



Post-ISIS States IX: Turkey's Year of Living Dangerously (May 2018 – May 2019)

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Acronyms

AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
DBP	Democratic Regions Party (Turkey)
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
GoI	Government of Iraq
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkey)
HPG	Peoples' 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 (Iran)
JFS	Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly Al-Qaida/ Al-Nusra
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union (PKK-linked coalition of parties)
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KNC/ENKS	Kurdish National Council (KDP-linked coalition of parties)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
MMC	Manjib Military Council
NGO	Non-government organisation
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (Formed in Sochi)
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Turkey)
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)

All monetary figures are in USD.



Summary

This report documents Erdogan and his government's abuses of power in and outside Turkey to warn international decision makers of the need for co-ordinated action before Erdogan's hubris has even more dangerous consequences for Turkey, the region and beyond.

Inside Turkey

Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) have been in power since 2002. In the early years the AKP government oversaw a booming economy and focused on providing essential services. US anthropologist, Jennifer White, considers Erdogan and the AKP 'used Islam as a political tool to gain the loