former KRG Prime Minister Barham Salih, and the New Generation Party, led by a businessman, Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir, who was responsible for the 'Not for Now'



campaign before the referendum. These parties could challenge the pre-eminence of KDP and PUK in the next elections. Both parties are campaigning on a parliamentary system, uniting Peshmerga forces, establishing an impartial judiciary, and resolving the status of the disputed territories.

If Kurdish political leaders and ministries could become more effective, they could do much to build on the natural wealth of Kurdistan – its oil, gas, water, rich agricultural land and youthful population, its central location and internal security. Perhaps this is why the US is building the largest US consulate complex in the world in Erbil, announced by the [US ambassador](#) to Iraq on April 23.

Ways forward

The actions and inactions of the GoI in the last six months do not reflect a government that wants to be inclusive and democratic. The problem is that there are no checks and balances to hold the GoI to account. There is no bicameral system, (as stipulated in the constitution) and no independent judiciary.

The international community has directly and indirectly contributed to the suffering of the Iraqi people for the last 40 years. The same international players must ensure the Iraqi people have a better future. KLA has long argued that the stabilisation and reconstruction process offers an opportunity to review the status quo, by rewarding constructive action from the community level up, and by insisting the Federal Court clarify and the GoI implement the constitution (see [Supporting a Functioning Federation of Iraq](#)), speed up GoI-KRG negotiations, especially over oil and the disputed territories, as well as negotiations with other provinces that want autonomy, and for all levels of government to become more accountable and efficient, especially in providing adequate services throughout the country and rebuilding destroyed Sunni Arab-majority cities. Iraqis would benefit from the establishment of non-sectarian political parties (the Kurdistan region being the most advanced in this regard), and establishing councils to ensure women's, youth and minority rights are protected. Better quality education, up-skilling the workforce and creating diverse sustainable industries could be encouraged during the reconstruction process. Otherwise, there should be predetermined consequences if a dysfunctional structure or sphere of power resists pressure to reform in a specified time frame.



Syria

Overview

What is happening in Syria reflects the paralysis of the UN Security Council and the failure of the international community to protect civilians against a regime willing to kill its own people and destitute the country to stay in power. After seven years of war, Syria is gridlocked on multiple fronts of self-interest, with military tensions reaching dangerous levels in 2018. The UN Security Council has passed 18 resolutions with no means of enforcing them. Resolution 2401 was passed on February 24, calling for a one-month, countrywide humanitarian ceasefire excluding ISIS, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and others deemed terrorist organisations. No-one was listening: the Assad regime, supported by Russia and Iran, is determined to take back Syria by any means; Turkey is determined to 'neutralise' all non-subservient Kurds, and Israel is determined to ensure Iran does not entrench itself in Syria.

Until December 2017, the US-led coalition was focused on ISIS, leaving the thorny issues related to the civil war to Russia, the only country that has relations with all stakeholders. While all stakeholders claim to support a united Syria, Syria is now divided— Russia overseeing regime-controlled areas in the west, Iran in the south, Turkey in the northwest, and the US-Kurdish-Arab alliance in the east, although these sectors differ in size and resources.

Since Astana I, May 2017:

- The Assad regime, with Russian air support and Iranian ground support, has increased the territory it 'controls' from 19.3 percent to 55.7 percent of the most populated areas of Syria;
- The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the US-led coalition, increased its territory from 22 percent to [32.8 percent](#) this territory including Syria's water, hydro-electric, oil and gas resources and rich agricultural land;
- US-led coalition and Arab militia-controlled territory remained at 1.9 percent;
- Territory controlled by Opposition militia was reduced from 19.2 percent to 13.7 percent by November 2017, and further reduced by April 2018;
- Turkish controlled territory increased from 1.2 percent of Syria with the addition of Afrin and villages around Tal Rifaat by April 2018; and
- ISIS-controlled territory was reduced from 39 percent to less than 3 percent.¹⁰

Based on territory and population, the biggest stakeholder is the Assad regime, which is reliant on rival proxy forces and foreign patrons to maintain control. The

¹⁰ Note that these figures do not add up to 100 percent.

second biggest stakeholder is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their political counterparts in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. This has led Russia and Iran to use various means (including allowing Turkey to attack the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin) to convince Kurds to negotiate with the regime. The most significant unknown, which could determine the future of Syria, is how far the US is willing to support the SDF and the federal system. Other unknowns are the extent Russia is willing to support President Bashar al-Assad and, with Turkey, [trade Kurds for Opposition compliance](#).

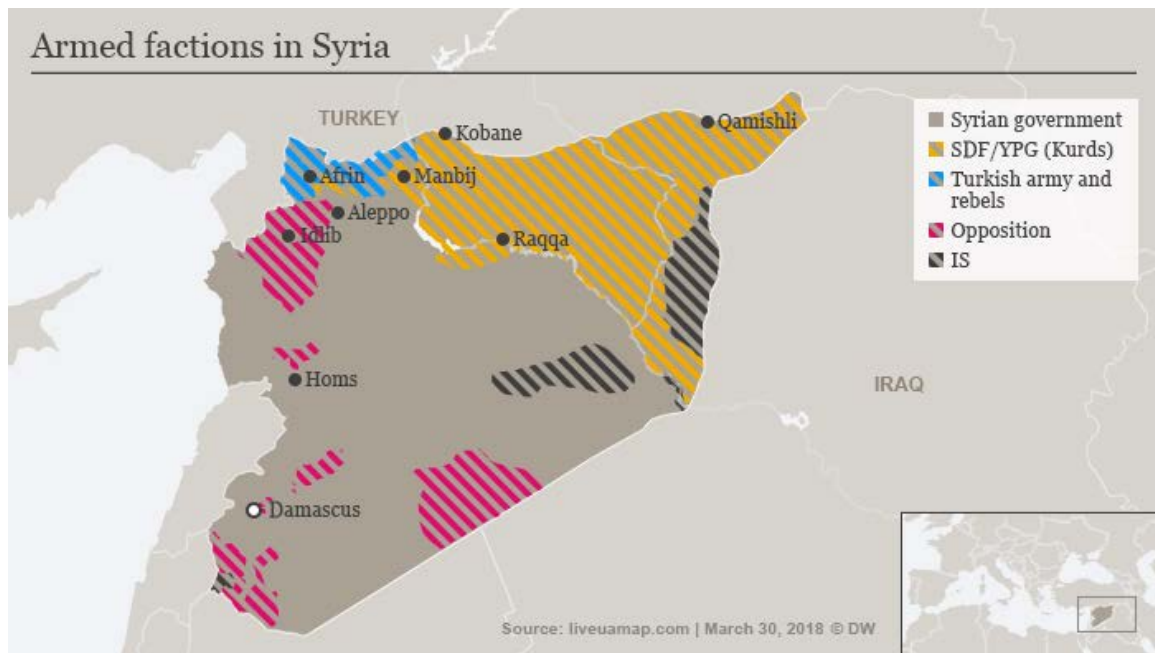


Figure 5: [Map](#) of Syria showing zones of influence, March 30, 2018

In December, US officials announced that the US was staying in northern and eastern Syria until ISIS was defeated and there was a political transition. US Defence Secretary James Mattis voiced another significant change in strategy on January 19 (the day before Turkey attacked the Kurdish district of Afrin), when outlining the Pentagon's new [National Defence Strategy](#) at John Hopkins University. He claimed the strategy prioritises countering nations 'pursuing a world order aligned with authoritarian values' and 'To those who would threaten America's experiment in democracy: If you challenge us, it will be your longest and worst day ... great power competition — not terrorism — is now the primary focus of US national security.' This perspective had immediate repercussions on the US – Russia – Turkey triangle of interests.

While it is well established that the intransigence of the Assad regime and a radicalised Opposition (the latter only a narrow representation of Syrian society) has led to the failure of the UN and Astana-Sochi negotiations to effect a political transition, what is not widely discussed is how this failure reflects on Russia as much as the UN, and other members of the international community.



In Syria, Russia is currently perceived as the puppet master. Back in October 2015, Russia claimed it would take three-months to sort things. In December 2017, Putin announced the Russian military would begin withdrawing. In February (after the US killed Russian mercenaries in Deir Ezzor) [Russia announced](#) the arrival of more warplanes at Khmeimim airbase, including the latest fifth-generation Su-57 stealth fighters, as well as Su-35S multi-role fighters and four Su-25 ground attack aircraft. President Vladimir Putin's wish for progress on a political solution before Russia's elections in March proved elusive.

In providing air support, Russia has used cluster bombs, killed more than 5,000 civilians, targeted 119 medical facilities, and contributed to the displacement of 85 percent of all IDPs. In overseeing these war crimes, Russia has undermined any trust it held among the Opposition, which increasingly answers to Turkey.

Any Assad regime statement, position, contract or action needs approval from a Russian advisor stationed in each ministry. Yet a more confident Assad has become more resistant to Russian pressure. After enabling the regime to cantonise the Opposition, Russia has been unable to control the regime's offensives (and use of chemical weapons), or push the regime towards a political compromise. While Russian businesses are said to be benefitting from rights to oil, gas and mineral exploitation, and favourable terms of trade (at the expense of Iran), these benefits do not include access to Syria's largest oil and gas fields, which are held by SDF and the US-led coalition.

Russia's military successes are dependent on Iran-led ground forces, and its ability to negotiate with the Opposition is increasingly dependent on Turkey's influence over opposition militias. Russia does not have control over either of these 'allies'. Russia has failed to prevent Iran building military installations and positioning Iran-backed militias within reach of the Golan Heights, and may fail in preventing Iran building an IRGC equivalent in Syria. These activities are a source of anxiety for Israel, and have led to clashes between Israel and Iran on Syrian soil, which Russia has failed to prevent. In turn, Iran fears a Russian – US agreement that does Iran no favours in Syria, resents the Assad regime favouring Russia in so many deals and Iran-backed militias have taken action against Turkish forces without Russian approval. Meanwhile, the US, Saudi Arabia and others have arguably given up on the removal of Assad in return for the removal of Iranian forces, proxies and bases. But it is beyond Russia's capacity to remove Iran from Syria, just as it is beyond the US' capacity to remove Iran from Iraq. Unless there are significant changes in transnational strategies, and a political transition, over time, Iran will exert increasing political, economic and military influence in Syria, as it has done in Iraq.

While Russia and Turkey are currently trading Opposition-held towns in Idlib and eastern Ghouta for Kurdish-held Afrin and villages around Tal Rifaat in northern Aleppo, Russia is not in control of Turkey's actions. Against Russia's wishes, Turkey has trained a Syrian 'National' Army in Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo, co-



ordinated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, advised and supplied opposition militia in their attacks on Syria and Russia in January and February, and consolidated its occupation of northern Aleppo. It is also threatening to expand its offensives across northern Syria, and refuses Russia's request to hand Afrin to the regime.

Russia does not share a common vision of Syria's future with Turkey, which wants a state run by subservient, Sunn Arabs, or the Assad regime and Iran, which want the status quo. The Syrian theatres' complexities are beyond any one stakeholder's control, and its costs to Russia are growing, including the risk of being further isolated from the international community. These unravellings mean Russia needs help to extricate itself from its Obama-predicted quagmire in Syria.

To end the Syrian nightmare, effect a political transition and embark on reconstruction, Russia and the US will have to come to some sort of understanding. The Assad regime has destroyed about one third of all residential infrastructure and other non-military targets, and threatens to confiscate the property of more than half the population. With most destruction occurring in regime-controlled areas (except for Kobani and Raqqa under SDF control), unless there is a significant political transition, and international intervention, the Assad regime will use reconstruction to reinforce the regime's patronage networks and expand its demographic changes. Syria's allies lack the resources for the massive scale of reconstruction. Instead, these allies are interested in exporting resources, making trade deals and offering credit lines. While some argue that Assad has won the civil war, this report will show that this is a simplistic view, and that under Assad, both the civil war and all the proxy wars would continue. The only hope is that with the US, EU and Gulf States refusing to invest in reconstruction in regime-controlled areas until there is an acceptable political transition, Russia may be more open to convincing President Bashar al-Assad and his closest colleagues to step down.

War against ISIS

By December 2017, the US-led coalition and Kurdish-led SDF, and the Russian and Iran-backed (pro) Assad forces had removed ISIS from all major towns in Syria, but ISIS continues to launch counteroffensives and suicide bombings in the Deir Ezzor desert along the border with Iraq and in regime controlled areas of northern Hama, Homs and Idlib, and in the south, around Damascus and near the Golan Heights.

To avoid a confrontation between Russia and the US in the south, and in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in the east, a de-confliction line was established along the Euphrates River and between June 18 and September 12, the de-confliction channels worked. However, on September 12, Russian airstrikes hit the SDF northeast of Deir Ezzor city, and on October 6, the US-led coalition shelled pro-regime forces advancing on Al-Tanf in the south. (Other clashes are outlined in the section on Deir Ezzor.)

US-led coalition support for the SDF in Deir Ezzor became more critical after US allied Arab fighters from *Usud al-Sharqiya* (Lions of the East), *Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo*



Brigade and Maghawir al-Thawra (Revolutionary Commando Army), all previously in the now defunct Free Syrian Army, withdrew from their positions in the south eastern desert known as the Badia to the Al-Tanf de-confliction zone in October, after which pro-regime forces swept northeast and seized territory and outposts abandoned by these militia. This left the SDF to advance towards Abu Kamal in a failed attempt to prevent Iran-led pro-regime fighters meeting up with IRGC-led *Hashd al-Shaabi* fighters from Iraq. These pro-Assad regime and Iraqi forces took Abu Kamal in November, while on [April 19](#) Iraq bombed ISIS in Syria.

Following Turkey's offensive on the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in northern Aleppo, beginning on January 20, many SDF fighters left Deir Ezzor to defend Afrin, and the US was forced to announce an operational pause in their fight against ISIS. Since then, the US-led coalition has made [no gains in ISIS-held territory](#) in Deir Ezzor. [ISIS remains active in regime-controlled areas](#) and has been able to reclaim some territory from pro-regime forces.

Raqqa

The Raqqa campaign started on June 5, 2017.¹¹ By September 21, 80 percent of the city had been destroyed. In August alone, the US-led coalition dropped 5,775 bombs, shells and missiles costing an estimated \$13.6 million a day, which helped the SDF take control of 90 percent of the city. An estimated 700 mainly foreign ISIS fighters and 1,500 pro-ISIS militants using about 1,000 to 2,000 civilians as human shields remained in the stadium and hospital in the city's centre. Unexploded munitions and IEDs prevented the SDF from clearing other parts of the city and ISIS still controlled 74 percent of the province, including the towns of Abu Kamal and Mayadin.

The SDF, Raqqa Civilian Council and local tribes attempted to convince ISIS to evacuate the stadium and hospital. There were arguments between foreign and local ISIS fighters about whether to continue fighting, and French intelligence rejected the evacuation proposal because some of the ISIS fighters were allegedly involved in the November 2015 attacks in Paris. On October 14, 2017, a deal was reached to allow local ISIS fighters to leave in buses. About 250 fighters and 3,500 family members left in a convoy, taking human shields with them. An estimated 250 to 500 foreign and local ISIS fighters and 400 civilians remained in the stadium and hospital. Finally, on October 17, the SDF raised their flag in the stadium and hospital and on October 20, after 130 days of fighting, although an estimated 100 ISIS fighters remained in the city, the SDF officially declared Raqqa liberated.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the four month campaign killed 1,114 civilians including 267 children and 198 women, ISIS IEDs killed 156 civilians, and fighting killed 1,338 ISIS fighters and 624 US-led coalition fighters,

¹¹ For a description of the early stages of this campaign see <http://www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Post-ISIS-States-VI.pdf>



including five fighters of American, Georgian, British and Turkish origin. Airwars claimed the Raqqa campaign killed 1,800 civilians. According to the SDF, they lost 793 SDF fighters with another 1,685 being injured. To escape fighting 270,000 people had fled to IDP camps in SDF-secured territory including al-Hawl Camp (south of Hasaka city, hosting 26,000 people), al-Aresha Camp (hosting 30,000), al-Mabroula Camp (hosting 12,800) and Ayn Issa Camp (hosting 28,600) with another two camps (West Manbij Camp and Rubar camp) located west of the Euphrates. Humanitarian aid deliveries came from the KRI through the Faysh Khabur border crossing. Turkey had blocked its border to humanitarian organisations and the Assad regime blocked all but two humanitarian convoys into SDF-secured territory. Consequently, the camps lacked drinking water, a sewage system, electricity and sufficient medicines. Another one million IDPs lived outside the camps among host communities.

In the liberated parts of Raqqa province, the under-resourced Raqqa Civilian Council organised volunteers into 14 committees, each tasked with specific duties, the primary ones being clearing IEDs, rubble and corpses, helped by a EU donation of \$3 million and the US State Department donating 56 bulldozers. With Saudi support, the US was also providing water tanks, sewerage and hygiene kits for returnees, and is restoring water and electricity services. In late 2017, France pledged \$17.65 million and Germany pledged \$12.23 million towards these activities.

At the end of November, some 4,000 people returned to three neighbourhoods, which were handed over to the Raqqa Internal Security Force (RISF) that answers to the Raqqa Civil Council, both organisations comprising individuals from Raqqa city and province. By December 20 an estimated 50,000 of the 200,000 residents of Raqqa had returned to fringe suburbs. Those with houses only partially damaged started to clean up and rebuild, despite fearing ISIS sleeper cells, ISIS spies and revenge attacks, and despite the 5 pm curfew because of these threats. The SDF secured the perimeters of the city and prevented ISIS attacks, but IEDs and unexploded ordinance continued to be a danger, killing an average of [50 civilians a week](#), with the injured being treated in makeshift clinics.

Reconciliation and reconstruction will be even more difficult than liberation. Key to the Raqqa Civilian Council being accepted will be its capacity to liaise and co-ordinate with local tribes and navigate conflicts of interest. Arab-Kurdish relations are complicated by inter-Arab divisions, Arabs changing allegiance, and Arabs being divided about the Raqqa Civil Council being influenced by PYD ideology that tests patriarchal norms, with YPG/YPJ having trained 500 Raqqa women in Ayn Issa to form an all-Arab women's unit, and PYD insisting on all committees having a female co-chair, and outlawing polygamy and under age marriage, which had soared under ISIS.

Divergent geopolitical interests make relations more difficult. Both the Assad regime and Turkey are infiltrating Raqqa and stirring up resentment among local Arab tribes, each trying to convince tribes that only they can provide a way forward. For instance, [Russian Ambassador to the UN](#) argued at an open meeting of the UN



Security Council on April 17 that reconstruction could only begin after the Assad regime assumed control of Raqqa. But this would deter Gulf States from becoming involved.

The assassination of Raqqa Civil Council co-chair and member of the Syrian Democratic Council (overseeing all territory liberated by the SDF), [Omar Alloush](#), in Tal Abyad on March 14 was a huge loss for Raqqa, as he was instrumental in establishing good relations between Kurds, Arabs and the US-led coalition. He had worked hard on relations not only in Raqqa, but also in Tal Abyad, Manbij and Tabqa. A proxy militia, *Harakat al-Qiyam*, established in mid-2017 and linked to Turkey intelligence (MIT) claimed responsibility for Alloush's murder and is thought to be responsible for a string of other attempted and successful assassinations on Kurdish leaders since late 2017.

Deir Ezzor

In Deir Ezzor province, Russian and Iranian pro-Assad forces, and the US-led coalition supported SDF and various Arab militia were in a race to liberate towns and territory from ISIS, but also to take control of the oil and gas fields, which produce 50 percent of Syria's total production, and also the border with Iraq.

On the Syrian side, there are the IRGC and Russian Special Forces, Russian military contractors, Syrian militias including the al-Qassam elite forces, the National Defence Forces, the Baath Battalions, a number of local tribes, and Iran-backed militias including the Lebanese Hezbollah and Galilee Forces (a Palestinian militia). Within the US-led coalition were US Special Forces advising the YPG/YPJ led SDF, the Manbij Military Council and Deir Ezzor Military Council (both of these councils having taken part in the liberation of Manbij and Raqqa), and other Arab forces.

In the first ten days of September, (pro) Syrian forces backed by Russian airstrikes and Syrian helicopters advanced to the outskirts of Deir Ezzor city. ISIS withdrew, allowing (pro) regime forces to take control of the main highway from Damascus. An aid convoy was able to get through to the city's outskirts, where an estimated 93,000 people remained besieged. On September 9, strengthened by reinforcements, and after days of heavy fighting, (pro) regime forces liberated the military airbase east of the city, and the next day proceeded to liberate the mountain overlooking the airbase. But when trying to advance on Al-Tayem oil field on the other side of the mountain, these forces came under ISIS attack and between September 3 and 10, at least 174 ISIS fighters and 57 (pro) regime fighters were killed, after which pro-regime forces took the oil field and a power station. Another counteroffensive by ISIS on September 29 killed at least 73 pro-regime forces. By mid-October about 375 foreign ISIS fighters remained in Deir Ezzor city.

Back on September 9, the SDF announced Operation Jazeera Storm in Deir Ezzor province, to be spearheaded by the Deir Ezzor Military Council. Supported by US-led

coalition airstrikes, the SDF quickly advanced from the north and east of Hasaka province along the Khabur River Valley. The Khabur River joins the Euphrates River 35 kilometres east of Deir Ezzor city. By September 10, the SDF had reached Deir Ezzor city's industrial zone, putting them within six kilometres of the city's centre and (pro) regime forces on the other side of the Euphrates. After clashing with ISIS they reached the Euphrates River on September 14, where they were within three kilometres of pro-regime forces. A spokesperson for the US-led coalition announced that the SDF would not enter the city but at 12.30 am (local time) September 16, Russian warplanes shelled SDF positions in the industrial zone, injuring six to eight SDF fighters. Russian officials denied the SDF fighters were specifically targeted. This was the first confrontation since de-confliction measures were put in place in June.

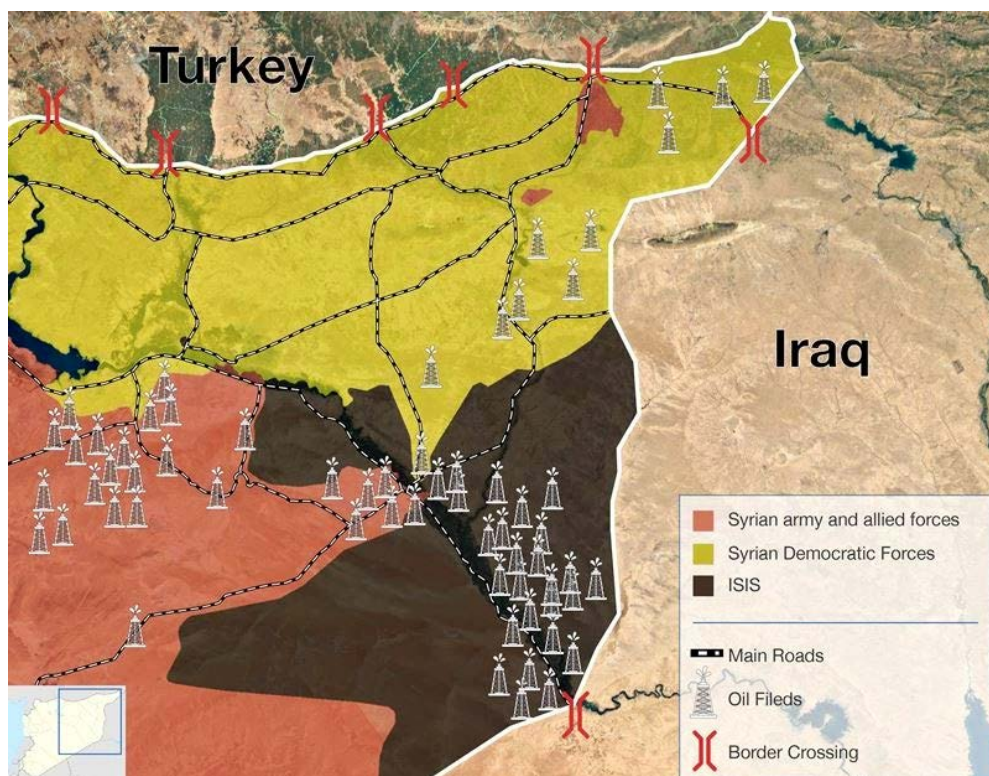


Figure 6: [Map](#) showing the location of major oil fields in Syria before the SDF took fields in Deir Ezzor held by ISIS

The Syrian regime reiterated its claim over Syria and the SDF expressed the same determination to take all territory east of the Euphrates. On September 18, pro-regime forces crossed the river by fixed pontoon. Both sides advanced on the Azbah and Conoco gas fields. Conoco is Syria's largest gas field and gas processing plant. On September 21, Russia accused the SDF of twice targeting pro-Syrian forces near Conoco, and warned that any position targeting their allies would be destroyed. The SDF denied they had done so. High-level military and political meetings resolved tensions, but after SDF liberated Conoco gas field from ISIS on September 23, the SDF claimed they were again targeted by Russian airstrikes on September 25. The airstrikes killed one SDF fighter and injured two others.



As the SDF advanced east towards the town of Al-Suwar on route to Abu Kamal and Mayadin (40 kilometres south of Deir Ezzor city), pro-regime forces reached Mayadin's western outskirts on October 6 (having besieged but not liberated Deir Ezzor city). Over the next 24 hours pro-regime forces captured the sheep market, silos, a castle and an airstrip, intent on capturing the city and also captured Al-Omar oil field to the northeast. On October 8, ISIS launched a counterattack and within 48 hours had driven pro-regime forces out of Mayadin. These pro-regime forces then circumvented the town and advanced east, but on October 14, ISIS resistance in Mayadin collapsed and pro-regime forces captured the city.

Two days later, on October 16, Syrian jets targeted SDF positions near wheat silos and a sugar factory northwest of Deir Ezzor city. To the northeast, ISIS withdrew from villages leaving behind weapons and munitions. This allowed the SDF to advance quickly, and on October 22, they captured Syria's largest oil field, Al-Umar, 25 kilometres east of Deir Ezzor city, as well as al-Jaffra oil field and processing facility. By early November the SDF were 18 kilometres from the Syrian-Iraq border.

On November 5, an ISIS attack at a SDF checkpoint near al-Jaffra oil field killed 200 civilians who were in a bus convoy trying to escape the war zone. This came days after an Arab YPG fighter sacrificed his own life to save IDPs at the same checkpoint by ramming his car into an ISIS vehicle packed with explosives. On November 25, the SDF reached the Syrian-Iraqi border north of Abu Kamal, and on December 10, the SDF and Iraqi Army agreed to a joint co-ordination centre on the border. By this time the [SDF claimed](#) to have killed 7,027 ISIS militants and captured another 1,397 as prisoners-of-war in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

On November 3, the regime announced the liberation of Deir Ezzor city, the same day Qaim was liberated in Iraq. *Hashd al-Shaabi* militants that had fought in Qaim crossed into Syria and by November 8, pro-Syrian regime forces and *Hashd al-Shaabi* had surrounded and advanced into Abu Kamal on the border, with Russian air support and advice from IRGC Quds force commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani. But on November 10, ISIS launched a counterattack and retook the town. Six days later, pro-regime forces again entered Abu Kamal and on November 20, the Assad regime announced Abu Kamal had been liberated. This meant the regime controlled the three largest towns in Deir Ezzor and had access to the border for the first time since 2012. This allows trade, supplies and the movement of fighters, including IRGC, into and out of Syria.

While there had been much forethought, time and effort put into forming the Raqqa Civilian Council and in training the local security force, this had not been done for SDF-liberated areas in Deir Ezzor. The Syrian Kurds, well aware of the backlash to the KRI referendum on independence, and the failure of the US to stop Iran and Iraq's advance on Kirkuk, claimed they were willing to negotiate with all parties. On December 3, the SDF thanked local Arab tribes for their co-operation, as well as the US-led coalition and Russia for their air support and logistical advice in helping



defeat ISIS in Deir Ezzor. The SDF announced that civilian councils were being formed, with members of the YPG and YPJ visiting each village, asking the people what they needed and explaining the federal model. The Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed that it had conducted 672 sorties in November, in support of tribal and Kurdish militias in Deir Ezzor province, and a military statement confirmed that Russia was coordinating with the SDF in overseeing the formation of a council to govern eastern Deir Ezzor. A meeting to discuss the formation of the council was attended by Russian, SDF and local representatives on December 3 in al-Salihyah. The next day, Russia's post-war reconciliation task force announced that the SDF would provide security for Russian forces and Syrian officials working with local communities. In January, the SDF claimed that they had trained 700 people from Deir Ezzor to take responsibility for security.

If the US withdraws from east of the Euphrates, the SDF may have no alternative but to negotiate with the Assad regime, including handing over Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, and the oil and gas fields and Euphrates dams, in return for the regime granting the Kurds and their allies an autonomous federal structure in the north, and a revenue share of the oil and gas fields in Hasaka. The PYD's representative in Moscow, Abd Salam Muhammad Ali, told a Russian media outlet that if a political solution could be found, the SDF could be integrated into the Syrian army. But there are many obstacles to these negotiations. The war against ISIS continues in Deir Ezzor on both sides of the river, with ISIS committing a number of revenge attacks on pro-regime positions after losing territory in northeast Hama and southern Aleppo. ISIS has been executing people smuggling civilians into SDF-held territory and could easily infiltrate any new structure. Locals may resent having to choose between the Assad regime and the SDF, with most locals opposed to the regime. West of the Euphrates, the regime is using local tribal militias and National Defence Forces (NDF) for security and locals must submit to conscription. East of the Euphrates, some look favourably on the SDF. Others resent Kurdish influence in Sunni Arab-majority areas.

The US is unlikely to support negotiations between the Assad regime and the PYD-led administrations. The US gains geopolitical leverage with the SDF controlling the dams and oil and gas field, but if or when the US decides to withdraw, and if negotiations with the regime fail, there is potential for military confrontation between the SDF and the Assad regime and/or Turkey, and Assad and Turkey blockading Kurdish-controlled areas. If both blockade Kurdish-controlled areas, the only avenue in or out is the Faysh Khabur border crossing with the KRI, which the GoI wants to control, and which the Turkish military (TSK) shelled on April 5.

The challenges of US-led coalition forces remaining in Syria were highlighted in December. On December 13 and 22, US warplanes fired warning flares after Russian Su-25 jets crossed into the de-confliction zone near Abu Kamal, east of the Euphrates, and flew so close to US F-22 fighter aircraft that the F-22 had to 'aggressively manoeuvre to avoid a mid-air collision.' The Pentagon claimed that Russian jets frequently crossed into the de-confliction zone without warning.



In December, President Assad called the SDF 'traitors' and the Syrian foreign minister called the SDF a 'terrorist' organisation for allying with the US. With the SDF continuing to expand their territory near Abu Kamal and the border, on December 21, regime forces and ISIS simultaneously shelled SDF in border villages, and on December 24, regime forces launched a third artillery attack on SDF positions in a week.

In response to Russian infringements and the attacks on SDF positions, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis claimed it was a 'mistake' for anyone to violate the demarcation line, but denied that coalition-partnered forces had clashed with pro-regime forces. In December, both Mattis and Brett McGurk announced that more diplomats and contractors would work in non-Assad controlled parts of Syria for the 'initial restoration of services'.

The largest confrontation occurred on February 7, when 500 to 600 pro-regime forces, that involved [two tactical units consisting of 550 Russian military contractors employed by Wagner](#) (a private military company with close connections to the Kremlin) initiated an unprovoked attack on a SDF headquarters, where U.S. coalition advisors were based, eight kilometres east of the Euphrates River de-confliction line, and near the Khusham oil fields. Under cover of artillery, mortar, rocket fire and tank rounds, the pro-regime forces advanced. When 20 to 30 artillery and tank rounds landed within 500 metres of the SDF base, the US initiated a three-hour attack [in self defence](#) using US F-15E attack planes, B-52 strategic bombers, AC-130 gunships, Apache attack helicopters and Reaper drones. The attack stopped the advance and destroyed an unspecified number of artillery and tanks.

Initial reports claimed that two [Russian military contractors](#) had been killed. This climbed to 300 Russian military contractors having been killed or injured, although the figure could be higher. The [Russian Ministry of Defence](#) claimed that no uniformed Russian soldier was involved, the advance was not coordinated with the military, and that Russia and the US-led Coalition were 'in regular communication ... before, during and after' the assault. US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis concluded that Russia's inability to stop the attack showed a lack of influence over the forces. A [former Wagner employee](#) and comrade of several killed claimed that the Wagner attack was ordered by a Russian businessman, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has production rights to 25 percent of Syria's oil and gas, and [local businessmen close to Assad](#), who want to seize control of SDF-secured oil and gas fields.

The February 7 incident was followed by another incident on [February 10](#), when US-led coalition forces blew up a Russian-made T-72 battle tank, and a third incident on [March 22](#), when 'dozens' of Syrian army soldiers, Iran-backed militants and Russian mercenaries came under US-led coalition fire after they crossed the Euphrates River with tanks and other armoured vehicles in the same area. The responses to these attacks indicate US' determination to defend resources and territory east of the Euphrates.



After more than 1,700 SDF fighters withdrew to defend Afrin, ISIS regrouped in Deir Ezzor. On March 4, a senior Kurdish official told [Patrick Cockburn](#) that 170 YPG fighters were killed in the previous six weeks due to ISIS attacks. ISIS attempted to cross into Iraq in March, and [400](#) ISIS fighters attacked [Abu Kamal](#) on April 1, killing 19 Iran-backed militants. In April, SDF fighters began returning to Deir Ezzor. On [April 29](#), the Syrian army and Iran-backed militants crossed the Euphrates River and took four villages near the Iraqi border, but the [SDF launched a counteroffensive](#) and with [US air support](#) retook the villages hours later. Six SDF fighters were killed in the fight.

There is a solitary, unconfirmed report from [Pravda](#) that pro-Assad regime attacks on US military personnel in late March and on April 1 have killed 30 US servicemen in Al-Shaddadi and when travelling between Manbij and Raqqa. Such attacks could be a reason for President Trump announcing that the US would withdraw its forces 'very soon'.

US announcements regarding its presence in Syria

With the White House, US State Department and the Pentagon issuing mixed messages, speculation increased about whether the US would remain in Manbij and SDF-controlled territory east of the Euphrates. On November 6, 2017, at a NATO meeting in Europe, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis refused to commit the US to taking back weapons given to the SDF. On November 13, Mattis claimed, 'We're not just going to walk away ... before the Geneva process has traction.' In late November, US President Donald Trump allegedly promised President Erdogan that US military support for the YPG would end 'soon'. A White House statement clarified that Trump was referring to 'pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners ... in Syria ... (as) we ... progress ... into a stabilisation phase.' On [November 22](#), and [December 29](#), Mattis said that the US was sending diplomats to northern Syria and was planning increased assistance to the SDF and local councils, for a stabilisation process that included demining, removing rubble, rebuilding basic public services and infrastructure, training local forces and government workers, and maintaining military bases. These and other announcements gave Kurds and their allies hope that there would be diplomatic recognition of their federal system.

On December 12, Trump approved a further \$393 million for the supply of weapons to the SDF and another \$500 million to train and equip 30,000 fighters in the 'Vetted Syrian Opposition'. This came 18 days after Trump promised Erdogan that the US would no longer supply weapons to the SDF.

The first public reference to a Border Security Force east of the Euphrates came on December 22 from [Gen. Joseph Votel](#), head of the US Central Command (US CENTCOM), who announced its establishment, training and equipping so it could take responsibility for security in SDF-held territory and help prevent an ISIS resurgence and an inflow of foreign fighters.



Testifying before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 11, 2018, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, [David Satterfield](#), outlined US goals in Syria. These were to finish off IS, stabilise territory east of the Euphrates, prepare for a political transition, and counter Iranian influence. In response to Senator Marco Rubio's question about what would give the US leverage to counter Iranian and Russian support for the regime in a political settlement, Satterfield responded, 'Our military presence associated with the [Syrian Democratic Forces] in a critical and very significant piece of Syrian territory is a factor.' He further claimed that the project would constitute a new model in Syria, supported by US diplomats, intelligence officers and military commanders. Sceptics pointed out that Congress had not given approval to maintain US troops in Syria, that Iran was not in SDF-controlled territory, and to fulfil the stated goals would require a significant increase in US troops and State Department resources, especially as the allied force was vulnerable to internal and external attack. However, even opponents of an on-going US presence called for aid delivery in non-Assad controlled areas, and for this to occur, there has to be security.

On January 13, Col. [Thomas F. Veale](#), and on January 14, Colonel Thomas Veale, both speaking on behalf of the US-led coalition, re-affirmed that the US would form and train a 30,000 Border Protection Force, with 15,000 troops from the SDF forming the core and the ethnic composition in different areas reflecting local ethnic demographics. The force would protect all internal and external borders of Syria controlled by the SDF. Assad and Erdogan responded to this announcement by claiming they would 'crush' or 'strangle' this 'terror army' before it was born, Assad calling it a blatant assault on Syria's sovereignty. Iran said it was doomed to fail, and Russia claimed it was a US attempt to divide Syria.

On January 19, [US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson](#) delivered a speech at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University in which he claimed that the term 'border force' was misleading but that the US will maintain an extended military presence in Syria and train forces to prevent the return of ISIS, deter Iran, bolster a UN-backed political process, provide stabilisation, allow IDPs and refugees to return home safely, and ensure Syria is free from weapons of mass destruction. Again, many questioned that the US had the in-country resources to execute these plans.

According to [Mahmut Bozarslan](#), the SDF was already training forces in 14 training centres that included a new officer-training school and a military college, that much of the process was being financed by the Kurdish administrations, and that it was not about creating a new army, but making the SDF more professional. SDF sources argued that if EU/US relations with Turkey did not improve, then the US, EU and Israel needed alternative bases to leverage Russia and Iran.

Talk of a border force was the final straw for Turkey, which considers the US has broken a series of promises including ending military support for the SDF after the defeat of ISIS, and removing the SDF from Manbij. As a result of these and other



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factors (see a KLA report on [Turkey's Invasion of Afrin](#)), Ankara launched Operation Olive Branch in Afrin on January 20.

In another US-about-face, on January 27, [US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster](#) said that the US would no longer provide weapons to YPG fighters despite the proposed US defence budget for 2019 suggesting otherwise. Then, to the surprise of the Pentagon and State Department, on March 29 (after a phone call with Erdogan) President Trump announced that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria 'very soon' and that there would be a freeze on \$200 million allocated for the stabilisation of territory east of the Euphrates. Trump appeared to be contradicting the [National Security Strategy](#) released in December that stated 'inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.'

On April 6, [US Army Col. Ryan Dillon](#), speaking on behalf of the 75-member US-led coalition, claimed that the establishment of civil and military councils in Manbij and east of the Euphrates had worked in that 'not an inch of the territory where we have supported our internal security forces has been retaken by ISIS.' He claimed that the council in Manbij represented the local demographics and had overseen a 'secure and thriving community'.

At a national security meeting in early April, Trump's advisors [warned](#) Trump that a US withdrawal from Syria would leave a power vacuum for ISIS, [Russia](#), Iran and Turkey to exploit, and this would lead to more conflict and a loss of US influence throughout the Middle East. [Opinion pieces](#) from the Arab world supported this view. Trump relented, but insisted that US troops had to be [withdrawn within 12 months](#). The crux of the matter was that [Trump wants Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Arab countries to contribute troops](#) and resources for the stabilisation and reconstruction of eastern Syria. However, [Saudi Arabia](#) and other Arab countries are reluctant to send troops, although the SDF commander-in-chief, [Mazloun Abdi](#), claimed the SDF was willing to work with Arab forces to defeat ISIS. On [April 26](#), US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis told the Armed Services Committee that the US would probably regret having holding partners without a presence of US Forces. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, supported this view. It appears those around Trump are trying to prevent him from repeating President Obama's mistake of withdrawing the US military from Iraq in 2013, before Iraq was ready to confront a foe like ISIS. After French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Washington on April 23 – 25, Trump continued to prevaricate but finally conceded that the US wants to leave a 'strong and lasting footprint' in Syria.

Democratic Federation of Northern Syria

By supporting the SDF to secure territory east of the Euphrates, the US-led coalition is directly and indirectly supporting the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. The system is a mixed communal and parliamentary system involving hierarchically organised multi-ethnic committees that administer communes, district and town



councils, regional councils, provincial councils and a parliament. The Kurds and their allies want to demonstrate this model in view of applying it to the rest of Syria.

Elections have been held for communal and local councils. On September 22, commune elections were held in Afrin, Kobani and Jizere, in which there were 12,421 candidates for 3,732 positions. Voter turnout was 70 percent. On December 1, 6,000 candidates representing over 30 parties and coalitions ran in the elections for district and town councils, although elections [were not held](#) in Raqqa, Manbij and Tabqa, which have yet to join the Federation. A 13-member delegation from the HDP and the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq, including representatives from KDP, PUK and Gorran, arrived in Rojava on November 29 to observe the elections, having been invited by the authorities. Turnout was 69 percent. The Democratic Nation Solidarity List, which includes the ruling PYD, won a total of 4,621 seats. The Kurdish National Alliance, Syrian National Alliance, Democratic Unity, and independent candidates won the remaining 411 seats. The Barzani-linked Kurdistan National Council (KNC or ENKS) boycotted the elections.

For the parliament, it is proposed that 80 percent of members be elected and the remaining 20 percent be technocrats and specialists. An election for the parliament was scheduled for January 2018, but was delayed to prepare voter lists and for representatives in Sunni Arab-majority areas to decide whether they wanted to participate.

There are [three to 3.6 million Kurds in Syria or 12.5 to 15 percent](#) of the total population. If the Kurds and their allies succeed in convincing Raqqa and Deir Ezzor people living east of the Euphrates to join the Federation, then it would cover 40 percent of Syria. Russia, the US and some in the Opposition support some form of decentralisation in Syria. The Turkey-backed Opposition, the Assad regime, Iran and Turkey strongly reject federalism, although the Assad regime has sent mixed signals about accepting a form of Kurdish self-rule.

The PYD has been the main driver behind the federal project. Back on September 27, the PYD held its seventh conference, at which two co-chairs were elected to replace Salih Muslim and Asya Abdullah, who had served two-terms and did not seek re-election. The new co-chairs are Shahoz Hasan and Aysha Hisso. On February 24, [Salih Muslim was arrested](#) in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he was attending an international conference on security in the Middle East, after the Turkish Interior Ministry announced a bounty of \$1 million for his arrest, and placed him on an Interpol list of most wanted terrorists. Upon Salih Muslim's arrest, Turkey submitted an extradition request but a Czech court released him on February 27 without conditions maintaining Muslim was a politician. If extradited to Turkey, he would face 30 life sentences for allegedly being involved in terrorist attacks, for which Muslim, a Syrian Kurd, denies any involvement.

Recognising that education is key to the future, and with so many schools destroyed in the war against ISIS (for example, 78 percent of 1,500 schools in Raqqa province



have been destroyed) the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria is focused on education, It is reviving the Kurdish and Syriac languages in schools and universities, and has established four universities – the University of Rojava in al-Jizere, Kobani University in Ain al-Arab, the University of Afrin, and a university in Raqqa. However, certificates issued by these universities are not internationally recognised, so many students still go to regime universities in Qamishli and Hasaka.

A major set back for the federation was Turkey's occupation of Afrin. Otherwise, in all Sunni-majority areas, the future will depend on internal and external factors. These include local administrations and security forces becoming truly representative and accepting of plurality, and the navigation of contentious issues such as the PYD's support for women's rights and conscription. Although federation representatives say they can be self-sustaining, Turkey's invasion of Afrin proved that international support is critical. This support will also need to address Turkey's fear of Kurds. One way to address Turkey's security concerns would be to have international peacekeepers along the border. Another way to convince Turkey to accept a federal region would be to point out the economic opportunities, as Turkey has enjoyed in the KRI.

ISIS in Hama, Homs, Idlib and Damascus

During and after ISIS' defeat in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, many ISIS fighters escaped west, causing a resurgence in ISIS activity in regime-controlled areas. Between September 3 and 15, fierce fighting between ISIS and pro-regime forces in eastern Hama killed 279 ISIS and 128 (pro) regime fighters. Both parties prevented civilians from escaping the war zone, but pro-regime forces succeeded in taking back territory. In early October, ISIS managed to recapture Qaryatayn city and the surrounding area in Homs province. After two weeks of fighting ISIS remained in control and also took the highway to Deir Ezzor, before pro-regime forces recaptured the city on October 21.

On October 9, remaining pockets of ISIS fighters advanced on HTS-held areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib, and managed to seize 15 villages from HTS but HTS regained control of six villages and arrested at least 70 ISIS fighters. Clashes between ISIS and HTS continued in October. In January, Turkey did not stop ISIS re-establishing a presence in the northwest Idlib for the first time in four years. At the end of January, these fighters launched attacks on pro-regime forces in Aleppo.

ISIS remained in control of 60 percent of Yarmouk refugee camp and some neighbourhoods on the southern outskirts of Damascus and was able to launch attacks in and around the city of Damascus, for example, targeting the main police headquarters in Damascus city on October 11. Between March 13 – 20 [ISIS killed more than 62 pro-regime fighters](#) in and around Yarmouk camp, where, weeks earlier, fierce fighting for control had taken place between ISIS and HTS. After eastern Ghouta was finally evacuated of militias, on [April 19](#), the regime began attacking ISIS in Yarmouk camp and surrounding neighbourhoods. After 18 civilians,



80 pro-regime fighters and 74 ISIS fighters were killed, on April 29, under Russian supervision, ISIS agreed to evacuate to Idlib or hand over their weapons and stay.

Turkey's invasion of Afrin

For a detailed account of Turkey's invasion of the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin, beginning on January 20, see the KLA report on [Turkey's invasion of Afrin](#). What follows is an update.

On the night of [March 16](#), missiles targeting Afrin city hospital killed at least 15 people and wounded tens more, as [YPG fighters tried to prevent Turkish forces](#) entering the city from the north. But early on Sunday morning, March 18, [Turkish forces entered the city](#) from three sides. According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) [the 58-day war had killed](#) at least 289 civilians and 1,500 YPG fighters. It was unclear if these fatalities included seven foreign YPG/YPJ fighters, including two Americans and an English woman. According to YPG, 820 YPG/YPJ/SDF fighters and 500 civilians had been killed and 1,030 civilians wounded. Turkey claimed it had neutralised 3,603 'terrorists'. [Forty-eight schools](#) were damaged and Afrin city had been without water or electricity since March 9.

Leading up to this victory for Turkey, the YPG had to decide whether to withdraw or stay and fight. They had [stockpiled](#) weapons and built trenches and tunnels inside Afrin city. On March 14, they were ordered to withdraw. Over the next few days, along with at least [200,000 residents](#) in Afrin city, according to YPG, the UN claiming the number to be [167,000](#), the majority of YPG/YPJ withdrew with civilians to Tal Rifaat, with most fighters going on to Manbij and east of the Euphrates, and other civilians reaching regime-controlled towns. YPG claimed the withdrawal was about preventing a bloodbath and saving the city from destruction. Allegedly the US had advised them to withdraw, saying there was no stopping Turkey taking the city. The YPG promised an insurgency.

In the centre of Afrin city, Turkish forces put up Turkish flags and destroyed a statue of the Kurdish national hero, Kawa, a legendary blacksmith who led an uprising against a tyrant. Videos soon emerged on social media showing [Turkey-backed militants executing people in the street](#), and conducting widespread looting of houses, shops, vehicles, machinery and livestock. The [SOHR](#) claimed the plundering was co-ordinated and exceeded in scale anything ISIS had done. YPG claimed it [killed 50 looters](#). The SOHR claimed 40 looters were killed.



Figure 7: Turkey-backed militants walking through Afrin city, March 18, 2018



Figure 8: Turkey-backed militant engaged in looting in Afrin city, March 18, 2018



Figure 9: Turkish soldier and Turkey-backed militants overlooking Afrin's central square, March 18, 2018



Figure 10: Destruction of the statue of Kawa, a legendary Kurdish figure, in Afrin's central square, March 18, 2018



Kurdish Lobby Australia

Intermittent reports thereafter indicate a Kurdish insurgency is in progress. With Turkey not allowing any journalists or humanitarian organisations into Afrin, and having [cut all Internet access](#), no independent news is coming out. Observers must rely on Kurdish and Turkish sources. [Turkish media](#) reported that on March 19, four Turkey-backed militants and seven civilians were killed in an explosion inside Afrin city. Between March 18 and 20, [YPG claimed nine attacks killed 60 Turkey-backed militants](#); an attack in the industrial area of Afrin city on March 25 killed 19 fighters from (the Islamist) *Faylaq al-Sham* and (former Free Syrian Army) *Ahrar al-Sharqiya*; an attack on [March 31](#) around Tal Rifaat killed 30 militants from the Sultan Murad Brigade; another attack on the same day killed [four Turkish soldiers](#) and destroyed a Turkish tank in Afrin; an attack in Afrin city on [April 1](#) killed 12 militants; and an attack in the centre of Afrin city on [April 7](#) destroyed a key Turkish military post and killed four militants. Between April 17 and April 22, YPG killed 12 Turkish forces in four attacks. Between March 18 and April 21, Turkey claimed to have neutralised 651 'terrorists', bringing the total to 4,254 since January 20.

The UN estimated [50,000 to 70,000](#) civilians remained in Afrin city. [Firat News](#) reported that inside the city, women and men were being separated; men were being detained, tortured, and forced to decide between going to prison or joining the Turkey-backed militias; Yezidi were being forced to convert to Islam, and 'dozens' of girls were kidnapped and systematically raped by TSK soldiers and militants in known locations in Afrin city centre. (The Yezidi have long called for [UN protection](#).) With [Turkish](#) and regime forces preventing people leaving Afrin or IDPs returning to Afrin (which is against international law), by [early April](#) Turkey had begun moving the families of Turkey-backed militias and IDPs from eastern Ghouta into Afrin city. For instance, when *Jaish al-Sham* militants and their families were evacuated from Douma to Azaz, [many chose to go to Afrin](#). Turkey has opened a border crossing into Afrin and as of April 20, Turkish officials claimed that [9,880 Syrian refugees](#) had 'decided' to cross into Afrin. Under Turkish occupation women's centres are being converted into schools for studying the Quran, and [school children](#) are being taught to wave Turkish flags and chant pro-Erdogan and pro-Turkey slogans in front of Erdogan's portrait.

On the day that Turkey entered Afrin city, a meeting in Gaziantep (Turkey) was held to establish [Afrin Liberation Council](#) from people who had [lived for years](#) in Turkey. The council will work under the auspices of the Turkey-backed [Syrian Interim Government](#) that controls the Azaz-Jarablus-al-Bab triangle. Turkey also announced it would form a local security force from civilians with no political affiliations.

The International Red Cross requested entry into Afrin, but Turkey claimed it would oversee all aid delivery and no international aid agencies have been allowed into Afrin. By April 4, [five aid convoys](#) from the Kurdish Red Crescent, Syrian Red Cross, Syrian Red Crescent and UN agencies managed to get through to Tal Rifaat from east of the Euphrates and the KRI, and the Kurdish Red Crescent had begun operating seven mobile health clinics, but the aid getting through was not nearly enough for the number of IDPs living in damaged villages, or sleeping on the street or sheltering in tents or in Tal Rifaat's mosques and 16 schools.



As of April 22, the [SOHR](#) reported that looting and forced displacement of residents continued and so did the arbitrary arrest of civilians by Turkey-backed militias, who beat them before demanding large ransoms to release them. ‘Tens’ of those arrested have ‘disappeared’. Allegedly most of the Turkey-backed militants have [not been paid for two months](#) and have been told ‘The spoils of war ... from Afrin will suffice you for a year.’

War crimes, crimes against humanity, and militia infighting undermine any legitimacy of the Turkey-backed militias. The Turkish occupation of Afrin has further [divided](#) the Opposition. Even among Turkey-backed forces, clashes occurred in late March in Azaz, Afrin city and al-Bab, with a [clash in Afrin city over the spoils of war](#) on March 25 leaving seven dead and the arrest of [130](#) of one faction.

While most Kurds are opposed to the invasion and occupation of Afrin, there are divisions on how to respond. The KDP-backed Kurdish National Council (KNC/ENKS) left the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in protest over Turkey’s invasion of Afrin, but re-joined after the Gaziantep meeting. Accusing the [KNC](#) of working with Turkey, the PYD-led governing coalition called on the KNC to permanently leave the SNC. [Like the PYD, the KNC is asking the UN](#) and the international community to pressure Turkey into withdrawing from Afrin, but claims it needs to work with the new Afrin Liberation Council to ensure Kurdish IDPs can return to a ‘normal’ life.

Turkey’s offensives beyond Afrin

After the fall of Afrin city on March 18, Erdogan increased his threats that Turkey would [clear all ‘terrorists’ from Manbij](#) and east of the Euphrates to the Iraqi border and beyond, including the Yezidi enclave of Sinjar in Nineveh. But [Turkey was already in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq \(KRI\)](#) and Nineveh, having intensified its airstrikes on PKK positions since March 10, causing material damage, including the destruction of two bridges, and [killing four civilians](#) on March 22. Turkey had also [deployed TSK on the ground](#), and claimed to have [killed 91 PKK militants](#) between March 17 and 23.

With Erdogan adamant that Turkey would invade Sinjar, with or without Iraq’s approval, on March 22 [PKK announced it was withdrawing](#) from the city. On [March 25](#), Iraqi troops and more *Hashd al Shaabi* militants entered Sinjar, and some 100 to 300 [PKK handed their posts](#) to the Yezidi Protection Units and Sinjar police on the understanding that these forces would be incorporated into Iraq’s security forces.

Outside Sinjar, TSK took up positions in [28 villages](#) within 10 kilometres of the border in the Amediya region of the KRI, [building](#) roads and three bases. On [April 5](#), TSK in Dohuk heavily shelled the Faysh Khabur border crossing between the KRI and northern Syria, injuring two *Asayish* (Kurdish police), with shells landing in northern Syria causing YPG to respond, killing two Turkish soldiers and injuring others. Because of the intensity of on-going airstrikes and artillery attacks, and with another



[three civilians being wounded](#), at least [seven villages in Erbil province](#) were evacuated. On April 6 – 7, [TSK established positions on eight mountains within 20 kilometres](#) from the border, but not without a fight. PKK's armed wing, the People's Defence Force (HPG), claimed it killed 12 Turkish soldiers on April 6 – 7. [Turkey](#) claimed to have 'neutralised' 108 'terrorists' in the previous week. On [April 27](#), due to armed clashes between TSK and PKK, five more villages were evacuated in the district of Soran. Meanwhile, the GoI repeatedly expressed opposition to any Turkish troops on Iraqi soil. Many Iraqis fear Turkey is not only intent on eliminating PKK and *Hashd al Shaabi* from the border area, but wants to take control of Nineveh, Dohuk and Kirkuk – these provinces having been part of the former Ottoman Empire.

Back in Syria, Turkey's next target after Afrin was Tal Rifaat and the Menagh airbase to link Idlib and Afrin with the Turkey-occupied triangle of Azaz – Jarablus – al-Bab. In the week following the fall of Afrin city, pro-Assad forces and Turkey's forces clashed near Tal Rifaat. On [March 27](#), Russia allegedly agreed to hand over YPG-controlled villages and the town to Turkish forces, and some [Russian personnel](#) were withdrawn allowing [Turkish forces to advance](#). This was despite the Assad regime calling for an unconditional withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria.

With at least 100,000 of Afrin's IDPs having fled to the town of Tal Rifaat the YPG vowed to defend Tal Rifaat, which it continues to hold. In late March, Turkey targeted the city with airstrikes and some reports incorrectly claimed that Turkish forces had [taken](#) the town. [Fars News](#) reported that negotiations between Turkey and Russia for the handover of the town had failed after Turkey refused to force HTS to hand over the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour to the Syrian Army. On April 1, [reports](#) claimed that pro-Assad forces were in the town, while Turkish forces occupied surrounding villages.

Turkey's next target was Manbij, which Turkey has repeatedly threatened to take if the US fails to remove YPG from Manbij and fails to sever ties with the YPG. On [March 19](#), the US reiterated that it was staying in Manbij and claimed that the agreement made by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a meeting with Erdogan for YPG to withdraw over a 90-day period had been put 'on hold'. In the following days Erdogan told Putin and Trump that Turkey would not step back from 'neutralising terrorists' in Syria and Iraq.

On [March 29](#), an IED killed one British SAS and one US Delta Force serviceman, and wounded four members of the Manbij Military Council (MMC) and one other person, when they were on a mission to kill or capture a high value ISIS commander outside Manbij city. Some blamed ISIS for the attack but Kurdish sources suspect MIT working through *Harakat al-Qiyam*, especially as the attack came days after an assassination attempt on Shervan Derwish, a MMC spokesperson, and *Harakat al-Qiyam* had already claimed responsibility for killing MMC commander Mohammad Abu Adel in November, and Raqqa Civilian Council co-chair, Omar Alloush, in March.

Between US President Trump's repeated announcements that the US was pulling out of Syria 'very soon', on March 30, French President Emmanuel [Macron](#) met with a



delegation from Rojava, and offered to help stabilise northeastern Syria, and mediate between Turkey and the SDF/YPG. Turkey refused mediation. [YPG/PYD sources](#) insisted that Macron offered French assistance within the US-led coalition to defend Manbij, as well as east of the Euphrates. On April 1, about [300 US Special Operations personnel](#) arrived in Manbij in armoured vehicles, accompanied by construction machinery that over the next days built a second (and perhaps third) US-led coalition base [2.5 kilometres](#) from Turkish forces and militias. Fifty [French Special Forces](#) followed the US troops, with British, German and Canadian troops also in Manbij. [More US and French troops](#) arrived on April 8 (and thereafter). As tensions built, [ANF](#) reported that Turkey had closed a dam, cutting off water to Manbij, once again using water as a weapon of war. [Fars News](#) reported that Turkish airstrikes targeted a US-led coalition/SDF base in Ayn Issa on April 4.

Turkey insists that its invasion and occupation of northern Aleppo (and invasion of northern Iraq) is consistent with Article 51 of the UN charter, which relates to the right to self-defence between nation states, and not to perceived threats from non-state actors. Turkey is also in violation of the North Atlantic Treaty in not seeking approval for an offensive operation beyond its borders and is in [violation](#) of its own laws when it deployed gendarmerie, police special forces and village guards to Afrin from [February 6](#). These forces answer to the Ministry of the Interior, and are for domestic security, but were put under TSK control in a foreign territory. Then there are the legal questions related to Turkey setting up banking and postal services in a foreign country without permission and Turkey appointing a Turkish governor and deputy governor to Afrin, reminiscent of Ottoman rule.

Both Russia and the US had and have [critical decisions](#) to make about whether to draw red lines for Turkey at a time when Trump was replacing US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with ex-military/CIA director, Mike Pompeo (March 13), and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster with John Bolton in April.

It appears some decisions have been made. Russia wants Turkey to focus on Idlib, and on April 9, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei [Lavrov](#) announced that Turkey should hand Afrin over to the Assad regime, a view supported by Iran and rejected by Turkey. The US wanted to resume the war against ISIS. This has occurred since April 18, with the return of some SDF fighters to Deir Ezzor. With top level US and Russian military commanders in regular communication, and the US, Russia, and France pursuing diplomatic channels with Turkey, it appears Turkey's intent to expand its offensive in Syria has been prevented, at least for now. Although Erdogan claims the offensive is far from over, on April 21, Erdogan announced that [Turkey would not move east](#) of the Euphrates unless the 'terrorists' attacked Turkey. If Turkey's [opposition parties](#) win a majority in parliament in the upcoming June 24 elections, they are even less likely to pursue territorial gains in Syria.

Civil War

Outside SDF-secured territory, the establishment of four de-escalation zones has become a war strategy for Assad to claw back opposition-held territory, dismantle local councils and NGOs the West helped establish, and change demographics, achieved with the support of Russian airstrikes and IRGC and Iran-backed militias on the ground. In doing so, the Assad regime ignores UN Security Council resolutions and Russian calls for ceasefires, continues to block aid deliveries and medical care to millions, and intensifies its attacks on de-escalation zones. The Assad regime justifies these actions by saying it is fighting Islamist extremists, which is what many Turkey- and Saudi-backed militias have become. However, the regime's actions collectively punish civilians, who have no choice. Within each 'de-escalation' zone, civilians live with sieges, airstrikes, ground offensives, forced displacements, arbitrary detentions, retaliations, and restrictions on movement, assembly and expression.

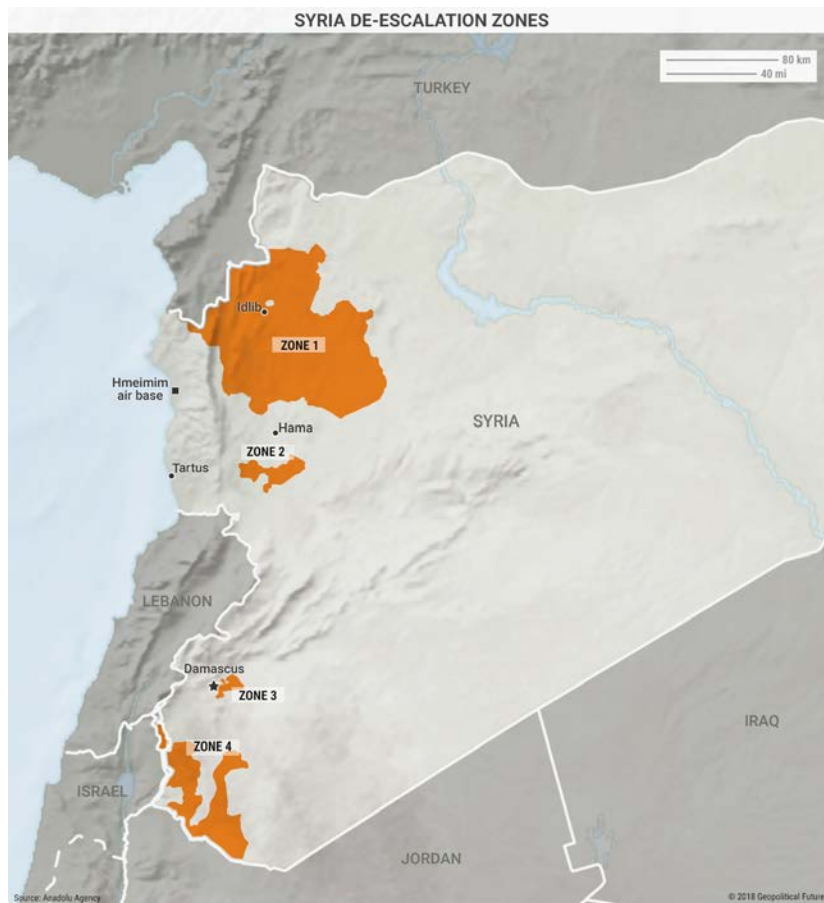


Figure 11: [Map](#) of de-escalation zones in Syria

Both in regime and opposition-controlled territory a war economy and black market thrives. The profiteers are state security, pro-regime forces and Baath Party officials, opposition militias and ISIS, it being [common practise](#) for opposing sides to do business with each other. In this militarised anarchy, women and girls are kidnapped



for ransom¹², or sold into marriage or traded for weapons, goods, rent, or for help from people smugglers, and are used as leverage in negotiations, or in prisoner exchange deals.

Such is life in eastern Aleppo city, now controlled by the regime. According to the UN, between 22 December 2016 and November 2017, 300,000 people had returned (another estimate of the current population being [600,000](#)), despite half of all neighbourhoods being rubble. While the Assad regime has made some effort to clear rubble and restore water, electricity and sewerage, these services remain unreliable (unlike in Homs where services are 24/7). Citizens are left to rebuild their homes and businesses without help, while it has been UNICEF (not the regime) that has reopened more than 20 schools. The UN estimates another 140,000 people have returned to western neighbourhoods.

Throughout the city, neighbourhoods are secured and administered by state security agencies, pro-regime militias and the Baath party, all with their own spying and monitoring networks, and with their own checkpoints subjecting civilians to searches and arrest if they have failed to report for military service. All profit from imposing taxes on transportation and goods that need to pass through the checkpoints, and in demanding monthly bribes from families in return for not conscripting their sons, and from industrialists and traders in return for allowing them to operate. In addition, various pro-regime militias (like *Liwa' al-Baqer*, *Liwa al-Quds Filistini*, which includes Palestinian refugee fighters, the Iraqi *Harakat al-Nujab*, and Lebanon's Hezbollah) run brothels and drug trafficking networks, kidnap for ransom, and carry out hit and run killings.

Until December 2017, the only neighbourhoods not subject to this kind of extortion were the YPG-secured Kurdish neighbourhoods like Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya. But in December, the YPG/PYD and the Assad regime agreed to joint security measures, which led to regime checkpoints on the boundaries of these neighbourhoods taxing incoming and outgoing goods, and restricting traffic. In February, with so many Kurdish fighters going north to defend Afrin, the PYD-led administration handed the security of six neighbourhoods over to Syrian police.

In the Turkey-controlled Azaz – Jarablus – Al-Bab triangle of northern Aleppo, Turkish media describes thriving towns and villages. Turkey is investing in the area, and Turkey-backed militias are benefitting from cross border and internal trade, but under age marriage and child labour remain prevalent. Children from 7 to 17, often the sole family provider, work a 12-hour day for a monthly wage of \$40 to \$50. There were more than 25,000 militants in the triangle, the [number having doubled](#) since the evacuation of eastern Ghouta, including those Turkey formed into a Syrian 'National' Army. At the many checkpoints it is common for people to be harassed and even shot at. The situation was so bad for civilians that in September Turkey

¹² ISIS received \$18 million for Christian women captured in Hasaka province in February 2015 and pro-government militia receiving on average \$10,000 a woman.



announced that all militias would withdraw from populated areas and stay in well-fortified barracks on the outskirts of settlements. This either has not occurred or has not been successful in curbing violence, because in March Turkey announced it was training a 300-member police force to mediate between militias and civilians, and between militias.

Turkey's Syrian 'National' Army was officially announced on September 7 in Doha, just days after UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, claimed that the Syrian Opposition had to be realistic about having lost the war, apparently discounting that the Syrian army is decimated and the regime relies on racketeering Syrian and foreign militias to maintain security. The 25,000 member Syrian 'National' Army includes up to 44 opposition militias (out of 63). Among them are Islamist extremists like *Ahrar al-Sham*, Syrian army defectors, and former 'Free' Syrian Army militants, with some elements unsavoury to both Russia and the US. Other militias refused to join. In the triangle of Turkish occupation, the army operates under the mandate of the Turkey-backed Syrian Interim Government, established in Istanbul in November 2013, and headed by 'Prime Minister' Jawad Abu Hatab, and its partner organisation, the Syrian Islamic Council. The leaders of this 'National' Army claim they are committed to overthrowing the Assad regime, and taking part in negotiations, but the factional nature of the army means there have been frequent clashes between its militias. For instance, on October 14, four Turkey-backed militants were killed in clashes over control of the Oncupinar border gate five kilometres from Azaz. At the end of the civil war, all 'National' Army fighters are expected to hand their weapons to the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence. If not, they will be dismissed, free to cause future trouble.

Eastern Ghouta, an alleged Chemical Attack, and the Response

The Assad regime and Opposition knew that a regime victory in the opposition-held suburban and rural district of eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus city was key to an Assad (and Putin) victory. Hence both made a mockery of the September 2017 declaration that eastern Ghouta would become a de-escalation zone.

Since 2013, 94 percent of the population had been living under siege, with aid reaching them only 20 times throughout 2016 and 2017. The regime prefers private businesses operating in an overpriced black market to supply eastern Ghouta, often through underground tunnels. People otherwise survived by growing food on rooftops and on agricultural land, with an estimated 11.9 percent of children under the age of five suffering from acute malnutrition.

The main militias in eastern Ghouta were the Saudi-backed *Jaish al-Islam*, and the Turkey-backed *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Faylak al-Rahman*, as well as HTS.¹³ These militias

¹³ Other militias include Jabhat al-Shamiya, the Sham Legion, al-Naser Union, Nureddin Zengi Brigade, Free Idlib Army, the Central Division, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the 13th Division, the 1st Coastal Division, the Hamza Division, Lions of the East Army, and Forces of Martyr Ahmed al-Abdo.



imposed harsh rule in their respective zones and could be just as unscrupulous as the regime in their war tactics. For instance, according to the [UN](#), unspecified opposition militias in Ghouta weaponised chlorine gas three times in July 2017, and a phosphorus-based pesticide in November. They regularly targeted Damascus suburbs, including the Syrian Arab Red Crescent headquarters, according to Syria's Representative at the UN [Bashar al-Jaafari](#).

The Assad regime has consistently claimed that its offensive on eastern Ghouta would only stop after all extremist Islamist militias evacuated. Between October 19 and 23, the regime hit the area with 181 airstrikes. [Russian airstrikes](#) on November 3 targeted three schools and on November 13, Russian unguided 'blast' weapons targeted a market and killed 84 people. The regime ignored a Russian imposed two-day ceasefire in late November, and between November 14 and December 5, the SOHR reported that regime bombardments killed at least 192 people, and injured 'hundreds'. At the end of December, the regime agreed to medical evacuations, but only approved 29 of the most critical cases on a UN list of 500. Around this time, HTS, *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Faylak al-Rahman* joined forces in Harasta¹⁴ to capture and lay siege to an army base housing 200 pro-regime forces, but on January 8 the siege was broken by elite Syrian forces backed by Russian airstrikes.

A Russian brokered cease-fire at the end of January did not stop the regime's ground offensive, with pro-Assad forces accused of using chlorine gas in attacks on Douma on January 31, resulting in at least 21 civilians, including children, being treated for breathing difficulties. The regime blamed the Opposition for this chlorine attack. SOHR reported that between December 29 and February 5, 287 people were killed.

Between February 18 and March 16, Russian airstrikes and the regime's use of barrel bombs, incendiary bombs, artillery and combat intensified, killing 1,650 people, including 557 children. By [March 25](#), 5,420 people had been wounded. [Mahmood Adam](#), a member of the Syrian Civil Defence (i.e. the Opposition), claimed 'We are talking about a systematic targeting of civilians in their homes, schools, (22) medical centres, marketplaces, and civil defence sites ... This is an extermination of society.'

On February 21, the Opposition shelled a Russian monitoring centre in eastern Ghouta and [Russia blocked a draft of a UN Security Council resolution](#) calling for a 30-day cessation of hostilities throughout Syria. Russia insisted that the resolution include exceptions to the ceasefire, these being 'all individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with al-Qaeda or ISIL [ISIS] and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council'. These exceptions were included in Resolution 2401 passed on February 24. Thus, the regime continued its offensive. To limit casualties, Russia ordered [a humanitarian corridor](#) to allow humanitarian supplies in and civilians and opposition militias and their families out between 9 am and 2 pm each day, which was a replay of eastern Aleppo. When the first aid convoy

¹⁴ In Syria it is not unusual for militias fighting each other in one part of the country (e.g. Aleppo) to be fighting on the same side in another part of the country (e.g. Ghouta).



arrived in eastern Ghouta, the regime approved only half of all food and confiscated most medical supplies, with airstrikes allowing only 32 of the [46-truck convoy](#) to be off-loaded. Meanwhile, [Russia](#) claimed that some [300 to 400 families](#) came under fire from opposition militias as they fled the district.

By March 7, the Syrian Army¹⁵ had [taken half of Eastern Ghouta](#). Over the next week the army split eastern Ghouta into three Opposition enclaves. On March 20, opposition militias launched a rocket attack into the centre of Damascus, killing 44 people. The next day, [Russia struck a deal with Ahrar al-Sham](#) to evacuate 1,600 militants and 6,000 family members from Harasta to Idlib. In one evacuated area, Russian and Syrian officials claimed [they had found a chemical weapons factory](#) and 40 tons of chemical weapons. By [March 24](#), *Faylak al-Rahman* agreed to evacuate Arbin, and HTS agreed to evacuate the 40 percent of Yarmouk refugee camp under its control, leaving behind [18,000 Palestinian](#) refugees and ISIS, which had been in control of the other 60 percent of the camp since 2015. Over ten days, Russia had orchestrated the evacuation of up to 132,000 people (figures vary). Most were taken to Idlib. Others crossed into regime-controlled areas. [Pro-regime forces](#) allegedly killed 18 civilians and kidnapped others who remained in evacuated areas, but unlike eastern Aleppo, regime forces did not attack the convoys leaving Ghouta.

[Jaish al-Islam](#) refused to evacuate the town of Douma. They demanded they be allowed to stay, that no regime force must enter the town, but other regime institutions could provide basic services. Russia demanded *Jaish al-Sham* hand over all heavy weapons, release all pro-regime prisoners (said to number [3,500](#)), and either stay in Douma and enlist in a Russian monitored police force, or evacuate to Turkey-controlled Jarablus. After [two Jaish al-Islam military commanders](#) were assassinated, [1,198 fighters](#) and their families evacuated to Jarablus on April 3. But [80,000 to 130,000](#) people remained. With splits in the ranks of *Jaish al-Sham* and *Jaish al-Islam* alleging that the TSK was mistreating those who arrived in Jarablus (they were being disarmed, unlike other evacuated militants), after ten days, negotiations collapsed on [April 6](#). Airstrikes and a regime ground offensive killed 36 civilians on the first day.

The next day, April 7, *Jaish al-Sham* claimed that the regime used [chlorine and a nerve gas](#) in barrel bombs dropped from helicopters that targeted a [Douma hospital and nearby building](#) resulting in at least [42 people](#) dying and another 500 suffering from the effects. The regime denied using chemicals, claiming it was propaganda. Local doctors claimed the worst affected had been sheltering from conventional bombs in basements. Some claimed the regime was responsible for the alleged chemical attacks, others claimed it was the Opposition, and others, like the SOHR, claimed no one had used chemicals. [Robert Fisk](#) visited Douma and interviewed a local doctor who claimed the people were suffering from a lack of oxygen caused by conventional bombing and dust storms. This was consistent with SOHR reports that

¹⁵ [Iran-backed militias](#) were not involved in the offensive or evacuations.



claimed 11 people had died from suffocation from conventional bombs. Other journalists claimed they could smell a strange odour in basements they visited.

Even the mention of chemical weapons elicits terror, and on [April 8](#) the evacuation of Douma began. Over the next days 8,000 fighters and 40,000 people were bussed to Turkey-controlled Idlib and Jarablus. However, thousands of evacuees from eastern Ghouta [continued on to Afrin](#), where they were put in the [empty houses of Afrin IDPs](#) who have been blocked from returning to Afrin.

On [April 14](#), inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons arrived in Damascus to examine the Douma sites affected by the alleged chemical attack. Unlike Robert Fisk and other journalists, they were delayed from reaching the sites because of a lack of security until [April 21](#). Meanwhile the US debated further sanctions on Russian businesses operating in Syria, but [Trump rejected](#) the measures.

Before any investigation could take place, and without seeking approval from their respective governments, on [April 14](#), the US, UK and France launched 105 missiles from four US warships (including a new Virginia-class [nuclear submarine](#)) in the Mediterranean, Gulf and Red Sea, and from UK and French warplanes flying outside Syrian airspace. The missiles simultaneously and successfully hit the main target – the military Research and Development Centre in Barzeh, an outer suburb of Damascus (thought to be the centre of chemical and biological weapons development and targeted by Israel in December), as well as two chemical facilities and a military command post in Homs. Before the attack Russia claimed it would destroy any missiles and sites from where they were launched, but with extensive use of de-confliction channels, the targeted facilities had been evacuated and Russia did not hinder the warships or deploy its missile defence system as no missiles entered its airspace. Syrian air defence fired between [40](#) and [112 surface-to-air missiles](#). Russian sources claimed these shot down 71 of the coalition's missiles that targeted six airfields. Russia claimed the missile attacks were acts of aggression and against international law, but otherwise chose not to immediately respond. However, by the end of April, the head of US Special Command Operations claimed ['adversaries' were jamming the electronics](#) in AC-130 Gunships and other communications equipment, and Russia was considering deploying advanced anti-aircraft and S-300 anti-missile systems in Syria.

To date, these actions have not changed the balance of power. Many suspect the US-UK-French missile strikes were less about an unconfirmed chemical attack, and more about making a statement to the Astana troika. Following the attack, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted that the UN must take charge of negotiating a political transition, and Turkey went quiet on Manbij.

Throughout the regime's offensive on eastern Ghouta, pro-regime forces continued to target other de-escalation zones. On March 13, the regime bombed several cities in the southern de-escalation zone of Daraa. In early April the regime moved [tanks](#)



[and heavy artillery](#) into the demilitarised buffer zone along the border with Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. [Daraa](#) is subject to a US-Russian-Jordanian agreement, and is of strategic importance in blocking Iran's ability to form a contiguous land corridor to the border with Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The [city of Daraa](#) is controlled by the regime in the north and opposition fighters in the south.

Concurrently, pro-Assad forces advanced into northern Aleppo and southern Idlib, the destination of most opposition fighters and their families. In April, some [48,000 people](#) from eastern Ghouta were evacuated to [80 locations](#) in Idlib, where there were not enough tents, schools, mosques, half finished buildings or aid groups to provide for them. They entered another war zone.

Idlib

Idlib has a population of 2.65 million people, nearly half of which are IDPs. Between 2013 and July 2017, a civilian council supported by the Turkey-backed Syrian National Coalition's 'Syrian Interim Government' ran Idlib city, but by the end of July, *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* (former Al-Qaida/Al-Nusra) and its coalition, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) had taken control of the province. HTS dismantled the Syrian Interim Government councils and on November 2 announced the formation of the Syrian Salvation/Relief Government. Other sources claim that Idlib has two rival governments, with their respective militias regularly clashing. Residents claim there is no overarching authority, and that all police are masked so it is impossible to distinguish between police, militants and criminals. Kidnapping, robbery and murder are daily occurrences. In the week beginning October 9, civilians in Idlib city protested that HTS police were failing to maintain law and order after a jewellery shop owner and his two sons were murdered and robbed by masked assailants. On January 7, a bomb blast in Idlib city killed at least 34 people, including 18 civilians. Such incidences indicate considerable challenges to HTS' intention to unite and control all opposition groups, defeat Assad, and create a Sunni Arab caliphate.

Challenges were also coming from within, with some HTS leaders wanting to Syrianise the movement, others wanting to retain its aim of transnational jiahd, some wanting to co-operate with Turkey and others wanting to fight Turkey. Such splits could be behind the assassinations of 35 high-ranking HTS commanders and religious figures, the majority being from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia, by unknown perpetrators between September and December 2017. Other HTS leaders were arrested. With Turkey failing to pay its opposition militias, some joined HTS, which appears to be well financed, and in September, HTS launched several attacks on Russian military police in Idlib. In one attack on September 18, HTS surrounded 29 Chechen military police, who had to be rescued by Special Forces backed by air support.

HTS' consolidation of power in Idlib led to the Astana troika agreeing to divide Idlib into three areas in September, with each member of the troika supplying 500 monitors. Area 1, east of the railway, would be a demilitarised zone cleared of

opposition militias, administered by local councils, and secured by Russian and Iranian monitors. Area 2, between the railway and the highway, would be where HTS fighters were contained and forced to disarm. Area 3, west of the railway and from the Damascus-Aleppo M5 international highway to the Turkish border would be under Turkish observation.



Figure 12: [Map](#) of Idlib and Aleppo, before Turkey's occupation of Afrin

Turkey was expected to deploy its 500 monitors along the 160-kilometre line of contact between HTS and the regime, in the border region of Hama, Idlib and Aleppo, to prevent supplies from getting to HTS and to force HTS militants to split from transnational jihadists, lay down their weapons, demobilize and relocate, or be subject to a siege and, ultimately, killed. Russia opposed a third alternative proposed by Turkey, that of HTS joining the Turkey-backed Syrian 'National' Army in northern Aleppo.

In early October, President Erdogan announced that Turkey had its own 'game plan' in Syria. Days later, after a series of high level meetings in Turkey, elements in HTS agreed to allow Turkey's army into Idlib on the condition that Turkey target the



YPG/SDF in Afrin, that there would be no operation against HTS administrations or militias in Idlib, and that Turkey-backed opposition militias in northern Aleppo would not enter Idlib. Despite some in HTS opposing Turkey's entry, after Turkey agreed to these conditions, under HTS escort and with HTS handing over a strategic hill, Turkey established three observation posts overlooking the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in October. [Co-operating with Turkey](#) paid HTS dividends on October 18, when Turkey opened the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, and agreed that customs and duties would accrue to the local HTS administration.

Back in late September, some opposition militias requested Russia rather than Turkey to oversee Area 3 but *Syria Deeply* found widespread support for Turkey's intervention in Idlib, perhaps stemming from fear of Russian airstrikes and HTS hegemony (over local administrations, money transfers, education, dress codes, businesses, water and transportation) more than favouring a long term occupation.

Despite the formalising of the Idlib de-escalation zone in late September, Russian and Syrian warplanes escalated their airstrikes on Idlib, with Russia claiming to have killed five top HTS commanders in one airstrike in early October. In November and December, HTS continued to clash with opposition militias in Aleppo, and also with pro-regime forces in the border regions of Aleppo, southern Idlib and northeast Hama. Initially, HTS managed to hold back a pro-regime advance, but from December 9, Russian airstrikes supported a ground advance and from December 18 pro-regime forces entered HTS-held territory. On December 26, these forces entered Area 1 and gained control of at least 120 villages along the Damascus-Aleppo international highway. The Opposition saw this as a violation of the Astana agreement. By early January, pro-regime forces had captured the HTS-held towns of al-Ruwaida, Abu Dal, Khan Sheikhoun and Sinjar, and 50 villages in Idlib and another 50 villages nearby, and headed for the HTS-held Abu al-Duhur airbase, one of the largest airports in northern Syria.

Turkey lobbied Russian, Iranian and US officials to stop the regime's offensive on Idlib, especially after a Turkish military convoy in the Darat Izza district came under fire from unknown assailants on January 8. Turkey warned that the offensive would impact the Sochi Congress, jeopardise de-escalation agreements, and cause more Syrians to seek asylum in Turkey. The UN reported that between November and early January up to 100,000 civilians had fled north and west to escape the fighting, Turkey claiming the number to be 220,000.

On January 11, opposition militias, including those affiliated with HTS, reinforced by 'thousands' more arriving in Idlib, began a counter-offensive in Area 1, [using armoured vehicles](#) and [advanced weapons systems, possibly including man-portable air-defence systems](#) (MANPADs) supplied by Turkey. [Turkish support](#), including in direction and planning, helped HTS and other militias recapture a number of regime-held villages in Idlib and Hama, and inflict casualties on pro-Assad forces, with the fighting killing tens of civilians each day and destroying essential infrastructure. For instance, in early January airstrikes hit a maternity hospital in the Idlib city of Ma'arat al-Nu'man three times in four days. TASS claimed the month long offensive



killed 600 opposition militants, and on January 20, the Syrian army took control of the Abu al-Duhur airbase. With this victory, the regime controlled strategic roads and most of Area 1, which had been assigned to Russian and Iranian monitoring.

Tensions were building between Turkey and Russia. Turkey had been silent about Russia's support for the SDF fighting ISIS in Deir Ezzor in November, but overtly opposed Russia's wish to have SDF and PYD representatives attend the upcoming Sochi Congress. Turkey was also lobbying Russia for permission to invade Afrin, as Russia controlled the airspace. In January, not only was Turkey supporting opposition militias to fight pro-regime forces in Idlib, back on December 31, 82 mm mortars targeted Russia's Khmeimim airbase in Latakia province, killing two personnel and wounding another eight, and allegedly destroying seven Russian planes (four Su-24 bombers, two Su-35S fighters and a transport plane) as well as an ammunition depot. The Russian Ministry of Defence denied the material damage. On January 4, Russian anti-air defence systems shot down two drones over Latakia and a Russian Il-76 heavy transport plane could not land at the Khmeimim airbase for undisclosed reasons. On the night of January 5/6, thirteen combat drones accurately targeted the Russian bases at Khmeimim and Tartus, but were repelled. Russian sources claimed the mortars and drones came from an area in southwest Idlib controlled by *Ahrar al-Sham* and other Turkey-backed militias, and demanded Turkey deploy observers to the area and implement the ceasefire agreement. Turkey claimed that 'terrorists' had infiltrated the area and were responsible for the attacks. Russian officials claimed that the drone attacks had outside stakeholder involvement, but implied it was the US rather than Turkey. On January 12, Russia claimed all militants involved in the drone attacks had been killed.

On February 3, [Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham used a MANPAD](#) surface-to-air missile to shoot down a Russian Su-25 warplane over Khan al-Sabl, close to Idlib city. The Russian pilot, Roman Filipov, ejected safely, and with his handgun fought the militants surrounding him before detonating a grenade in preference to being captured. Some Moscow officials suspected Turkey of supplying the MANPAD, as a message to Russia to stop its airstrikes on Idlib. This was the second aircraft to be shot down by the opposition using MANPADs, the first being the Syrian L-39 aircraft near Hama city on December 26. In response to the attack on the Su-25, Russia conducted more than 100 airstrikes in the area, killing more than 30 militants. The militants claimed that the airstrikes targeted civilian convoys fleeing from villages that pro-regime forces had overrun, and further claimed regime helicopters dispersed chlorine gas in the area on February 4.

With Turkey failing to dismantle HTS councils, (see the KLA report on [Turkey's links with HTS](#)) even though these councils were undermining the rival councils of the Turkey-backed Syrian Interim Government, in January Russia began exerting pressure on Turkey to establish more observation posts in southern Idlib. In exchange for allowing Turkey to invade Afrin on January 20, on the night of January 29, Turkey sent [a 100-vehicle convoy](#) that included 15 transporters loaded with tanks, [escorted by HTS](#), into Aleppo, heading to Tel al-Ais in Area 1, on the



Damascus-Aleppo M5 international highway. Eight kilometres from its destination, the convoy was stopped when Syrian army and pro-regime forces [shelled the Kamhari area](#) with artillery shells and missiles. The convoy pulled back to Kafr Kermin, resuming its advance 10 hours later, when it was again [attacked](#) with an explosive-packed vehicle at the entrance of Atarib. The TSK blamed the attack on PKK but a faction within the [HTS claimed responsibility](#). On January 31, and again on [February 5](#), pro-regime forces within 30 kilometres of the besieged Shia towns of Fua and Kefraya targeted Turkish convoys, apparently not guided by any accord between Russia and Turkey. In response, [the TSK attacked Syrian Army positions](#) near Tel al-Ais with missiles launched from Turkish soil. In deploying to Tel al-Ais, an Opposition-controlled frontline within a kilometre of the pro-regime forward base at Hazir, Turkey could block an advance by pro-regime forces. In the meantime, it set up an observation post at al-Ais, and by early April had set up another five observation posts, including one inside Idlib city, bringing the total to [nine observation posts](#).

Back on February 18, Turkey-backed *Ahrar al-Sham* and the *Nureddin Zengi* Brigade announced yet another coalition called the [Syrian Liberation Front](#) to fight ISIS, build institutions and the 'future army of a free Syria'. (Not revealed was whether this coalition was formed in or outside the new Syrian 'National' Army.) Two days later, clashes between this coalition and HTS broke out in Idlib and Aleppo. HTS had tanks and bomb-dropping drones, and both sides took villages and prisoners-of-war. In the first week, 94 HTS fighters, 62 opposing militants and 14 civilians were killed. With HTS also being targeted by Russian airstrikes and (pro) regime forces, HTS-controlled territory in Idlib was reduced to [60 percent](#) of the province by the end of March.

It appeared Turkey was taking action in reducing HTS-control of Idlib, thus [breaking its agreement with HTS](#) not to interfere with HTS' administrations and security. These actions discredit HTS and Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham's leaders, who had reassured their members of Turkey's intentions. But worse was to come in April, when Turkey accepted tens of thousands of Islamist extremists and their families from eastern Ghouta into Idlib and northern Aleppo, including *Jaish al-Islam*, which is not subservient to Turkey or HTS. The various militias have a history of fighting each other.

With the invasion of Afrin, Turkey now occupies contiguous territory from its border through northern Aleppo to Idlib, which it claims it will not hand over to the Assad regime. The area contains more than 70,000 opposition militants. This opens up a number of possibilities, all of which carry [huge military and humanitarian risks for Turkey](#). A Turkey-enforced ceasefire in Idlib could end the opposition's jihad and allow the Assad government to expand, but that would create a million or more asylum seekers at Turkey's border, which Turkey refuses to accept, as Turkey already accommodates between 2.9 and 3.5 million Syrian refugees. To stop more asylum seekers crossing into Turkey, Turkey has built a concrete wall along the border. Human Rights Watch claims that between September 2017 and March 2018, [Turkish guards shot](#) 32 asylum seekers trying to enter Turkey, killing 14 and injuring eighteen. A [doctor in Idlib](#) claimed that between August 1 and February 16. He treated 66 people with gunshot wounds incurred when they were attempting to



cross the border. Turkey regularly detains many hundreds of asylum seekers at the border before bussing them back to Idlib or northern Aleppo.

Another alternative is that Turkey creates a Turkey-controlled Islamist enclave in northern Aleppo and Idlib, but even if HTS rejects transnational militancy and works with other Turkey-backed militias there is the potential for future conflict between militias, with Turkish forces on the firing line. A permanent occupation by Turkey would not necessarily be acceptable to militias or civilians, and would not be accepted by the Assad regime or a future government, or Iran. Turkey could lose control of the militias. For instance, HTS has sustained its power by controlling smuggling routes and checkpoints and is determined to have a say in Syria's political future, with or without the co-operation of Turkey. Turkey could face conflict in Syria, which could easily spill over into Turkey and beyond.

To counteract these risks, Turkey would need to put a stop to Russia's airstrikes, regime advances and militia infighting, and would need to deliver humanitarian aid, reconstruction and inclusive local councils, tasks that are unlikely to be achieved given the Assad regime's determination to take back Syria, and Turkey's own track record in governance. More favourable alternatives would require action from the international community.

Israel in Syria

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly warned that Israel will not allow a regime that does not accept the existence of Israel to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, and that Israel is less than satisfied by Russian and US responses to Iran building military installations, and maintaining IRGC and Iran-backed militias in Syria, including Lebanese Hezbollah. Those near the border of Israeli-occupied Golan Heights are of particular concern. For Israel, the US House of Representatives passing [three bills](#) on October 25 related to new sanctions on Hezbollah, including blocking assets, denying and revoking visas, levying fines and imprisoning members, was not enough. Nor does Israel want Islamist extremists or Iraqi *Hashd al-Shaabi* on its border, given the latter's support for Lebanon and Palestine.

Unable to control what was happening in Syria, but knowing how dangerous it is to show weakness, Israel has conducted intermittent strikes to preserve its interests. In early September, Israel shot down a drone over the Golan Heights. On September 7, four Israeli planes in Lebanese airspace hit a Hezbollah military camp and a chemical weapons manufacture and storage site run by the regime's Scientific Research Centre in a military facility at Maysaf in Hama province. Two Syrian soldiers were killed. On October 16, Israeli F-16 warplanes struck a Syrian SA-5 surface-to-air missile site east of Damascus two hours after other Israeli warplanes in Lebanese airspace came under fire from surface-to-air missiles from the site. Syria claimed their missiles hit one target. After five 'projectiles' landed in Israeli-occupied Golan



Heights, the Israeli military targeted Syrian army artillery positions in Quneitra on October 21.

Back on September 11, the Israeli army, accompanied by tanks, bulldozers and military vehicles advanced 200 metres across the Golan Heights border into Quneitra province, and on November 3, Israel announced it would militarily intervene if Hader, a Druze village loyal to Assad just across the border, was again threatened after *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* conducted attacks involving a car bomb and suicide bomber on the village. These attacks killed at least 10 residents and wounded dozens.

On December 1 and 3, Israel launched two attacks – a combined air and surface-to-surface missile attack on an alleged Iranian military site in a rural area outside Damascus, and an air attack on the military Research and Development Centre in Barzeh. Syrian air defence intercepted some missiles but other missiles caused material damage. Israel did not claim responsibility.

On January 9 and again on February 9, the Syrian military claimed that Syrian air defence thwarted Israeli missile attacks on military sites near the capital. On February 10, Israel claimed an Iranian reverse-engineered Lockheed Martin RQ-170 Sentinel drone (a surveillance drone the size of a small plane) crossed into northern Israel and was shot down by an Israeli attack helicopter. In retaliation, four Israeli F-16s targeted a T-4 military base near Palmyra in central Syria, where Russian and IRGC military were allegedly stationed, and from where the Israelis claim the drone had been launched. The airstrikes killed [seven Iranians](#), including an IRGC colonel. But Syrian anti-aircraft fire of up to 24 surface-to-air missiles shot down one of the Israeli F-16s, which crashed in Israeli territory, the pilot and navigator ejecting. Other aircraft were allegedly damaged. In response, Israeli F-16s struck four IRGC military establishments, and eight Syrian targets, including three aerial defence batteries. The [Los Angeles Times](#) reported that these strikes took out half of Syria's air defences. If Russia had no prior warning of the IRGC drone launch, the incident reflects a lack of Russian control over the IRGC.

On [April 9](#), from warplanes in Lebanese airspace, Israel allegedly hit the large T-4 airbase in Homs, killing 14 people, including seven Iranians. [Iran warned](#) it would retaliate if there were further attacks. On April 17, (three days after the US, UK and French launched their missiles), [missiles targeted](#) Dumeir airbase near Damascus, and Shayrat airbase in Homs (which the US had bombed in April 2017). With the US denying any involvement, Syrian officials suspected Israel. Escalating clashes between Israel and Iran in Syria led Russia to hold meetings with representatives of each country's National Security Council on [April 25 – 26](#), in an effort to prevent a major confrontation.

On [April 29](#), several alleged [Iran-backed militia command and recruitment centres](#) in southern Hama and Aleppo were targeted. The subsequent explosions were large enough to register 2.6 on the Richter scale, and killed at least [22 Iranians](#), including [IRGC](#), and four Syrians, wounding another 60 people. Most commentators suspected



Israel. Others suggested the [US/UK fired missiles](#) from Jordan, or opposition militias could have been responsible.

Political Negotiations

The Astana process was meant to work on military and humanitarian solutions, and leave the Geneva process to focus on a political transition. Both are failing because the Opposition has been undermined and divided by the Astana process, and because of the intransigence of those at the negotiating table, with the spectrum of Syrian society not being represented in negotiations.

Astana VI was held on 14 – 15 September, with *Ahrar al-Sham* attending for the first time. A priority was to establish the boundaries and monitoring for a de-escalation zone that covered Idlib and parts of neighbouring Latakia, Hama and Aleppo. Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed for each to send 500 monitors to this zone, with Russian and Iranian monitors guaranteeing regime actions and Turkey guaranteeing the actions of opposition militias, and promising to deal with HTS, allowing Russia and the Syrian regime to negotiate with non-HTS opposition militias in each neighbourhood. The plan took no account of the Opposition's rejection of an Iranian and Syrian presence inside the de-escalation zone, and that the plan would likely involve intense and frequent clashes with HTS, unless Turkey could provide an alternative path. Russia also spoke strongly against Turkey's Syrian 'National' Army. As already described, no party kept to the agreements.

On 12 October, Russia and three militias including *Jaish al-Sham* signed an agreement in Cairo for a de-escalation zone south of Damascus but the regime and many armed militias in the southern suburbs (al-Qadam Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem) were not party to the agreement and two other districts (Yarmouk camp and Hajar al-Aswad, controlled by HTS and ISIS) were excluded. As already described, this meant eastern Ghouta and the southern neighbourhoods remained subject to a siege, airstrikes and a regime offensive.

Astana VII was held on 30 – 31 October, with *Ahrar al-Sham*, *Jaish al-Islam* and the Sultan Murad Brigade in attendance. Talks included plans for humanitarian aid delivery, prisoner exchanges, finding 'missing persons,' and a ban on aircraft flying over the four de-escalation zones. Iran accused Turkey of violating the agreement on securing Idlib, with Turkey having established only three of the 12 planned observation posts, while discussions on prisoner swaps and the regime's offensive in eastern Ghouta were tense. Astana VII failed to produce a final agreement except for a joint statement that differed little from previous ones. The Opposition concluded that Russia was not acting as a mediator but was intent on ensuring the survival of the Assad regime.

An expanded Syrian opposition met in Riyadh on 10 November and the next day, 11 November, US-Russian negotiations to end the civil war culminated in a joint



statement by Presidents Putin and Trump, who were attending an APEC summit in Vietnam. The statement affirmed that ISIS needed to be defeated, that there was no military solution, that all steps must include full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and that Syrians in the diaspora must participate in any future election. The statement proposed expanding the existing de-confliction channels, establishing a joint monitoring centre, and broadening the de-confliction zones. There was no reference to the fate of Assad, or how to resolve the Iranian presence.

On November 22 – 23, a 140-member delegation representing the Riyadh-based High Negotiation Committee (HNC), Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition (SNC), Cairo and Moscow Groups, but not the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, met in Riyadh in preparation for Geneva VIII. Two days earlier, the head of the HNC, Riad Hijab, former prime minister until he defected in 2012, resigned from his post because in his view, Russia and Iran were working solely for regime survival. He was replaced by Nasr al-Hariri, who, like Riad Hijab, reconfirmed that the HNC considered a peaceful transition would not be possible without the removal Assad from power and the removal of the IRGC and Iranian militias from Syria. The HNC accepted that some members of the regime could stay on in an interim government, and did not make their demands pre-conditions for talks to proceed. While it appeared the opposition was developing a united group, they had not developed a united position on Assad being involved in an interim government. Consequently, representatives of the Moscow and Cairo platforms walked out of meetings on 23 November.

Geneva VIII began on November 28. In attendance were 36 opposition representatives, including those from the HNC, SNC, Cairo and Moscow platforms, the [National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change](#) (a secular coalition of leftist and nationalist non-armed groups), eight independent delegates, and seven representatives of military factions. Regime representatives arrived a day late, refused direct talks, and quit talks on December 1, claiming a pre-condition of any discussion was the Opposition dropping its demand that Assad step down at the start of any political transition.

Facing yet another failure, UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, submitted to both sides a post-war plan he called '[12 Living Intra-Syrian Essential Principles](#)', which was basically a wish list full of assumptions that had no relation to realities on-the-ground and made no attempt to address the status of Kurds. The principles endorsed Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty; the Syrian peoples' right to determine the future of their country by democratic means that *will* result in a democratic and non-sectarian state based on political pluralism, equal citizenship and the separation of powers; fair representation in local administrations; a strong unified meritocratic army; and an unqualified rejection of terrorism, fanaticism, extremism and sectarianism. Other efforts, for example by the German Institute, have produced equally idealistic goals without reference to any mechanisms on how to achieve these goals.



Head of the regime delegation, Bashar Jaafari, objected to Mistura's principles, claiming the regime was not there to negotiate with Mistura, or apparently anyone else. Having walked out on December 1, the regime delegation did not return until December 10. The fruitless negotiations ended on December 14, with Mistura blaming the Assad regime for being unwilling to negotiate.

After meeting Erdogan in Ankara, on 11 December Putin had made a surprise visit to the Khmeimim airbase, where he announced that most of Russia's military were returning to Russia, without referencing a previous announcement that Russia would expand its bases at Tartus naval facility and Khmeimim airbase. The announcement was thought to be about putting pressure on Assad to negotiate. If so, it was not successful.

Astana VIII began on December 21 with a focus on prisoner releases and demining, but ended with no progress, given the main thrust was to encourage 'moderate' factions to fight their 'radical' Opposition counterparts, discredit Opposition negotiators, and strengthen the regime.

On January 25 – 26, Staffan de Mistura held another meeting for the Assad government and opposition in Vienna to discuss constitutional issues. Frustrated by perpetual deadlock, de Mistura told the UN Security Council that a new timeline needed to be set for constitutional reform and elections, adding that a broader section of Syrian society needed to be included in negotiations. Not mentioned was that the regime had introduced new conditions, these being that there would be no political transition until all sovereignty was restored and terrorism was defeated.

With Geneva and Astana failing to produce a political resolution, international observers put their hopes in Sochi. Back in September, Russia had proposed a two-day 'Syrian Congress on National Dialogue' at the Black Sea resort to discuss a new constitution, and a time line for parliamentary and presidential elections. It would involve 1,500 representatives from the Syrian regime, 33 Syrian groups and political parties, Syrian tribes and local councils, and for the first time, it would include representatives of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. This was despite Turkey saying it and all Opposition groups it had influence over would boycott Sochi if Federation representatives were allowed to attend Sochi. However, on December 11, Turkey announced that it would let Syrian Kurds join the Congress provided no representatives from the PYD or the YPG/J attended. Those selected were to come from a list of acceptable Syrian Kurdish organisations, all of which operated under the KRG umbrella of the KNC, which was already represented in the SNC. Although an opponent of the PYD, the KNC also supports self-rule in northern Syria.

Russia insisted that only groups that had no pre-condition for Assad to step down could attend Sochi, but also warned that those who did not attend could be sidelined in the political process. From the outset, the Istanbul-based SNC and the Riyadh-based HNC rejected the proposed Congress, insisting that all talks be held within a UN framework, consistent with the position of the US-led coalition. In



contrast, having not been invited to any prior negotiations, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria submitted names of people from Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and elsewhere to represent the ethnic and religious groups in the region. Sceptics claimed that a two-day conference with so many attendees could not hope to achieve any real outcomes.

Russia also insisted that the Assad regime approve a 21-member Constitution Committee to work on the constitution before the conference, but Assad insisted that only members of the current parliament could be part of the committee and that any new constitution had to be based on the 2012 constitution.

The Sochi Congress had been initially scheduled for November 18, was then rescheduled for December, and was finally held on January 30 – 31. In response to on-going regime attacks in eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Aleppo and elsewhere, only 10 of the 34 opposition groups attended. In response to Russia allowing Turkey to attack Afrin, representatives of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, and the Barzani-backed KNC also boycotted Sochi. The US, UK and France stayed away, and no Assad regime representatives attended the first day of the congress. The opening of the congress was delayed by hours because of disagreements between Mistura, the Turkish delegation and Russia, with 83 Opposition delegates arriving from Turkey objecting to the Syrian flag being raised at the Congress, and leaving. Throughout the two-day congress, Assad's forces continued to attack Idlib and eastern Ghouta, causing members of the Sochi audience to heckle Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov when he claimed, 'All circumstances are ripe for peace in Syria'.

Sochi produced two outcomes. The only substantial outcome was that it was agreed to form a constitutional committee comprising representatives from the government, Opposition, local councils, civil society, Syrian experts, independents, tribal leaders and women. Turkey, Russia and Iran would each submit a list of 50 people for the constitutional committee. After taking advice from unspecified country representatives, Staffan de Mistura would have sole discretion to adjust the proposed list, including the addition of names, to form a UN-endorsed constitutional committee of 30 to 45 people, one third representing the regime, one third representing the Opposition, and the remaining third representing 'independents'. Meetings of the constitutional committee would take place in Geneva. These have not happened and Astana IX, scheduled for February 20, has been rescheduled for May, after the Assad regime rejected the proposed constitutional committee.

The second outcome of Sochi was a 12-point statement that was more or less a reiteration of Mistura's wish list, but which included that 'the Syrian people ... shall have the exclusive right to choose their own political, economic and social system without pressure or interference', and that all foreign forces must withdraw from Syria. Again, it was a set of principles that excluded any realistic process of implementation.

The presidents of the Astana troika met in Ankara on April 4, and produced a statement that claimed all three countries support Syria's sovereignty, and called for



more UN assistance. Despite the façade of troika harmony, on April 3, at a joint press conference with Erdogan, [Putin](#) claimed Syrian Kurds had a right to be involved in negotiations on a political transition, and during meetings, [Iranian President Hassan Rouhani](#) called on Turkey to hand Afrin over to the Syrian government. Turkey refused.

On April 25, [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) announced that the US, UK, France, Jordan and Saudi Arabia had formed a contact group that will coordinate with Germany, Turkey and Russia to build a bridge between the UN-led Geneva talks and the Astana process. This addresses the need to co-ordinate. However, to effect a political transition these stakeholders will need to address:

- The intransigence of Assad and his colleagues, and as soon as possible, the need for their powers to be reduced or for them to step down, and if not:
- How to avoid a blood bath in Idlib.
- Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo and Idlib and intention to expand its offensives in Syria and Iraq;
- How to form a united Syrian Army, given the regime's depleted army and reliance on so many pro-regime militias, and the presence of so many radicalised opposition militias, including Turkey's Syrian 'National' Army;
- The presence of Iranian military installations, IRGC and Iran-backed militias in Syria;
- IRGC-linked companies positioning themselves for the reconstruction phase (having reconstructed Iran after the Iran-Iraq war);
- That opposition representatives that want a Sunni Arab state based on Sharia law have hijacked the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (a coalition of the HNC, SNC and others), while other views have had limited or no representation at the negotiation table. For example, that the coalition has not followed the original 'principles of the revolution and the aims of the Syrian people', and that the Astana process has consolidated the regime's power, caused [three prominent members of the coalition](#) to resign in at the end of April.
- Turkey's opposition to PYD/YPG/YPJ/SDF being part of political negotiations and the need for these groups to be included in negotiations;
- The status of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria;
- The commitment and roles of the US-led coalition east the Euphrates; and
- The timing of elections, and whether they should be delayed until critical matters are sorted.

Reconstruction

These political and military issues need to be addressed as soon as possible, as part of a reconciliation process and before major reconstruction can take place because:



- The scale of reconstruction requires co-ordinated planning, a long term commitment and a massive amount of resources, to which donors will be unwilling to commit unless the aforementioned issues are resolved;
- The World Bank and IMF have yet to provide a formal comprehensive strategy;
- The Opposition sees the UN as an accomplice to the regime, with the UN having had to co-operate with the regime to gain humanitarian access;
- Most reconstruction will need to occur in regime-controlled areas.
- In April, the Assad regime passed a [new law](#) that requires all displaced Syrians, who number more than 12 million (i.e. over half the country's 2011 population) to present their ownership deeds to *local* authorities by May 10, or their property will be confiscated.
- Any reconstruction conducted under the current regime will favour in-country and foreign patronage networks that will consolidate the regime's grip on power, and cause further demographic changes through an indiscriminate transfer of assets free of taxes to pro-regime companies. An example of a Public Private Partnership is the Damascus Cham Holding Joint Stock Company, headed by the Damascus governor, and established in December 2016 with a capital base of \$279 million. It is in charge of a massive urban redevelopment project in the Basateen al-Razi district, projected to provide 12,000 housing units for 60,000 residents, as well as schools, restaurants, places of worship, a car park and shopping mall. The development is likely to be unaffordable to the district's current slum dwellers;
- Many Syrian investors with the resources and expertise to contribute to the reconstruction process have left the country;
- Syrian banks are in no position to provide adequate funding and Russia and Iran have signed rights over Syria's resources, with generated revenue leaving the country.
- President Assad has been consistent in his position, as stated in December. 'We won't let enemies, adversaries, and terrorists, through any means, accomplish through politics what they failed to accomplish on the battlefield and through terrorism.' However, his allies do not have the resources to fund reconstruction, nor the intention to focus on essential services. For instance, one proposal is for Russia to build a railway from the phosphate mines to Tartus, while a private Russian security firm has signed a contract that will protect an oil facility in return for 25 percent of the production revenue.
- The Assad regime will unlikely prioritise reconstruction in Kurdish-majority and Sunni Arab-majority areas;
- Even among Assad's allies, there are tensions regarding reconstruction. For instance, Iran claims that an agreement between Syria and Russia requires all investment in Syria to be approved by Russia, and this has led to Iran being left out of reconstruction contracts.



- On November 28, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reiterated that any political transition and reconstruction effort requires the Assad family to have no role in the Syrian government. In December, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee unveiled the [No Assistance for Assad Act](#). This Act bars the US administration from using non-humanitarian assistance funds for Syria's reconstruction in areas held by the Assad regime between 2018 and 2022, although there are explicit exemptions for local community organizations and humanitarian programs. The Act also bars multilateral institutions such as the UN, World Bank and International Monetary Fund from using US dollars in their own reconstruction and stabilization projects in Assad-controlled territory. Conditions for embarking on reconstruction include 'organizing free and fair elections', allowing the 'safe, unfettered and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes', taking steps to improve the human rights record, establish an independent judiciary, halt attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, minimize any reliance on Iranian military support, halt 'the development and deployment of ballistic cruise missiles,' and comply with international norms on chemical weapons; and
- The Gulf States, EU and member states, UK and others hold a similar position.

Ways forward

Some Western [commentators](#) say the only way to stop the suffering and devastation in Syria is to let Assad win back and rule over 67 percent of Syria. As for the other [32.8 percent](#) of Syrian territory that includes Syria's main hydro electric dams, water, agriculture, oil and gas resources, the Syrian regime, Russia and Turkey have become increasingly vocal about the illegality of the US military presence, as this gives the US-led coalition a capacity to influence Syria's future.

To date the US Congress has not approved an on-going presence in Syria, but if the US withdraws Russia, Iran, Turkey and ISIS will fill the vacuum. If the US stays, its influence will depend on whether it allows Turkey to slaughter and displace Kurds, or it supports the US-SDF/PYD/Arab alliance. Each path involves risks. The risks associated with co-ordinating with Turkey are outlined in KLA's reports on [Turkey's invasion of Afrin](#) and appear to outweigh the benefits, given Turkey's current trajectories. The risks associated with relying on the SDF/PYD/Arabs include further pushing Turkey towards Russia, Turkey and/or its Islamist extremists militias acting outside anyone's interests, and Syrian Kurds and their allies being unwilling and/or unable to curb Iranian expansion, given they do not stand to benefit from making more enemies, and do not have the resources to confront Iran's proxies and rebuild. At some stage they would need to negotiate with a Syrian government.

The Macron outline of co-ordination, particularly between the US and Russia, will be difficult but not impossible. The de-confliction channels have worked, as has an agreement that Russia stay mainly west of the Euphrates and the US stay mainly east



of the Euphrates. Russia needs the US and its allies to commit to reconstruction. The US needs Russia to help address the Iranian and Turkish presence in Syria. Russia and the US are federations and have advocated this system for Syria, Russia particularly so. On [April 20](#), the Russian deputy foreign minister claimed no one could predict how the situation would evolve in relation to Syria's territorial integrity. A loose federal system may maintain this integrity.

Given Assad's unwillingness to compromise on any political or military matter, Russia needs to be convinced to force President Bashar al-Assad and his colleagues into an early retirement, especially if institutions remain operational and suitable replacements are identified, ones that would accept a ceremonial presidency, and a transitional government that represents Syrian society, including minorities. Putin has allegedly shown favouritism towards a potential Assad replacement – [General Suhail al-Hassan](#), nicknamed the Tiger because of his battlefield successes with only 8,000 fighters. Apparently he is not aligned with Iran. The US-led coalition may have their own preferences, but if Russia and the US could work on the make up of an interim government, it would be a great leap forward.

Local, regional and international stakeholders must engage in different combinations to generate minimum requirements for peace. Where there is no willingness for compromise, the UN Security Council and others could provide options that the international community would need to enforce, including no-fly zones and international peacekeepers, the latter addressing the security concerns of Turkey, and other pledges on security for Iran, in return for a withdrawal of Turkish and Iranian troops and foreign militias, and the incorporation of Syrian militias into the Syrian army or local security forces, provided they abide by codes of conduct. As for IRGC-affiliated companies capitalising on reconstruction projects, the US already has sanctions in place against IRGC operations outside Iran, although enforcing them has been a problem. The international community could co-ordinate sanctions, and make it illegal for IRGC-linked companies to operate in Syria by freezing assets and implementing travel bans, and commit to ways of enforcing whatever is decided.

There are many levers, if the international community is willing to use them. All would be more effective if the US and Russia co-ordinated and took responsibility for rebuilding the cities each destroyed from the air. Levers include using diplomacy and reconstruction commitments to split regime loyalties and encourage a political transition at the top, and support inclusive governance, and diverse sustainable industries at the local level.

A major lever is preparing court cases against all those who have directly overseen or committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the Assad regime, opposition militias, ISIS, Turkey and IRGC-linked militias. These cases could be pursued for those who do not co-operate, or not pursued in return for pre-determined concessions (e.g. Assad stepping down and Turkey and Iran withdrawing troops). Other levers could be applied to Turkey and Iran. It is a carrot and stick approach based on credible, co-ordinated diplomacy within a hierarchy of strategic frameworks.



Turkey

Conditions in Turkey in the lead up to elections, June 24

On [April 18](#) 2018, the Turkish parliament renewed the state of emergency for a seventh time, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that presidential and parliamentary [elections would be held on June 24](#). Erdogan brought forward the elections by 17 months because he wanted to ride a wave of nationalist support following Turkey's offensive in Afrin before the Turkish economy deteriorates any further. He also wanted to fast track the implementation of an executive presidential system. The campaign will be run under a state of emergency, at a time when Erdogan's government has gained a strangle hold on the media and opposition parties have little time to prepare.

The main political parties involved in the elections are Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which received 49.5 percent of the vote in the November 2015 elections, and formed an alliance with the (ultra) Nationalist Action Party (MHP) to win government. The opposition parties are the Republican Peoples' Party (CHP), the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the İyi (Good) Party, established in October 2017, and the small pro-Islamic Felicity Party.

With the people of Turkey more polarised than ever, President Erdogan and the AKP need the MHP to achieve over 50 percent of the vote. The most fervent supporters of this alliance are conservative, nationalist, religious and/or Islamist. The other 50 percent of the population may wish for a different future. Among them are disaffected AKP and MHP followers, who consider the AKP and MHP have self-sabotaged under Erdogan's one-man rule. Erdogan has purged AKP members critical of his policies. They disappear from the public eye; languish in prison on allegations of being tied to the failed coup in 2016, or join remnants of the alternative media. Erdogan personally pressured the elected mayors of six major cities to resign in September – October 2017, including the Istanbul mayor, Kadir Topbas, after 13 years in office, and the Ankara mayor, Melih Gokcek, after 23 years in office, and also the mayors of Bursa, Nigde, Duzce and Balikesir. Significant [AKP figures](#) responsible for the 'Kurdish opening', such as Ali Babacan and Beşir Atalay, are likely to be omitted from the AKP list of election candidates.

Then there are the [19 to 25 percent](#) of the population who are Kurds. In the past, the deeply conservative among them voted for AKP, given that between 2002 and 2015, AKP allowed pro-Kurdish political parties, media outlets and NGOs, and began negotiations with the PKK, and Erdogan developed good relations with Masoud Barzani from 2005. Since July 2015, these AKP supporters have witnessed the TSK conduct military offensives on Kurds in eastern Turkey, northern Syria and Iraq, with [500,000 people](#) having been displaced from their homes in eastern Turkey, and 200,000 displaced in northern Syria. They have witnessed Erdogan's vitriolic reactions to Masoud Barzani and the KRI's referendum on independence. They have



seen over [80 elected mayors](#) in Kurdish-majority municipalities removed from their positions and imprisoned, and 11 pro-Kurdish HDP MPs stripped of their seats in parliament. Eight of these parliamentarians are in prison. That leaves only 48 HDP MPs in the current 550-seat parliament.

Another section of society that may not vote for Erdogan or an AKP or MHP candidate are young people who voted against constitutional changes in the April 2017 referendum, and who [question the use of Islam](#) and nationalism as coercive tools. With at least 22 percent of Turkey's 82.5 million people aged between 19 and 39, they make a formidable voting block.

Lastly, there are at least one million people who have suffered from the post-coup purge, if the families of those who have been dismissed from their jobs and/or imprisoned are included. An estimated 152,000 public servants have been dismissed from their employment, and 169,000 people have been detained. Of the 78,000 who remain in prison, [50,000](#) are yet to be sentenced, with a similar number having been released on bail. Some have been detained and released a number of times. Dismissals and imprisonments are ongoing. For instance, on October 26, Ankara Police Directorate Anti-Terror Branch Directorate teams started simultaneous operations in 30 provinces and arrested 121 previously sacked staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On December 24, another 2,756 people were dismissed from their jobs. Those dismissed and/or imprisoned include TSK officers and soldiers, NATO officers, one third of all judges, several hundred lawyers, several hundred academics, thousands of teachers and staff from every ministry, as well as journalists, human rights activists, including [Amnesty International staff accused of belonging to a terrorist organisation](#), and those who spoke up or signed petitions calling for peace. All are accused of having links with the failed coup, the Gulen Movement,¹⁶ PKK, or criticising President Erdogan or the Turkish state.

Those affected by the purge include the heads of religious and cultural institutions and business leaders, who have been replaced by State-appointed trustees. Then there are all those who were employed by the now banned six news agencies, 50 newspapers, 18 television channels, 29 publishing houses, 20 magazines, 22 radio stations and 1,528 NGOs. Among those banned are pro-Kurdish newspapers, television stations and associations.

The purge has earned Turkey the 101st place out of 113 countries in the Rule of Law Index in the [World Justice Report](#) 2017 – 2018. The scope of the purge is far from complete. In February, one [Supreme Court Justice](#) claimed that the Turkish Government is investigating 6.9 million citizens, or about 8.6 percent of the population.

The people who have been detained in prison are subject to mistreatment, and before a court, experience extreme court bias and disproportionate sentencing.

¹⁶ For a background on the Gulen Movement see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36855846>



Turkey's Human Rights Association (IHD) claims that between January and November 2017, at least [2,278 people were tortured](#) and 11 people 'disappeared'. In October, Human Rights Watch announced that it had documented at least 11 cases of serious abuse inside detention centres. Violations included beatings and sexual assault of prisoners, whose access to lawyers and correspondence was frequently denied.

For court hearings of HDP MPs and former co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, foreign observers were not allowed to observe proceedings, despite delegations having travelled to Turkey for this purpose. An example of a court hearing of less well-known individuals occurred in September 2017. In the previous March, a professor of literature, Nuriye Gülmen, and a primary school teacher, Semih Özakça, went on a hunger strike in protest of having lost their jobs in the purge because of their alleged links with the leftist militant group, Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C) – a charge levelled at them in 2012, but which was dismissed. They sustained themselves on a liquid diet of lemon, saltwater and sugar solutions. On the 76th day of their hunger strike, the police broke down their door and [detained them](#), alleging their protest could turn into death fasts and could inspire other protests. At their [first hearing](#) before a court on September 15, 2017, the 'suspected terrorists' were not brought to court because police claimed they might try and escape. Before the hearing, warrants had been issued for their 18 defence lawyers. The hearing proceeded without suspects or lawyers.

Examples of disproportionate prison sentences (and outrageous convictions) include the [life sentences](#) given to three leading journalists on February 16 – Ahmet Altan, 67, a best-selling novelist and newspaper editor, his brother Mehmet Altan, 65, an economics professor and editor, and Nazli Ilıcak, 74, a political commentator and former parliamentarian. All three were charged with being involved in the 2016 coup because of what they wrote and published about the coup.

If Erdogan wins more than 50 percent of the vote to become president, or if not, wins the second round of voting, under constitutional changes that replaced a parliamentary system with an executive presidency, narrowly approved by a disputed referendum result in April 2017, the only hope of [restraining](#) his powers is if the AKP – MHP alliance fails to win a majority in parliament. This hope is tempered by constitutional changes allowing a president to override parliament.

To achieve a majority in parliament, opposition parties will have to run campaigns amidst a pro-government media barrage and other repressive conditions. For instance, it is now a crime to criticise Erdogan and the Turkish state, and hold unauthorised public gatherings. Nor can the opposition overturn [new electoral rules](#) rushed through parliament in March. These allow civil servants to monitor polling, for unstamped votes or votes stamped multiple times to be counted, and for ballot boxes to be 'moved around'. It was these conditions that swung the 2017 referendum narrowly in favour of an executive presidency, and which could allow widespread fraud in the upcoming elections. The new rules also allow small political



parties that [form an alliance](#) with a bigger party to win seats in parliament if they receive less than the stipulated threshold of 10 percent of the vote. This was passed to ensure the MHP made it through.

Opposition parties face considerable challenges. The largest is the Republican People's Party (CHP), with 116 seats in the current parliament. The CHP leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, is under investigation over his claims that Erdogan and his family transferred \$15 million to offshore accounts in the tax lenient Isle of Man. In April 2018, CHP MP [Enis Berberoglu](#) was sentenced to five years ten months in prison for 'making the Turkish state's confidential information public' when reporting in a newspaper that the National Intelligence Agency (MIT) liaised with ISIS. He was stripped of his seat in parliament. Thus, the CHP became victim of the law it helped pass in May 2016 that stripped parliamentarians of their immunity from prosecution. CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has been criticised from within and outside his party for having voted in favour of this law, for having attended a failed-coup celebration rally in Istanbul, for supporting the disputed 2017 referendum results, because of his unwillingness to push for peace with the Kurds, and his general lacklustre opposition to the state's lurch towards authoritarian rule. Within the party, [some](#) had called for active boycotts and withdrawal from legislative work. However, in a surprise move on [April 22](#), Kilicdaroglu directed 15 CHP MPs to resign and join the new Iyi Party so that the newly established party would have 20 candidates, and be eligible to run in the elections. The next day, the Supreme Electoral Board confirmed Iyi Party's eligibility to run.

The CHP is trying to [form an alliance](#) with the Iyi Party, HDP, the small pro-Islamic Felicity Party and other parties, and use the new law of smaller parties being able to team up with a large party to not need 10 percent of the vote to make it into parliament. But Meral Aksener, head of the Iyi Party and former MHP Minister of Interior during the [1990s](#), does not want an alliance with HDP. HDP is also reluctant to be associated with her party, given that during her time as Minister of Interior 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed, and extrajudicial killings were a daily occurrence. There was talk of CHP and Iyi Party backing a single presidential candidate, the favoured one being the former AKP President of Turkey (2007 – 2014), [Abdullah Gul](#), but [Meral Aksener](#) announced she was running for the presidency, [some members of CHP rejected](#) Gul's candidature, and AKP put [pressure](#) on Gul not to run. Gul finally announced he would [not run](#) as there was no consensus among the opposition. In a scenario of multiple opposition presidential candidates, the only hope is for a second round of voting, at which time the opposition could unite behind one candidate.

Erdogan's ideal scenario would be for the pro-Kurdish HDP vote to fall below the 10 percent threshold so no HDP MPs could enter the next parliament. Eleven HDPs have been stripped of their seats in parliament. Of these, eight are in prison. These are:

2017

- Former HDP co-chair and Van MP, Figen Yüksekdağ, who received a seven-year prison sentence for 'spreading terrorist propaganda' during a funeral;



- Diyarbakir MP [Nursel Aydoğın](#), who received a sentence of four years and eight months for 'spreading terrorist propaganda' and 'committing crimes on behalf of a terror organization despite not being a member' having attended the funeral of an alleged PKK member;
- Siirt MP Besime Konca, who received a 2.5 year prison sentence for 'spreading terrorist propaganda';

2018

- Şırnak MP [Ferhat Encü](#), who was [sentenced](#) to three years and five months for 'spreading terrorist propaganda';
- Urfa MP Ibrahim Ayhan, who received a 15-month prison sentence for 'spreading terrorist propaganda' in social media posts after attending a funeral of a YPG fighter;
- Mus MP Ahmed Yildirim, who received a 14-month prison sentence for 'insulting the president' in remarks made after the 2017 referendum. On February 16, 2018, a [Turkish court of appeal](#) not only upheld the prison sentence, but banned Yildirim from ever joining a political party, charitable organization, NGO, syndicate or corporation;
- Şanlıurfa MP Osman Baydemir, who received an 18-month sentence for verbally assaulting a police officer; and
- Hakkari MP Selma Irmak, who received a ten-year prison sentence for being a member of 'an armed terror group' and 'spreading terrorist propaganda'.

Both Baydemir and Irmak were stripped of their seats a day after Erdogan announced the elections. Three other HDP MPs have been stripped of their seats for having been absent from too many sessions of parliament. Two were out of the country at the time of the coup. When they returned, they were detained briefly for not attending 'terrorist' investigations. They are:

- Şırnak MP [Faysal Sarıyıldız](#);
- Van MP Tuğba Hezer Öztürk.

Then in early 2018:

- Agri MP Leyla Zana was stripped of her seat in parliament for missing too many sessions, partly because she had been detained several times and had to attend court. Back in 1991, Zana had received a ten-year prison sentence for defying Turkish law banning the use of the Kurdish language and any reference to 'Kurd' or 'Kurdistan'. Upon being elected to parliament, she had recited the final portion of her parliamentary oath in Kurdish, saying 'I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people'.

Six other elected HDP MPs have received prison sentences. In 2017, Mus MP Burcu Chelik Özkan was sentenced to seven years for 'spreading terrorist propaganda' at a rally. In January 2018:

- Şırnak MP Leyla Birlik received a 21-month prison sentence for 'insulting the president';



- HDP deputy co-chair and Van MP Aysel Tuğluk was found guilty of ‘organizing and managing illegal protests’ in front of the Kocaeli Prison, where she was imprisoned on terror-related charges. An extra 18 months was added to her original sentence of [10 years](#).
- Diyarbakir MP Idris Baluken was sentenced to 16 years and 8 months for ‘being a member of a terrorist organization’, ‘violating the demonstration law’, and ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’;
- Şırnak MP Hasip Kaplan, one of the main lawyers for Selahattin Demirtaş, was sentenced to three years for ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’.

In March:

- Van MP Botan Lezgin was sentenced to 18 years for ‘insulting a public officer’ during an election campaign speech in 2015, ‘harming the integrity of the state’, ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’ and ‘being a member of a terrorist organization’.

None of these MPs were convicted of a violent crime. All charges relate to them belonging to the HDP and what they allegedly said at a funeral, a rally, or on social media. According to an HDP spokesperson around 10,000 HDP members have been arrested since the failed coup, although some have been released. [Sixty](#) of the 102 elected mayors of Kurdish-majority municipalities remain in prison and more than [90](#) have been removed from office and replaced by state appointed ‘trustees’. Under these ‘trustees’ municipal workers have been sacked; signs in Kurdish, Syriac, Armenian and Arabic have been removed; names of streets and parks have been changed; cultural and charity organisations have been closed down and festivals have been cancelled.

Days before the third HDP Congress on 11 February, an Ankara court issued arrest warrants for 17 HDP officials on charges of opposing Operation Olive Branch (Turkey’s invasion of Afrin), for which 600 people had been arrested by 10 February, including 11 members of the Turkish Medical Association. At the congress, 32,000 people elected two new co-chairs: Pervin Buldan, a Kurd (whose husband was abducted and killed in 1994, and who founded an association for the families of missing persons and who is a member of the Saturday Mothers – a group that commemorates victims of extrajudicial killings every Saturday), and Sezai Temelli, a Turk and founding member of HDP. A day after the congress, the Turkish state launched investigations into Pervin Buldan and Sirri Sureyya Onder, alleging they had committed ‘crimes of carrying out terrorist propaganda, and inciting grudges and enmity in the public’.

Despite or because of these travesties of justice, an opinion poll conducted in February 2018 showed that the HDP could win [12 percent of the vote](#). How the HDP fares will depend on winning over Kurds who were former AKP supporters and who remain Barzani supporters. That HDP leaders met with Masoud Barzani and others in Erbil in April in support of Kurdish unity could convince some to vote for HDP. Others may vote for the pro-Islamic Felicity Party or a minor left wing party.



Imprisoned since November 4, 2016, but not sentenced or stripped of his parliamentary seat is HDP's charismatic former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş. The prosecution seeks up to 142 years imprisonment for 31 terror-related charges, including 'managing a terrorist organisation', presumably referring to the HDP, and another 60 charges such as '[insulting the Turkish nation](#), the state of the Republic of Turkey, its public organs and institutions'. Demirtaş denies all charges. In the presidential elections of 2014, Demirtaş surprised everyone by receiving 9.7 percent of the vote. Having become the most substantial Kurdish political leader since Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani and Abdullah Ocalan, [HDP nominated Selahattin Demirtaş](#) as their presidential candidate, despite his imprisonment. However, this may be subject to a legal challenge.

A potential threat during the campaign and on the day of the elections is the activities of shadowy paramilitaries and other extremist organisations. A decree published in the official gazette on December 24, 2018, declared immunity from prosecution of any individual or organisation deemed to be resisting 'terrorists', or resisting those who attempted to overthrow the government, or resisting any 'continuation' of the attempted coup. After the decree was published opponents argued that it could incite individuals or paramilitaries to act with impunity. Abdullah Gul broke his usual silence to say the decree infringed on basic freedoms and Meral Aksener accused the AKP government of arming and training civilians to use in the upcoming elections, (which she predicted would be brought forward) to scare people into voting the way the AKP wanted, or to scare them into not voting at all.

Paramilitaries in Turkey operate under no regulations. They include the Peoples' Special Forces (HOH), which has branches in 22 of Turkey's 81 provinces, and [SADAT](#) (International Defence Consultancy), run by Erdogan's 'chief consultant', Brigadier General Adnan Tanriverdi, known for his Islamist views. SADAT was established for the purpose of training in country and foreign militias, and has a decidedly Salafist emphasis. It is alleged that SADAT has recruited and trained ISIS, and is training Turkey's Syrian 'National' Army, and that its snipers were involved in killing civilians during the attempted coup in July 2016. SADAT militants were accused of attempting to burn 34 villagers detained in Diyarbakir province in 2015. A third group is the Ottoman Hearths, a pro-Erdogan youth organisation that is run by criminals. In the lead up to the first elections in 2015 its members attacked HDP offices.

Media coverage will be extremely biased, as it was for the 2017 referendum. The AKP government has increased its [grip on Turkey's already highly censored media](#). In 2016, the state cancelled the press cards of [889 journalists](#). In 2016 and 2017, Turkey had the highest number of journalists in prison in the world – higher than China, Iran or Russia. In 2017, between 146 and 176 journalists were in prison on charges of terrorism, links to the Gulen Movement and/or spreading propaganda against the state. They included two German-Turkish journalists, Deniz Yucel and Mesale Tolu. On 10 October, Wall Street Journal journalist and dual Finnish-Turkish national, Ayla Albayrak, was sentenced in absentia to two years imprisonment for 'producing PKK terrorist propaganda' after reporting on the 2015 clashes between Kurdish youth in



the Nationalist Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) and the Turkish army. The Wall Street Journal called the sentencing 'intolerable censorship'. In March 2018, the country's last notionally independent media company, the Dogan Yaysat Group, that owned the *Hurriyet* newspaper, multiple magazines, TV and radio channels, was sold to the pro-government Demiroren group. In recent years, the government has banned 170,000 websites, and in March, the Turkish parliament gave the Radio and Television Supreme Council more powers to restrict Internet and broadcast content, the new legislation also requiring the licencing of media streaming Internet platforms. This impacts the likes of BBC. In a climate of fear, [self-censorship is pervasive](#), but some resist. Media on the internet critical of Turkey's current trajectory like the Leftist Sendika.org and pro-Kurdish Dicle News Agency (DIHA) get shut down only to re-emerge the next day under a different name, with the cycle repeating itself.

Another prime motivation for calling early elections is the fragility of the Turkish economy. In 2017, inflation was running at 13 percent. The non-agricultural unemployment rate was 13 percent, with a far higher rate in eastern Turkey. For instance, in Mardin the overall unemployment rate is 30 percent and the youth unemployment rate is 38 percent. The minimum wage in Turkey is [\\$343](#) per month, and with high inflation this is below the poverty line. In 2015, [22 percent of people](#) lived below the poverty line and the percentage is increasing. For instance, farmers all over Turkey, once strong supporters of Erdogan, are protesting at farm gate prices not covering production costs.

Between August 2016 and October 2017, the Turkish stock market fell by 17 percent. The exit of foreign investment funds has reached \$1 billion per week. Although Turkey's economy grew by 5.1 percent in the first half of 2017, this was fuelled by foreign investment in public-private partnerships for a few large-scale projects, government pressure on banks to lend (with loans expanding by 23 percent between June 2016 and June 2017), and cheaper exports. These trends have led to escalating budget and current account deficits. [Turkey](#) owes \$450 billion to foreign creditors, of which \$276 billion is denominated in hard currency, mostly dollars and euros. This is problematic as interest rates rise. The remaining \$174 billion is denominated in Turkish lira. The lira debt is a significant burden because the lira has devalued from 1.75 to 4.08 lira to the US dollar between 2013 and 2018. Consequently, lira interest rates have doubled from six percent to 12 percent in the past five years, and Turkey is increasingly dependent on short-term loans carrying an interest rate of more than 10 percent. If Turkey were to find itself in financial distress, the usual lifeline is the International Monetary Fund, over which the US and its European allies have veto power. If the US and European countries demand conditions on any IMF assistance, and if Turkey rejects these conditions, this would lead to an impasse.

A factor affecting the Turkish economy is the purge on 600 private businesses and companies on the Turkish stock exchange suspected of having links with the Gulen Movement. These have been taken over by the state. Some of these businesses are very large (see [KLA report](#) p. 45). Then there is the transfer of assets and mismanagement of the [Turkey Wealth Fund](#), established in mid-2016 as a result of



the transfer of \$160 billion of public assets including the state-owned Ziraat Bank, Halkbank, Turkish Airlines, Turk Telekom, PTT postal service, National Lottery, Istanbul stock exchange, the pipeline operator BOTAS, the oil company TPAO, the satellite communications company Turksat, the tea company CAYKUR and Eti Maden, which has a monopoly on boron products. Close associates of Erdogan manage the fund. Two years after its formation, they have yet to finalise an investment strategy.

In 2018, [Global Fire Power](#) ranked Turkey 9th out of 136 countries in terms of military firepower. Despite a deteriorating economy, Turkey plans to increase its military budget by 30 percent in 2018. The \$5.2 billion increase will be raised through direct taxation of citizens' personal income and surcharges on vehicles, fuel, real estate and other commodities. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Turkey's 2018 budget defence expenditure of \$26 billion out of a national budget of \$195 billion puts Turkey in SIPRI's top 15 defence spenders.

Under deteriorating economic conditions, and with the AKP and MHP fanning Islamist and nationalist sentiments, the polarisation of Turkish society could turn nasty, especially if there is widespread election fraud. For example, in September 2017, an ultra-nationalist group of about 100 people, chanting '*Allahu Akbar*' and 'This is a Sunni cemetery. Alevis cannot be buried here', attacked the funeral procession of the deceased mother of imprisoned HDP MP Aysel Tuğluk, who had been temporarily released to bury her mother. Allegedly police units at the scene did not intervene. When the mob threatened to dig up the body, Tuğluk's family decided to exhume the body and rebury Aysel's mother in their home province of Dersim (Tunceli). In the last week of January 2018, a group of AKP supporters attacked an HDP office in the Pendik district of Istanbul. Although no one was killed, the attack resulted in extensive property damage. After breaking all the windows and doors, the attackers drew racist writings on the walls.

Host community grievances against [2.9 million \(UN\) to 3.5 million \(Turkey\) refugees](#) living in Turkey have also increased, particularly in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, causing the deaths of at least 35 people, including 24 Syrians. Forced expulsions of 300 Syrians to Syria and 200 Iraqis to Iraq from Van 'Removal' Centre have been [documented](#), when returns are meant to be voluntary.

Only 228,408 Syrian refugees live in refugee camps. The remainder live by their own means, with more than half a million Syrians living in Istanbul alone. In some border towns like [Kilis](#), Syrians outnumber the host community. Although Syrian refugees have set up [more than 8,000 companies](#), employing close to 100,000 people, most do not speak Turkish and have trouble finding employment. Only 15,000 have obtained a permit needed for formal employment. Some 750,000 – 950,000 Syrians work in the informal sector. President Erdogan and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim regularly claim that Turkey has spent [\\$30 billion](#) on Syrian refugees, with 250,000 Syrian babies having been born in Turkey and 600,000 Syrian children receiving an



education. However, at least 370,000 school-age Syrian children are not enrolled in school.

In Turkey, there are [90,000 mosques and 61,000 schools](#). Turkey is currently allocating more money to students studying in religious schools than in secular schools. Not only could this foster religious extremism in Turkey, but by backing Islamist extremists in Syria, and allowing them to come to Turkey-controlled areas near the border with Turkey, Turkey could be creating a threat far worse than PKK. Such is the climate in which the June elections will be held.

Armed conflict between the Turkish state and PKK

On 13 December 2017, HDP MP for Sanliurfa [Osman Baydemir](#) took the rostrum in parliament and said, 'I, as a Kurd, and as a representative of Kurdistan, believe I have a role, a mission to make this roof the common roof of the Turk and Kurd'. AKP Deputy Speaker Aysenur Bahcekapili demanded Baydemir to stop talking, muted his microphone, and asked, 'Where is Kurdistan? There is no such region in Turkey'. Baydemir thumped the left side of his chest and said, 'It is here'. A quick vote was taken, resulting in Baydemir being [found guilty](#) of using the word 'Kurdistan'. As punishment, Baydemir was banned from two parliamentary sessions and had his monthly salary cut by two-thirds.

Herein lies the dilemma for Kurds in Erdogan's Turkey. With their political avenues being dismantled, having had their teachers sacked and community organisations and media outlets closed, how are they going to achieve their basic human, cultural and political rights?

Since 1984, the PKK has tried military action against Turkish security forces, for which it has been classified a terrorist organisation by the US, Australia and some European countries, but not Russia or the UN. It has tried unilateral ceasefires. In 2013, it entered the first bilateral ceasefire with the Turkish government. This lasted two-and-a-half years, ending on July 24, 2015. A month before, pro-Kurdish HDP candidates had won 80 seats in parliament, thus contributing to the AKP not winning a parliamentary majority. But the events that Turkey used to justify its airstrikes in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey, and a ground offensive in eastern Turkey targeting the PKK, starting on July 24, was that on July 20, [PKK killed a corporal](#) in the Turkish army in Adiyaman three hours after ISIS killed 33 mainly Kurdish youths and wounded another 104 youths in Suruç. The youths had gathered in preparation to take medical aid across the border to Kobani. Two days later, youths killed two policemen in Ceylanpinar, 117 kilometres from Suruç. According to the PKK the youths belonged to a local group not affiliated with the PKK, and were not taking orders from the PKK. It was asserted that the individuals murdered had known links with ISIS and could have prevented the suicide attack in Suruç.

Between July 2015 and January 2018, at least [3,466 people](#) have been killed during the military conflict in eastern Turkey according to the International Crisis Group,

although the number could be as high as 17,398 taking maximum figures from various sources. Of those killed, between 440 (Crisis Group) and 1000 (HDP) were civilians. According to the International Crisis Group, another 219 people aged between 16 and 35 were killed but were unable to be identified as civilians or PKK affiliates. There were another 49 unconfirmed civilian deaths. Between 1,079 (Crisis Group) and 9,327 (PKK) security forces have been killed, including TSK, police and village guards, while between 1,181 (PKK), 1,728 (Crisis Group), and 7,071 (TSK) PKK fighters had been killed. The armed conflict continues, as does the solitary confinement of PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned on the island of Imrali since 1999. The last time Öcalan was allowed family visits was in September 2016.

Casualties of the Conflict

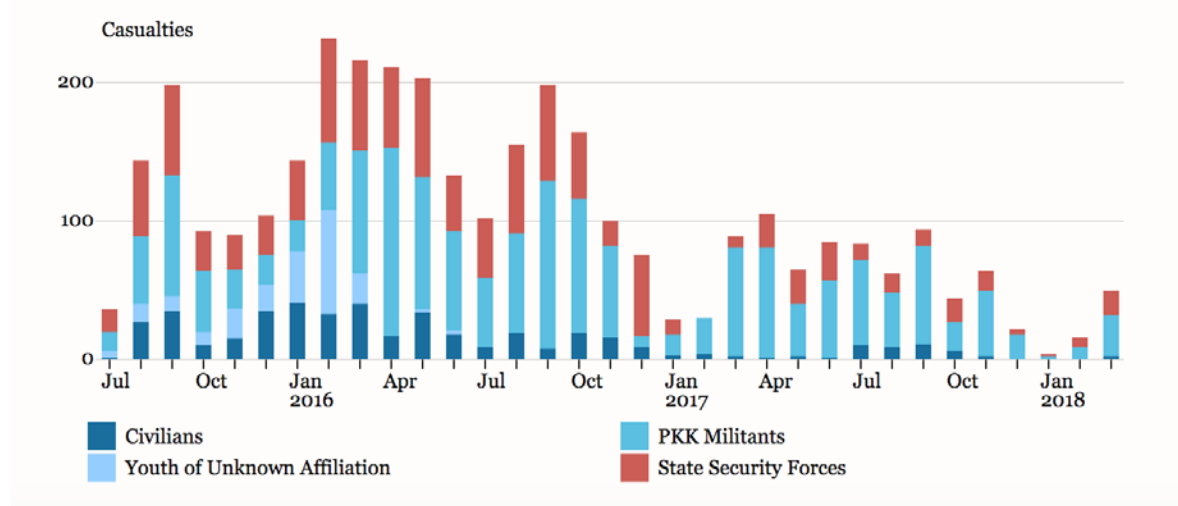


Figure 13: [Casualties](#) of armed conflict between Turkish security forces and PKK, 2015 – 2018

Since September 2017, Turkey declared curfews on 30 villages in Bitlis province in October, on 6 villages in Mardin province and 51 villages in Diyarbakir province in December, on 30 villages in Dersim, 69 villages in Diyarbakir and 13 villages in Bitlis in January, on another 176 villages in Diyarbakir in February and on 70 villages in Diyarbakir in April. Curfews are declared before the commencement of military operations.

At the end of August 2017, the armed wing of PKK, the People's Defence Force (HPG), launched its first drone attack on a Turkish army military outpost near Semdinli, wounding two Turkish soldiers. On October 17, 2017 (the day after Iran and Iraq took Kirkuk), HPG claimed responsibility for exploding a bus carrying police in Mersin. The explosion killed 10 police and wounded another nineteen. In March 2018, the [HPG](#) claimed that attacks on TSK in Agri, Şırnak, Diyarbakir, and other



provinces, as well as in the KRI, killed at least 99 TSK soldiers. Turkish media rarely cover the number of security personnel killed by the PKK.

Civilian deaths are a concern in any armed conflict. In the armed conflict between PKK and the Turkish state, both sides have killed civilians, the number of civilians targeted and killed by Turkish security forces exceeding 440 since 2015. These deaths were not collateral damage. TSK snipers and the use of incendiary bombs, artillery and tanks targeted and killed people hiding in basements, or who were in the street trying to buy food, seeking medical help or trying to escape the conflict zones of Sur, Cizre and Nusbayin. Large portions of these neighbourhoods and towns were destroyed, causing the displacement of between 350,000 and 500,000 people. Civilians have not been allowed to return to their homes. In destroying and demolishing six neighbourhoods of Sur in the centre of Diyarbakir city, the Turkish state wiped out 7,000 years of history. In building Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River, which will flood the town of Hasankeyf, the Turkish state will be destroying 13,000 years of history. Apparently Turkey's neo-Ottoman dreams entail wiping out pre-Ottoman history.

Then there are the civilians killed by airstrikes, helicopter guns and drones. For instance on August 31, 2017, a [Turkey air force drone](#) fired on four local picnickers near the Iraqi border in Hakkari province. One picnicker, Mehmet Temel, died and the other three were injured and detained. The Turkish state news agency claimed the picnickers were PKK collaborators despite them having no criminal record or history of being linked to any PKK activity.

Even the dead cannot rest in peace. Since 2015, Turkish security forces have destroyed numerous cemeteries where Kurdish fighters are buried. On December 22, 2017, ANF reported that security forces exhumed 267 corpses of HPG, YPG and YPJ fighters from Garzan Cemetery in Bitlis province and took them to an unknown location.

Turkey has introduced a tiered reward system for information leading to the capture of key individuals with links to the PKK or the Gulen Movement. Paramilitary village guards and civilians are benefiting from this reward system, and HPG consider informants legitimate targets. For instance, in June, the [PKK claimed responsibility](#) for kidnapping and killing Necmettin Yilmaz, a principal and teacher in a Kurdish village school in the Şanlıurfa district of Dersim province. The PKK claimed that he was a spy who provided information to security forces on locations and strategies of the PKK.

Other civilians have died from collateral damage. For example, the killing of Yilmaz came a week after the PKK claimed responsibility for accidentally killing another teacher, Senay Aybuke Yalcin, when she was struck by stray bullets while travelling in a car close to a gendarmerie checkpoint HPG was attacking. It was not the first time that HPG has accidentally killed civilians. When attacking a Diyarbakir police station on January 13, 2016, among the five who were killed were civilians, for which HPG apologised. Similarly, on August 10, 2016, six civilians were accidentally killed in a car



bomb attack on a police vehicle in Diyarbakir, for which the PKK claimed responsibility.

PKK claims it only attacks legitimate targets according to the rules of war – TSK soldiers, police, gendarmerie and informants. It has not claimed responsibility for any attack in western Turkey since the breakdown of the ceasefire.

This is not the case for the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), which split from the PKK over the PKK agreeing to a bilateral ceasefire in 2013. TAK has claimed responsibility for attacks in Ankara on February 17 and March 13, 2016, which killed a total of 66 people, and attacks in Bursa on April 27, in Istanbul on June 7, and the worst in terms of fatalities: the 7 December, 2016 attack on an Istanbul stadium and nearby park that killed 44 people. It also claimed responsibility for an attack in Kayseri on December 17, 2016, that killed 15 people. Since December 2016, no attacks on civilians have been claimed by TAK or PKK/HPG.

In early January 2018, in an interview with the German news agency DPA, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called for the resumption of peace talks ahead of elections, saying, 'If the PKK lays down its arms, it is possible that the peace process will restart.' With the political and military crackdowns in Turkey, Turkey's invasion of Afrin and the KRI, Turkey's vitriolic response to the KRI referendum on independence, and its support for Islamist extremists in northern Syria, and with ISIS making a resurgence in Syria and Iraq, it is unlikely the PKK will lay down their arms in the near future, unless these conditions change. Then an internationally mediated and enforced agreement between Kurds and the Turkish state could succeed.

Are PKK terrorists?

According to international law, distinguishing [armed conflict](#) from terrorism depends on the degree of military organisation, whether there is a command structure, the intensity of conflict and the number and nature of victims, the severity of damage, and the kinds of weapons used. In a landmark case, in November 2016, a Belgian lower court considered a 2006 complaint filed by the Turkish Government, which sought the imprisonment of between 30 and 36 Kurdish politicians for their alleged links with PKK, and the closure of two Kurdish television stations for 'spreading terrorist propaganda'. Cables from 2006, released by Wikileaks in 2011, showed US State Department involvement in preparing the prosecution's case.

In the 2016 court case, the defence argued that the PKK fulfilled the requirements of being involved in an armed conflict and complied with the international laws related to armed conflict. The prosecution countered that the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, could not sign the Geneva Convention because the PKK did not represent a state, that PKK did not occupy territory and their operations were 'spasmodic guerrilla activity'. The prosecution also cited instances of terrorist attacks on civilians



performed by TAK. The defence argued that TAK had separated from PKK and PKK had condemned TAK's actions.

The lower court ruled that there was an armed conflict in Turkey and as one of the belligerent parties, the PKK could not be considered a terrorist organisation. The court considered that the PKK had a command structure, adhered to the rules of war, and used significant weaponry (e.g. M16 machine guns and rocket launchers). The court ruled that the aim of the PKK was not to terrorise the population, rather, it was to fight for the rights of Kurds, although in its military actions civilian casualties could occur. The court found no evidence to link TAK with the PKK and concluded that, based on the arguments and evidence, the individuals could not be tried under Belgium's terrorism laws.

Turkey pressured for the case to be reconsidered. On September 14, 2017, a Belgian Court of Appeals upheld the lower court ruling. Again, Turkey pressured for the case to be reconsidered.

On [16 April](#) 2018, the EU Court of Justice heard a case to remove the PKK from the EU terror list, where it has been listed since 2002. The European Council, the European Commission, the UK and France asked that PKK remain on the list. The case for the defence argued that PKK has not committed terrorist acts, and had, in fact, fought the terrorists known as ISIS, that PKK has been involved in a war with the Turkish State, and has complied with the rules of war, having made every attempt to avoid civilian casualties. The defence also argued that nearly 70 allegations that caused the PKK to be listed in 2002 were based on articles in the Turkish media, which had never been investigated or clarified. The defence concluded that the matter rests on whether a people have a right to engage in armed struggle against an oppressive state. The court's verdict will be released in six to nine months.

Turkey's International Relations

Under President Erdogan, the Turkish state has lurched towards authoritarianism, Islamism and ultra-nationalism. These trends have led to a purge inside Turkey, Turkey waging war on Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Turkey threatening US-led troops in Syria, Turkey threatening Cyprus, Greece, and its own citizens in other countries, and imprisoning foreign citizens in Turkey. Erdogan's belligerent anti-West rhetoric is too frequent to recount. The Turkish state's duplicity include:

- Attacking US-led coalition allies using ex-ISIS and other Islamist extremists in Afrin, but supporting the US, UK and French missile strikes in April;
- Allying with Russia and Iran in the Astana process, whilst creating a new Syrian 'National' Army that opposes Assad, and using Islamist extremists to expand its occupation of Syria; and
- Supporting the Syrian Opposition, whilst agreeing to offensives against them in exchange for being allowed to attack the SDF/YPG/YPJ and civilians in Syria.



Under Erdogan, Turkey is an inconsistent ally, yet the international community has been equally inconsistent in formulating appropriate responses.

Renditions to Turkey

Impacting Turkey's international relations is Turkey's aggressive pursuit of perceived enemies in at least [46 countries](#) using MIT and misusing the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). Turkey has revoked thousands of passports of Turkish citizens for their alleged links to the Gulen Movement, or opposition to Erdogan. By April 2018, the Turkish state had managed to engineer the arrest and deportation to Turkey of [80](#) Turkish citizens from 16 countries, including those who were asylum seekers under UN protection. The countries that have arrested and deported Turkish citizens include recipients of Turkish aid, such as Angola, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Malaysia, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sudan, and Turkmenistan. For example, [Kosovo](#) deported five school teachers and a medical doctor accused of having links with Gulen. Other countries that have deported Turkish citizens back to Turkey are Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Countries that have arrested Turkish citizens at Turkey's request include Spain, where Turkish-German writer, Dogan Akhanli, was arrested. Other courts and governments have refused to comply with the Turkish state's demands. These include a Czechoslovakia court that refused to extradite former PYD co-chair and Syrian Kurd, Salih Muslim, and Greece, which refused to deport [eight Turkish soldiers](#). In response to Greece's refusal, [two Greek soldiers](#) were arrested in Turkey.

Turkey has also successfully pressured at least 20 countries to close or transfer ownership of more than 1,000 Gulenist schools and 15 universities. No Turkish citizen is safe. Former US National Security Advisor Michael Flynn was allegedly involved in discussions on the possible abduction of Fethullah Gulen in return for \$15 million. In November, the German Government strengthened its cooperation with INTERPOL to protect the Turkish opposition in Germany, after the Turkish Government put political opponents on INTERPOL's wanted list. In December, at the request of the Turkish opposition, Ankara's Chief Public Prosecutor's Office opened an investigation into plots to track and assassinate Turkish dissidents, including academics, journalists and opposition politicians living in Europe. Since then, German and Dutch officials have expressed concern about [MIT threatening the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora](#) in their countries, but have taken no action. Residents in Australia are not immune from this kind of pressure.

Responses to Turkey's invasion of Afrin

At first acquiescing and conciliatory, the UN, US, EU, Germany, Netherlands, France, Portugal, Iran and the Gulf States became increasingly vocal in condemning Turkey's invasion and occupation of the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in northern Syria.



Between 2006 and 2011, Germany supplied Turkey 354 Leopard 2 tanks. After Turkey used the German Leopard tanks against the YPG and civilians of Afrin, at the [end of January 2018](#), the German government delayed an upgrade deal and put all weapons sales to Turkey on hold.

On 5 February 2018, the Netherlands withdrew its ambassador to Turkey, the ambassador having been denied entry to Turkey since March 2017 following the Netherlands refusal to have Turkish officials conduct pro-referendum campaigns in the Netherlands in 2017.

On March 29, the [Portuguese Parliament](#) approved a statement that condemned Turkey's invasion of Afrin as 'unlawful'. On April 15, the [Arab League](#) likewise condemned the invasion as 'unlawful' and demanded Turkish troops immediately withdraw from Afrin and Iraq. In the meantime, [22 Swiss MPs](#) called an immediate stop to armed sales to Turkey because these arms were being used to wage a war in Afrin. [An MP](#) on the extreme right of Swiss politics, and [another in the Socialist Party](#) called on all European citizens to boycott tourism in Turkey. Meanwhile, US officials and military commanders have repeatedly stated that they respect Turkey's right to self defence, but that Turkey's invasion of Afrin has had negative impacts on the war against ISIS.

The Australian Government has been silent on the matter, [although](#) individual parliamentarians have spoken out. Speeches by Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon at protest rallies on February 10 and February 14, and a speech by Labor MP Peter Khalil in parliament on February 12 condemned the invasion. By February 14, 10 Australian parliamentarians had put their names to an [open letter](#) calling on the Australia Government to condemn Turkey's invasion and recall its ambassador in protest. The government has not publicly responded.

Relations between Turkey and Europe

The [EU](#) is Turkey's largest export and import market. Of the top ten countries Turkey exports to, European countries make up seven, first among them being Germany, with the other three countries in the top ten being the US, Israel and Iraq. The EU is also the top direct foreign investor in Turkey, with the Netherlands leading the way, accounting for roughly 16 percent of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Turkey.

Between four and five million people from Turkey live in Europe. The largest diaspora groups are found in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and France, with Germany hosting 1.4 million. [Turkish nationals seeking asylum in Europe](#) increased from 4,980 applicants in 2015 to 15,625 in 2017, and Turkish and European politics is becoming increasingly entwined. For instance, in Rotterdam eight percent of the population are Kurds and Turks from Turkey. Denk, a pro-Erdogan party was founded by two Turkish-Dutch MPs in 2015, and ran in Rotterdam's municipal elections in March.



Despite the volume of trade, and acceptance of Turkish citizens in Europe, tensions between Turkey and Europe are increasing. Multiple factors are behind the tensions. They include the EU's tolerance of organisations that support or are sympathetic to PKK, and the EU's refusal to classify the Fethullah Gulen Movement as a terrorist organisation. In the lead up to the April 2017 referendum on constitutional changes in Turkey, the Netherlands refused Turkish officials permission to campaign in the Netherlands. This refusal meant that a plane carrying Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was not allowed to land, and Turkish Family Affairs Minister Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya, who came overland from Germany, was forced to leave. In response, Erdogan called the Dutch 'Nazi remnants'. In the lead up to the June 24 elections, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands have [banned](#) Turkish candidates from campaigning in their countries. Erdogan vows to defy the bans.

Then there is the refugee issue. With [2.5 million people applying for asylum](#) in Europe in 2015 – 2016, the majority coming from Turkey, in [March 2016](#) the EU agreed to compensate Turkey for hosting refugees inside Turkey with \$7.3 billion of EU funds over two years. To date, Turkey maintains it has only received \$2.25 billion.

Another on-going thorn is the accession debacle. On 6 July 2017, the European Parliament voted to [halt accession negotiations](#) with Turkey. On October 20, European Council President [Donald Tusk](#) said the EU was reflecting 'on whether to cut and re-orient pre-accession funds' to Ankara. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, clarified that the council had asked the European Commission, 'to reduce [Turkey's] [pre-accession aid](#) in a responsible way.' The EU has delayed or frozen the processing of Turkey's membership application, the update of the 1995 Turkey - EU Customs Union agreement and visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens until Turkey complies with EU standards of human rights, and narrows its definition of terrorism. Since October 2017, there have been six formal statements from the Netherlands, Austria, France, Germany and Belgium against Turkey's accession to the EU. At the end of November 2017, due to human rights violations in Turkey, the EU decided to withdraw 105 million euros (\$127 million), and set aside another 70 million euros (\$85 million) in pre-accession aid to Turkey. Turkey claimed it did not need EU money or membership, but would not unilaterally end its bid to join the EU. By January 2018, Turkey was toning down its rhetoric against EU leaders, following suggestions that accession talks should be replaced with realistic transactional relations on counter-terrorism, refugees and trade.

Since 2016, Turkey has imprisoned 12 Germans on allegations they were involved in the failed coup. Germany's threats to cut funding to Turkey from its state-owned bank and other European banking entities and curb military sales was possibly behind Turkey's release from prison of six of these prisoners, the sixth being Turkish-German journalist Deniz Yücel who was released in February 2018, having been held in detention for 12 months without being charged.

New crises are emerging. [Cyprus](#) has become a contentious issue following the Greek Cypriot government signing a lease with Total and Edison to conduct oil and



Kurdish Lobby Australia

gas exploration around the Aegean islands in the eastern Mediterranean. [Turkey refuses to accept Cyprus' sovereignty](#) over these islands and waters, and sent naval vessels to the region to prevent exploration. It has also threatened to invade the islands, which [legally](#) belong to Greece. With Greek and Turkish warplanes flying sorties in the area, on [April 12](#), a Greek pilot died when his plane crashed into the Aegean after returning from a mission to intercept Turkish aircraft, and on April 17, Turkish fighter jets harassed a helicopter carrying Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, causing Greek fighter jets to change course to protect the helicopter. Greece and Cyprus accuse Turkey of violating international law.

Small frictions flare up all the time, for example when Erdogan [called](#) the town of Kardzhali in Bulgaria a part of Turkey's 'spiritual frontiers'. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by saying that the country's borders were not subject to revision. When Erdogan was in Athens in December 2017, he proposed the [revision of treaties and borders](#). Such comments have become so frequent they are usually met with silence.

As a result of these tensions, Turkey's political leaders frequently whip up anti-European sentiment and threaten to unleash another wave of refugees on Europe. Fears of another refugee crisis, and a wish to maintain Turkey as an ally, coupled with a wish to send a message to Turkey about its human rights abuses contribute to inconsistencies in European responses. For instance, despite a tolerance towards PKK sympathisers and media, in an effort to appease Turkey, the European Parliament banned the entry of individuals and groups sympathetic to the PKK in November, and Berlin banned PKK banners during pro-Kurdish demonstrations against Turkey's invasion of Afrin.

Germany has been inconsistent over its military sales to Turkey. Between November 2016 and March 2017, the [German Government](#) blocked 11 deals on the sale of small arms and ammunition to Turkey because they could be used to fight Kurds in Turkey and Syria. In September 2017, the German parliament and the US Senate voted to restrict certain arms sales to Turkey. Yet, between 18 December 2017 and 24 January 2018, the [German Ministry of Economy](#) approved 31 permits for military armaments to Turkey, including bombs, missiles, surveillance systems, land vehicles, ships, special tanks and related parts.

If Turkey continues on its current path, the EU could diplomatically isolate Turkey, block military sales and maintenance requirements to Turkey, abolish its customs union with Turkey, issue travel warnings against going to Turkey, boycott Turkey's imports, and reduce its aid and investment in Turkey. With more than one-sixth of Turkey's exports going to Germany, the German Government could refuse to supply export credit guarantees to companies doing business with Turkey. Another measure could be preventing the diaspora sending money back to Turkey, which in Germany amounts to over \$979 million a year. Such measures carry costs to Europe and have unknown political consequences, but they are alternatives to terminating accession talks, which would require a unanimous vote.



Turkey – Russian Relations

Russia is one of the top three countries that Turkey imports from, (with Iran being in the top ten), with Turkey relying on Russia (and Iran) for energy. In the first ten months of 2017, imports from Russia amounted to \$15.7 billion while Turkish exports to Russia were worth \$2.1 billion. In addition to this trade imbalance, between 2007 and 2015, Russia's FDI was only 3 percent of all FDI in Turkey, compared to EU member states' FDI being 73 percent of the total. However, Russia's level of FDI is about to change, with Russia investing in the [nuclear power plant](#) in Mersin, and the [Turkish Stream](#) gas pipeline, and the establishment of a joint investment fund.

Then there is Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defence system, which is incompatible with NATO's systems. After the US, Germany and the Netherlands declined to renew their Patriot-missile deployments in southern Turkey, Turkey looked for alternative suppliers. Having created an enemy of Russia in 2015 by downing a Russian jet that strayed into Turkey's airspace, Turkey began a re-approachment with Russia in 2016. By [March 2017](#), Turkey announced its interest in purchasing Russia's S-400 missile defence system. [In September](#), Turkey made the first down payment. By December, the Russian and Turkish finance ministries had completed negotiations, whereby Turkey would pay 45 percent of the total \$2.5 billion cost in advance, with the remainder coming in the form of a Russian loan. The first of four batteries was scheduled for delivery in March 2020, but this has been brought forward to July 2019. In April, [a US offer](#) to supply a Patriot system is an attempt to derail Turkey's purchase.

Russia is investing in two major [energy projects](#) in Turkey. One is the \$16 billion joint [Botas \(Turkey\) – Gazprom \(Russia\)](#) 1,100-kilometre gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea that will supply Turkey and Europe, and will likely involve KRG oil and Syrian oil. The proportion of investment from Gazprom has yet to be disclosed. The second project is the \$22 – 25 billion Russian state [financed, built, owned and operated](#) Akkuyu Generation III nuclear power plant to be built on the Mediterranean coast in Mersin province, designed to deliver up to seven percent of Turkey's energy needs by [2025](#). [Opponents](#) to the project, including the EU, Cyprus and 86 percent of Mersin residents, claim that the plant's construction and operation (e.g. water discharge into the Mediterranean), let alone an accident, pose significant threats to the environment, and the fishing and tourism industries.

In 2017, the [Turkey Wealth Fund](#) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Russian Direct Investment Fund, and in April 2018, co-signed a joint investment agreement whereby each committed \$500 million for future infrastructure, health care and information technology projects in Turkey.

Historically, Russian-Turkey relations have been tenuous; Turkey has different objectives to Russia in Syria; and US sanctions on Russia could impact Russian investment in Turkey. However, the recent Turkish-Russian re-approachment



provides Russia with many levers on Turkey. These include delaying or fast tracking major projects and investments, and re-introducing sanctions on tourism and trade that were implemented after Turkey downed the Russian jet in 2015.

Turkey – US Relations

The US is Turkey's biggest arms supplier, although Erdogan claims that [Turkey aims](#) to be self sufficient in its military needs by 2023. The US has long valued Turkey as a NATO ally, and would to gain Turkey's support for curbing Iranian expansion, but [Turkey's leaders](#) consider that the old East-West divisions are obsolete and there needs to be a balance of power. Hence, US officials (even President Trump) have become increasingly vocal about their concern for Turkey's domestic and foreign policy trajectories, its imprisonment of US citizens, its purchase of the S-400 Missile Defence System, and its opposition to the US alliance with the YPG/SDF/PYD in Syria.

There are more than [12 US citizens](#) being held in Turkey's prisons on allegations of having played a role in the failed coup. They include a Christian missionary, Pastor Andrew Brunson, who has lived in Turkey for 23 years and who has been in prison since November 2016, a NASA scientist who was vacationing with relatives in Turkey, and a visiting chemistry professor from Pennsylvania and his brother. After Turkey arrested a third US consulate worker with Turkish citizenship on charges of espionage and links with the Gulen Movement, the US suspended all non-immigrant visa services to Turkish citizens in Turkey on 8 October 2017. The next day, Turkish authorities suspended all visa services to US citizens and issued an arrest warrant for another US Consulate worker on terrorism related charges. The suspension of visa services affected business, military programs and sales, and education. On October 14, US Ambassador to Turkey, John Bass, left his post and the US has yet to replace him. It was not until December 28, that the US and Turkey resumed full visa services.

It is thought that US citizens are being held as hostages because the US is unwilling to extradite Fethullah Gulen, as requested by Turkey, and is proceeding with cases related to Turkey's gold-for-oil deal during US sanctions on Iran. Gulenists originally opened an investigation into the oil-for-gold deal in 2013. This is what caused the irreparable rift between Erdogan and the Gulenists, with Erdogan accusing Gulenists of trying to bring down the AKP government. The case was taken up by New York prosecutors following the arrest of [Reza Zarrab](#), a Turkish businessman of Iranian-Azeri origin who was involved in the gold-for-oil deal, in March 2016, just before the failed coup in Turkey. Zarrab agreed to plead guilty and go witness for the prosecution (just before Michael Flynn admitted that he had lied to the FBI and US government about his dealings with Turkey). Zarrab's subsequent testimony in November 2017, (and wire taps at the time of the deals) implicated Erdogan, who was prime minister at the time, his family, and a number of ministers in having agreed to the arrangements, with Erdogan insisting that two Turkish banks be cut in on the deal.

Zarrab's testimony led to the arrest of Mehmet Hakan Atilla, the deputy chief of the state-owned Halkbank, at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport in March



2017 on charges of conspiring with Zarrab to launder hundreds of millions of dollars through the US financial system on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Halkbank and five other Turkish banks are implicated in the money-laundering scheme. On January 3, Atilla was found guilty of five charges related to conspiracy and bank fraud by a New York jury. He was due for sentencing in April but his defence has launched an appeal. He faces up to 15 years in prison. Meanwhile, on 8 September 2017, [New York prosecutors](#) issued an arrest warrant for Zafer Caglayan, Erdogan's economy minister in 2011 – 2013, for conspiring to commit bank fraud, conspiring to commit money laundering and evading US sanctions on Iran, and conspiring to defraud the US, all of which carry a maximum sentence of 55 years.

Turkey has two main concerns in relation to these convictions and trials. One is the size and terms of the fine that the US Treasury could impose on Halkbank. The other concern is if the US decides to release evidence against Erdogan. In an effort to derail the cases, Istanbul's top prosecutor launched [twin probes](#) into Joon H. Kim, acting US attorney for the Southern District of New York, and his predecessor, Preet Bharara, over how documentary and audio evidence was gathered in the case against Zarrab.

In July 2016, the US [Congress passed new parameters for sanctions on Russia](#), which included sanctions against companies and countries that purchase Russian arms and engage in joint ventures with Russian energy companies, where Russian interests are higher than one third of the total investment. Turkey's military and energy deals with Russia could trigger sanctions on Turkey. This was emphasised on [April 18, 2018](#), when Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Wess Mitchell, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 'Ankara should be mindful of the risks in making strategic concessions to Moscow ... [Ankara's plans to purchase the Russian S-400 missile system] 'could potentially lead to sanctions ... and adversely impact Turkey's participation in the F-35 [fighter jet] program.'

Pro-Erdogan media claim the US has an undeclared war on Turkey, with Erdogan and others having frequently accused the US of being behind the 2016 failed coup. Some observers warn of an irreparable breakdown in US-Turkey relations. On [April 19, 2018](#), Turkey repossessed all its gold, valued at \$25.3 billion, which had been held by the US Federal Reserve System. This was in response to threats of US sanctions, and Turkey wanting to reduce its dependence on the US financial system.

In the US, there are those who advocate persuasion and appeasement, and those who question this strategy. Until recently, the US State Department has used moderate language regarding Turkey. On February 14, [US prosecutors](#) dropped charges on 11 of 15 of Erdogan's security detail, these having been videoed assaulting protesters in Washington in May 2017. On February 15, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Erdogan in Ankara and allegedly agreed to a withdrawal of YPG/YPJ from Manbij. In March, Congress dropped proposed sanctions on persons responsible for the arrest and detention of US citizens and Turkish US consular workers.

Members of the US Congress that question this strategy of appeasement point to Russia's use of sanctions to force an apology after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet 2015, and Germany's threats that led to the release of German citizens from Turkish prisons. The State Department's latest Human Rights Report on Turkey pulls no punches, and at the end of February the US Congress debated sanctions and the scaling back of consular services because of Turkey's unremittingly hostile stance toward the US, its threats to the US military in Syria, unlawful detention of US citizens, and its purchase of Russia's missile defence system. The sanctions discussed were hardly severe. They included targeted visa bans on Turkish officials thought to be responsible for US citizen detentions, and the banning of imports of Turkish manufactured handguns, although non-delivery of the F-35 fighter jets was also raised.

The US has many levers it can use to influence Turkey. They include the threat of diplomatic isolation, reducing armament sales to Turkey, reducing military co-operation and withdrawing military assets from Turkey, a boycott on tourism and Turkish imports, and releasing intelligence on the Erdogan family's ties to money laundering on behalf of Iran, and involvement with ISIS, including Erdogan's son being a conduit for ISIS oil and his daughter setting up hospitals for ISIS near Turkey's border with Syria.

Turkey – NATO Relations

Turkey relies on NATO for defence, but is not performing as expected of a NATO member. It has not joined NATO's troop movements, arms build-ups and manoeuvres near the border with Russia, and, except in belatedly opening up its military bases, is not supporting the US-led coalition in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Without the required NATO approval, Erdogan proceeded with the purchase of the Russian S-400 surface-to air-missile defence system designed to detect, track and destroy aircraft, drones and missiles within a range of 400 kilometres. NATO has warned that Turkey's purchase would preclude Ankara from being part of any integrated air-defence system with NATO allies, and may result in other technical restrictions, although in statements made in April, NATO refers to Turkey as a strong ally.

This came after the Pentagon [moved all A-10 close air support planes](#) from the Incirlik airbase in January, leaving only refuelling aircraft, and reduced the number of US military personnel at the base. The [US military](#) has also sharply reduced combat operations at Incirlik airbase and is considering permanent cutbacks.

In light of Turkey's alliance with Russia and Iran, some are calling for transatlantic coordination to exclude Turkey from NATO weapon's development, training of security force personnel and NATO military positions, and a reassessment of intelligence sharing, member state's arms sales to Turkey, and NATO's military assets

inside Turkey, including having nuclear weapons based at Incirlik. Some argue that NATO is long overdue for a restructure.



Figure 14: [Map](#) of NATO and US' military presence in Turkey

Relations between Turkey and International Trade Unions and Labour Organisations

The [10th European Regional Meeting](#) of the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) was held in Istanbul on October 2 – 5, 2017. Ahead of the meeting various trade union federations met with Turkish officials and bar associations in Ankara. After the meetings they issued [a joint statement](#) urging Ankara to lift the state of emergency, put an end to mass expulsions and detentions, reopen closed trade unions and NGOs, and stop restricting democratic freedoms. None of their demands were addressed. Consequently, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) called on trade unions and governments to boycott the ILO meeting. In Turkey, the Revolutionary Trade Unions Confederation and Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions heeded the boycott, as did trade unions and confederations from 47 of 51 countries in the European region. The only labour delegates to attend the Istanbul meeting were from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Of the 91 labour groups affiliated with ITUC, 88 boycotted the gathering. Only Azerbaijan's Trade Union Confederation and Turkey's Turk-Is and Hak-I attended.

Turkey – UN Relations

The UN failed to condemn Turkey's invasion of Afrin, but on [March 20, called on Turkey](#) to end its state of emergency and its mass arrests, arbitrary sackings and other abuses that the UN called 'collective punishment'. The UN Human Rights office claimed Turkey had arbitrarily arrested 160,000 people and dismissed 152,000 civil servants since the failed coup. The report described the use of torture and ill treatment in custody, including severe beatings, sexual assault, electric shocks and waterboarding by police, gendarmerie, military police and security forces.

Conclusion

Turkey's geographical position and current trajectories are too critical to ignore. Under President Erdogan, Turkey's support for Islamist extremists, and destabilising activities in Syria and Iraq pose many international security threats. The elections on June 24 would benefit from international monitoring. If there is widespread fraud leading to Erdogan and the AKP-MHP alliance gaining power, then appeasement is not the answer. If the Turkish state continues to purge and wage war on its own people and those in neighbouring countries, the international community must send strong messages with material consequences.

Alternatively, if Turkey changes its current trajectories, and/or if the majority of people in Turkey vote for a new president and/or the opposition gains a majority in parliament, then these developments will need support to counteract the changes to the constitution and Erdogan's indoctrination of the population. All sorts of favourable political, economic and military initiatives could be offered to the Turkish government, businesses, NGOs and individuals, including help to save its archaeological heritage and work out appropriate transnational water agreements.

An important component of this endeavour will be international support for a peace process between the Turkish state and Turkey's large Kurdish minority. The international community must review PKK's listing as a terrorist organisation, and insist that Turkey incorporate the full spectrum of society in a peace process so negotiations gain legitimacy, and enact the outcome. This could be a driver for other political reforms that would support political and cultural plurality in Turkey. This would open up huge economic opportunities in eastern Turkey and in neighbouring regions of Syria, Iraq and Iran.



Iran

Overview

In 2019 the Islamic Republic of Iran will celebrate its 40-year anniversary. After toppling the Shah, the mullahs promised a fairer society, but after surviving 39 years of sanctions and a devastating eight year war, they now oversee a corrupt and militarised society that has failed to address poverty and minority rights, and where there is constant tension between conservatives and reformists. In foreign affairs, Iranian leaders perceive themselves to be surrounded by well-armed enemies. Israel has been threatening war with Iran since at least 2003, based on its assessment that Iran was developing nuclear weapons, and is striking Iranian targets in Syria, while US President Trump labelled Iran a world leader in terrorism in 2017. Hence, Iran is concerned about the US military presence in Iraq. These perceptions and realities have led Iranian strategists to develop a forward defence strategy over a 30-year time frame, helping to create militias in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, for the purposes of deterrence, intelligence sharing, assistance with counter-intelligence operations, counter-terrorism, and power projection, at great cost to the state. Meanwhile, Iranians have become increasingly dissatisfied with a stagnant economy and repressive government, which led to widespread protests on December 28, 2017 that continued into January.

The Economy

The July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),¹⁷ was meant to deliver better economic conditions to Iran by unfreezing state funds and lifting sanctions on doing business with Iran. Although trade between Europe and Iran nearly doubled in 2017, Iran continues to struggle with a stagnant economy. Iran's unemployment rate is officially 12.4 percent, youth unemployment is estimated to be as high as 40 percent, and the working poor earn less than \$100 a month. With 700,000 Iranians entering the job market in the next five years Iran needs an annual growth rate of 8 percent to absorb them. Meanwhile, the official annual inflation rate is 10 percent, although some sources claim it is closer to 13 percent. In 2017, five banks and investment funds collapsed, wiping out the savings of at least 2.5 million middle-class and lower-middle-class families. Several pension funds also collapsed. These institutions were run by mullahs and the IRGC, and therefore exempt from rules of transparency and legal accountability.

Rouhani's [2018 budget](#) was delivered in December and included a 14 per cent increase in defence and security spending (making the total amount five percent of GDP and equivalent to the combined allocations for education, health and social

¹⁷ The JCPOA was the outcome of Iran initiating negotiations with France, Germany, and the UK back in 2003, to avoid being referred to the UN Security Council for two undisclosed nuclear facilities that were used to enrich uranium, which the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran had revealed existed in 2002.

welfare). Iran already spent \$16 billion annually on foreign efforts. The budget also contained a nine percent increase in funds for religious and other institutions to propagate Khomeini's brand of Islam, making the funding for these institutions exceed that of the education sector. At the same time, the budget proposed severe austerity measures. These included amending the welfare system so 30 million people would no longer receive monthly payment, raising the price of petrol by 50 percent, and halving state subsidies for staples like bread and eggs. In compensation, the budget proposed investing in job creation.

Uncertainty of Nuclear Deal and other Sanctions

There are many factors contributing to the state of the economy, one being that the JCPOA did not increase the hoped for amount of foreign investment, partly because of uncertainties regarding the US position, with Trump rubbing the deal during the election campaign and afterwards. Since the JCPOA, the US has also applied additional sanctions targeting individuals and organisations. For instance, in October 2017, the US Treasury designated the IRGC a supporter of terrorism pursuant to Executive Order 13224 on global terrorism, due to the IRGC Quds Force's support of Hezbollah and Hamas. This enabled the Treasury Department to increase sanctions on the IRGC. In January 2018, the US also applied sanctions on Iran's top judge, Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani, and 13 other individuals for alleged human rights abuses related to the imprisonment, torture and deaths of protesters involved in demonstrations that began on December 28, 2017.

A UN Security Council report on the outcome of the JCPOA was released on December 8, 2017. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acknowledged that although Iran was complying with the nuclear accord, it was not heeding a UN call to halt the development of ballistic missiles and other weapons, whilst IRGC Quds Force commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani, continued to travel to Iraq and Syria, despite the travel ban provision of resolution 2231 (2015).

On January 12, 2018, Trump re-certified the JCPOA but threatened to withdraw from the accord if it was not amended by May 12. By this date, President Trump must decide whether he wants the US to remain a party to the JCPOA. The other parties – the EU, China, France, Russia, the UK and Germany – do not see a reasonable alternative. On April 23, French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in Washington to convince President Trump to abide by the JCPOA, and suggested having a supplementary deal that could address Iranian expansion, Iran's missile program and the prospect of Iran resuming the development of nuclear weapons after 2025. The dilemma is that it is hard to see how Iran's Guardian Council and IRGC could be significantly affected by more sanctions, given they have survived decades of sanctions. However, given that the IRGC and its companies are positioning themselves to benefit from reconstruction in Iraq and Syria, multinational, enforceable sanctions targeting the IRGC and its companies could prove effective.



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Established outside the military in 1979 to defend the Islamic Republic of Iran, the IRGC has grown into a dominant force in security, business¹⁸ and politics¹⁹ in Iran, and through the Quds force, the instrument through which the Islamic Republic projects power abroad. For instance, Grand Ayatollah Khamenei relies on Quds force commanders to liaise with Russia and Turkey over Syria, and lead *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Iraq.

While IRGC Quds force commanders like Major General Qasem Soleimani have risen in status since their success against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and some observers claim that the IRGC has become so powerful it could challenge the clerical order, the Revolutionary Guards are factionalised and have many opponents. One opponent is prominent opposition figure [Mehdi Karroubi](#), who has been under house arrest for seven years. He warned Ayatollah Khamenei in an open letter published at the end of January: 'You have been the head of state for three decades ... More than 50 percent of the country's wealth is at the disposal of a few state institutions, which are immune from monitoring and accountability ... I urge you, before it is too late, to make room for structural reforms of the regime with accurate diagnosis of the country's political, economic and foreign situation.' A day later, [President Hassan Rouhani](#) warned, 'All the leaders of the country must listen to the demands and wishes of the people. ... The previous regime thought monarchical rule would last forever, but it lost everything for this very reason - that it did not hear the criticism of the people.'

Corruption

In Iran, systematic embezzlement, bribery, and racketeering by prominent figures of the state, the IRGC, and judiciary are pervasive. Half the military budget is allocated to the IRGC without any oversight. In the past three years some 40 senior officials, including five bankers, have fled Iran after siphoning off vast amounts of money. In December 2017, [Rouhani made numerous statements against corruption](#), saying on different occasions, 'Twenty-five percent of the money market is in the hands of six fraudulent institutions' and 'If guns, money, newspapers and propaganda all gather in the one place, one can be confident of corruption there ... Continuation of corruption, expansion and deepening of corruption, means the [political] system and the [1979] revolution are at stake'. He urged the Majlis (parliament) not to be bullied by vested interests.

¹⁸ Having been tasked to rebuild Iran after the eight-year war with Iraq, IRGC companies are now involved in construction, oil and gas projects, and runs 25 jetties in different ports through which it can import and export whatever it likes.

¹⁹ For instance, former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad served in the IRGC.

Politics

In Iranian politics there is a constant struggle between conservatives and reformists, and many reformists have been imprisoned for their efforts. For instance, on October 3, 2017, seven high profile political reformists received prison sentences. They included Mohammed Reza Khatami (the brother of former reform President Mohammed Khatami), ex-deputy parliament speaker Mohammad Reza Khatami, former legislator Mohsen Safaie Farahani, a member of an advisory panel for former President Khatami, Azar Mansouri, and ex-MPs Ali Shakouri Rad and Mohammad Naimipour. All were charged with 'anti-regime propaganda', having been leaders of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, a very successful reformist political party that was banned in 2010 following the 2009 protests in Tehran against vote rigging and the re-election of hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Reformists are winning some battles. Iran has the highest rate of executions per capita in the world. In 2016, executions in Iran accounted for 55 percent of all internationally recorded judicial executions. Contributing to this outcome was that any drug-related crime incurred the death penalty. In August 2017 the reformist-majority Majlis voted in support of changing the [law regarding the death sentence given to all those on drug-related crimes](#). The conservative Guardian Council approved the new law, which raises the amounts that can trigger the death penalty from 30 grams to two kilos for the production and distribution of chemical substances, and from five to 50 kilos for natural substances such as opium and marijuana. On January 9, Iran's chief judge, Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani, announced that judges must review all drug related cases in light of the law change. However, the law still allows minors to be given the death penalty, and leaves Iran's hard-line judiciary — which answers directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — leeway to interpret the law.

The Guardian Council stipulates that an individual from a religious minority cannot represent a Muslim-majority constituency. Before local elections in 2017, on April 15, the secretary of the Guardian Council issued a directive demanding that [non-Muslims be disqualified](#) from running in city and village council elections in localities where most of the population were Muslims. As the Guardian Council does not supervise these council elections the directive was not implemented. This led to individuals from religious minorities participating and winning in the municipal elections on May 19, 2017. An example is Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian, who was elected as a city council member in Yazd. A defeated conservative candidate filed a complaint on the grounds of Niknam's religion. On October 9, the [governor of Yazd](#) ordered Yazd City Council Chairman Gholamali Sefid to suspend Niknam's membership to the city council. Two days later, Sefid [refused](#) to implement the order, insisting he would resign if the suspension was not revoked.

In another precedent, on October 11, President Rouhani appointed two Shia Kurds as provincial governors. Mohammed Mehdi Shahriari was named governor of West Azerbaijan and Bahman Moradnia was named governor of Kurdistan province.



The earthquake in the Kurdistan region of Iran

On November 12, the Kurdistan regions of Iran and Iraq experienced a 7.3 magnitude earthquake, with an epicentre in the KRI 29 kilometres west of the city of Sarpol-e Zharab in the province of Kermanshah. The quake killed more than 500 people (579 in Kermanshah alone), and injured an estimated 7,000 people. It left 70,000 people in need of shelter. A lack of coordination between the Iranian Red Crescent and military forces slowed the rescue effort. In Sarpol-e Zharab and surrounding villages only five percent of all people that had lost their homes were given tents by the government. In the earthquake's immediate aftermath, nobody was allowed into areas but locals and people from all over Iran sent clothing, blankets and other necessities to those affected. There were incidences of police and government officials confiscating the donated items. Despite the inadequacy of the relief effort, including medical services, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif rejected offers of international assistance from the US, Israel and others.

Many of the dead and injured had lived in affordable units opened in 2007 by former President Ahmadinejad. During a visit to earthquake-affected areas, President Rouhani acknowledged that government-built structures had collapsed, while private constructions remained standing. Another complexity was that some diaspora relief efforts ran up against sanctions. Tohid Najafi, a Detroit-based medical professional, raised \$200,000, largely from the Iranian-American community. In sending the money to Iran he ran foul of US sanctions. [Kurdish Lobby Australia \(KLA\)](#) did not confront these difficulties in raising AUD\$13,000, which a KLA member, working through a local NGO, directly distributed to 73 families and 35 individuals in and around Sarpol-e Zharab.

Kurdistan region of Iran

The Kurds of Iran live in a poor, highly militarised region, and are forbidden to speak Kurdish or form political associations. Iranian security forces regularly target protesters, political activists and kolbars (Kurdish cross border transporters). For example in October, Kurds in Iran celebrated the KRI referendum on independence. The IRGC conducted mass arrests of those celebrating in the streets. One Kurdish woman, [Zamana Zewey](#), was sentenced to 50 lashes because of her participation in a rally. The prosecutor in Saqqez accused her of 'disturbing national security.'

Even environmentalists are considered a threat to the state. Kurdistan Human Rights Association (KMMK) reported that in January two Kurdish students were called into an intelligence office for organizing 'unlawful' meetings to talk about ways to protect Urmia Lake from further environmental degradation. Seven academics and [environmentalists that belong to the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation](#) were arrested for 'transferring intelligence to foreigners'. One of them was Canadian-Iranian Kavous Seyed Emami, a professor of sociology at Imam Sadegh University. Sixteen days after his arrest he was found hanged whilst in solitary confinement in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. His family and colleagues were not told of his arrest



and death until February 9, and doubt he committed suicide. Others who were arrested along with Emami were Hooman Jokar, vice chairman of the board and head of the cheetah desk at Iran's Department of the Environment, and Morad Tahbaz, an Iranian American businessman and board member.

In late January, two Kurdish young people were sentenced to death for being members of Kurdish opposition parties. Human Rights experts from the UN²⁰ [asked for the cancellation](#) of the death sentence against [Ramin Hossein Panahi](#), a member of Komala (a left wing Kurdish political party). Panahi was arrested the previous June and was accused of being part of an armed opposition, despite Panahi being unarmed when he was arrested, and belonging to a political party. He was tortured in prison and not given a fair trial.

In February, a court in Sanandaj sentenced two Kurdish men for 'spreading propaganda against the state'. They were arrested when engaged in collecting donations to help earthquake victims. For this, [Shahram Farhadi](#) received a four-year prison sentence and Mohammad Naeempour received a two-year sentence.

In March, a [15-year old boy](#) was sentenced to five years in prison for lowering the Iranian flag during the protests in January. Hundreds of Kurdish protesters remain in prison, and in the first week of March, another Kurdish student, Qubad A'dami, died whilst being tortured after being jailed by Iranian Intelligence. The Kurdistan Human Rights Association reported that Qubad A'dami's corpse was given to his family, who were told he had committed suicide by drugging himself. The family was instructed not to hold a public funeral for their son. In Urmia, [Ibrahim Khalidi](#), a Kurdish student, was sentenced to five years in prison for participating in the January protests. He was charged for acts 'against national security.' After Newroz celebrations on 20/21 March, Iranian intelligence arrested tens of organisers.

In April, 2018, after Iran closed the border crossing of Siranband-Baneh between Iran and the KRI, [tens of Kurdish](#) businessmen and store owners went on strike and protested in the cities of Marivan and Saqqez. On April 24, a number of them were arrested.

In 2016, 42 kolbars were killed crossing the boarder into the KRI. Between January and September 2017, 30 kolbars were killed. As a result of two kolbars being shot and killed by Iranian border guards on September 4, 2017, protests erupted in cities across the Kurdistan region. Iran declared a de-facto state of emergency, and sent hundreds of security forces into the cities. Protesters were surrounded and many were arrested and taken to unknown locations. In some areas, power, phone and Internet lines were cut.

²⁰ The expert group included the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Dainius Puras, and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Nils Melzer.



Back in 2015, several Kurdish armed groups resumed their armed struggle for greater political and cultural rights for an estimated [10 to 12 million Iranian Kurds \(13 to 17.5 percent of the population of Iran\)](#). Clashes with Iranian security forces occur intermittently in the border region and inside Kurdish-majority cities in Iran. For instance on January 3, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) [killed six IRGC](#) members in clashes near the Iranian town of Piranshahr. On February 27, an [IRGC member](#) of Kurdish origin was assassinated in the province of Kurdistan.

As a result of these kinds of clashes, the Islamic Republic has resumed acts of assassination of Kurds belonging to political and armed groups that seek refuge in the KRI. On [March 1](#), a car bomb killed Salah Rahmani, a KDPI commander, and his son outside Erbil, and on March 7, another KDPI commander, Qader Qaderi, was found dead with 20 bullets in his body near Rania in Sulaimani province.

[Asso Hassan Zadeh](#) writes 'What the Kurds of Iran are asking for is ... recognition of their distinct identity, the end of discriminatory and repressive policies, autonomy in their own region, and equal access to power and resources at the country level. ... Iranian Kurds are not asking for secession from Iran. They struggle for the realization of their national rights in a democratic and federal Iran.'

Widespread Protests from December 28

Iranians realized that clerical rule could not be overthrown unless the opposition expanded to include minorities. The first step was the formation of the Council of Iranian Democrats in Cologne, Germany, in November 2017, following two years of consultations between the Persian opposition and different minorities. They did not have to wait long to see what can happen.

On December 28, 2017, Protests seemed to erupt spontaneously following the introduction of President Rouhani's austerity measures. They began in Mashhad over price rises to staples like eggs and bread. The young, unemployed and working poor came onto the streets and were soon joined by the politically disaffected protesting government corruption, clerical rule and Iranian involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Protesters chanted 'No to rising prices', 'Death to Rouhani' (protesters had lost trust even in reformers), 'Leave Syria; think about us' and 'Not Gaza, not Lebanon; my life for Iran'. They were met with water cannons and tear gas. Fifty-two protesters were arrested on the first day.

The word spread through Twitter, Instagram and an app called Telegram. By the second day, protests were being held in other major cities like Isfahan, Qom, Shiraz, Sari, Rasht, Qazvin, Qom, Ahvaz, Hamadan and Kermanshah. Even in the holy city of Qom, thousands of protesters shouted, 'We don't want an Islamic Republic', 'Aren't you ashamed Khamenei? Get out of Syria and take care of us', 'Death to Hezbollah', and 'Not Gaza, or Lebanon'. In Najafabad protesters shouted, 'Death to the



Revolutionary Guards' and in Rasht, 'Death to the dictator'. In Kermanshah, where the unemployment rate is 22 percent, people called for the release of political prisoners, chanting, 'The clerics act like God'. They were also met with water cannons and batons. Over the first few days, there were 350 arrests in Kermanshah. None of the protesters asked for US help, and there was no chanting of 'Death to America' or 'Death to Israel'.

The chants seemed to indicate the protests were not state-sponsored, but according to some commentators, given that protests started in Mashhad – home to two of President Rouhani's main rivals in the 2017 presidential elections, Ebrahim Raisi and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf – these hard-liners could have encouraged a protest in response to Rouhani's attacks on vested interests. For evidence, these commentators pointed to the initial 'moderate' reaction of the security forces, and that protests were receiving local media coverage. They conjectured that the hard-liners intended the protests to culminate in a large rally commemorating the squashing of the 2009 protests in Tehran. Whether this is the case or not, the apparently leaderless protests gained a momentum of their own.

Despite the government suspending Twitter and Telegram and temporarily cutting all internet access, protests extended into a third day, having spread to between 63 and 100 cities (depending on the report) across 31 provinces. The rapid spread was directly linked to 48 million Iranians having smartphones, in contrast to the protests in Tehran in 2009, when two to three million people took to the streets. In 2009, less than one million Iranians had smartphones.

In Hamadan, the IRGC opened fire on demonstrators, killing six people. Another four protesters were shot and killed in two other towns. The government claimed security forces were not responsible for the deaths, and accused foreign forces of being behind the protests. In Tehran, a government building was attacked, the Iranian flag was burnt, posters of Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani were torn down and a police car was overturned. In other towns, protesters set fire to offices of Iranian security forces including that of the Basij religious police, one of five forces in the IRGC. On the third day, a pro-government rally was held, and this was repeated on January 3 and 5, when thousands of pro-government protesters called for the death penalty for the anti-government protesters.

On the fourth day of protests (December 31) President Rouhani said that the protests were legal, institutions should allow criticism, and state television should reflect different opinions, adding that people should focus on solutions, and that their actions should not lead to violence or to public property damage. Rouhani also praised the restraint shown by the security forces. This was the line taken by a number of reformists in the Majlis.

By the fifth day, at least 22 people had been killed (a Kurdish source claiming the number to be 28), including one IRGC and six civilians in Qahdarijan. On the sixth day, more IRGC and other security forces were deployed to the towns where protests were taking place.



By the eighth day (January 4) there had been 450 arrests in Tehran alone. 'Dozens' were released within days, but on January 6, a 22-year old protester died in prison of unknown causes. Evin Prison authorities claimed he had hung himself. Amnesty International claimed there had been at least two other protester deaths in the same prison. Authorities reported another two deaths in custody, one in Markazi and the other in Khuzestan, were suicides. Amnesty International asked for an investigation into the five deaths in custody. In the second last week of January, there was another death in custody in Kermanshah: a Kurdish activist, Ghulim Raza Moahady, who had been tortured by Iranian intelligence.

The protests attracted people of all ages, although the majority appeared to be under thirty. These represented 90 percent of those arrested. Protesters were men and women from all classes and ethnic and religious groups - Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Baloch, Arabs, Sunnis and Shia - even some clerics from Qom joined in. Women made speeches. Videos posted on social media showed some [Basij paramilitary](#) burning their registration cards as a symbol of dissent.

What was even more remarkable was that none of the top or middle-ranking mullahs of Qom, Mashhad or Najaf came out in support of the regime. Even hard-liners were acknowledging the right of people to protest economic conditions, corruption and a lack of transparency, although they made a clear distinction between protesters and rioters. The state was forced to find defenders among a few hundred mullahs on the government payroll. These began accusing the protesters of being anti-Islam. At least 60 of the 290 members of the Majlis voiced some support for the protests.

Also remarkable was the reluctance of the military elite, especially the regular army, to stand against the protests, at least in the early days. Yet in the first two weeks of protests, security forces killed more than 35 protestors and throughout January, joint forces from the IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence continued to arrest protestors in the Kurdish cities of Kermanshah, Urmia, Mahabad, Sanandaj, Mariwan, and Bikan. It was as if the IRGC had waited to see how the protests unfolded, and to collect images to identify the ringleaders. They could then deal with them when the world's eyes had shifted to another crisis. After the protests died down, a member of the Majlis admitted that a total of 3,337 arrests had taken place, although other sources claim as many as 3,700 people were arrested.

According to Abdulrahman Al-Rashed writing in *Asharq al-Aswat*, because the protests were as much about the miscalculations of the theocracy as they were about rising prices and unemployment, and demonstrated a widespread unpopularity of clerical rule, the protests 'terrified' other Shia leaders, including the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hasan Nasrallah, and leaders of extremist Shia oppositions in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Pakistan, and leaders of Shia militias in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.



Russia considered the protests an internal affair. The US media rejoiced. International observers began speculating on how the Guardian Council, Majlis and IRGC would ultimately respond. Would they instigate reforms and if so, who would make the decisions and what grievances would be addressed? Sceptics doubted the protests would have any effect on the entrenched corruption, cronyism and international expansion of Iran. Vested interests were bound to thwart structural reforms. They reasoned that even if those in the army were sympathetic to reforms, the IRGC would protect the regime.

The IRGC showed its support for the status quo by announcing they had put an end to protests on January 7, and in an official statement blamed the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia for instigating the unrest. When protests continued on a smaller scale, President Rouhani acknowledged, 'People have economic, political, cultural and social demands.' He objected to hard-liners calling the protesters 'dirt and dust' and 'rubbish', claiming no one was infallible or above criticism. Sceptics claimed hope in reformers like Rouhani was misguided, as these reformers still believed in a theocracy.

Others were more optimistic, claiming that the protests proved that Iranians were ready for change, that the likes of Rouhani could use the protests to push through reforms to curb inflation and the IRGC's hold over the economy, and help the poor, by increasing private and public sector competition, and by advocating constitutional amendments to empower elected institutions. (Since 1989, Iran has not operated as a parliamentary system). After all, Rouhani had repeatedly claimed that the IRGC cost the state too much. He showed support when women protested in February against the state demanding they wear a hijab, his office releasing a 2014 report claiming 49.8 percent of all Iranians believed wearing a hijab should be an individual's decision. In April, 2018, [300 conservative figures](#) wrote an open letter to Ayatollah Khamenei asking for institutional, electoral and parliamentary reforms claiming 'the government is resembling a lifeless body and breaking from within', that the parliament is no long the 'people's house', that the judiciary has become 'oppressive' and that 'big economic groups' do not help the poor. The letter criticised the unaccountability of the IRGC and its influence on the economy, judiciary and cultural matters.

Whether Rouhani and other like-minded officials have the power to stand against the Guardian Council and the IRGC remains to be seen. Some argue that the only hope for Iranians is to demand regime change and for the West to support a popular uprising by enabling Iranians to get around bans on Telegram and Twitter, boost the signals of cell towers near Iran's borders; document all arrests and what happens to protesters after their arrest; document those who kill or injure demonstrators, and those who shut down the internet and social media sites, and use the findings in diplomatic relations and targeted sanctions, for example, against individuals and institutions inside Iran and companies and countries around the world complicit with Iran's repressive apparatus. Regime change in this way was more likely to be achieved than by war (Iran is no Iraq), or a military coup, given the power of the IRGC.



Ways forward

Some strategists suggest that rather than making an enemy of Iran, and going to war or containing a country that has a 2,600-year history (i.e. far longer than any other government), it would be better to include Iran in regional processes and convince Iran that working with the US and its allies serves its interests better than being tied to a Russian-backed regional order. Presumably this was what the JCPOA was all about. Reconciling rather than exacerbating Sunni-Shia interests has less risks and greater potential for positive outcomes than the dynamic being currently promoted by some. This does not mean submitting to the mullahs of Qom and the IRGC, which have adopted the Shah's heavy-handed tactics. As the demonstrations indicate, there are many Iranians who want change, and the numbers will grow, given Iran's young population. By respecting Iran's history, and its political, military and intellectual capacities, and by offering carrots and sticks in support of economic and political reforms, the energy and intellects of Iranians can be harnessed for constructive purposes. In such a scenario, Iran could fulfil its potential and become an asset to the region.

A Final Word

How the international community responds to the current crises will set the tone for the twenty-first century. Doing nothing is not an option, given the humanitarian disasters and international security threats. The US, EU and Russia have to work together on ways to benefit the people of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. A military approach is inadequate, as is maintaining the political status quo. To address the root causes, there needs to be a realistic assessment of the changing drivers, actors and conditions and how they intersect. Power sharing rather than early elections should be considered in Syria, giving non-radicals time to organise. For Iraq, Iran and Turkey, internationally co-ordinated mediation and the use of levers, based on specific criteria, could support reforms that benefit the people, as long as foreign parties work through local administrations, organisations and businesses, and the intellectual, civil, tribal and religious leaders, and build capacity. Any undertaking needs to be based on an understanding and respect of local history and dynamics to ensure projects minimise harm between people, communities, and the environment, and do not exacerbate tensions, energy and water consumption, and other transnational issues.

In the last seven months, the Kurds have seen huge victories and reversals of fortune. If national governments do not cater for diverse populations and a plurality of views, and remain unwilling to share power and resources, more communities will demand autonomy or independence. 'Optimal' political reaches change over time. Fifteen nations emerged out of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Within five years of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Czechoslovakia became two nations, created by negotiation, and Yugoslavia became seven nations created from bloodshed. In the



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last forty years, bloodshed has been the experience of *all* Iraqis, Syrians and Iranians, and the Kurds of eastern Turkey. The territories of these four countries are rich in resources and well placed geographically to be part of an interconnected world. Western imperialism, authoritarian governments and wars have prevented the region from reaching its potential, but change is inevitable, and it is up to the international community to ensure that change benefits the resilient, hospitable and amazing people of this region.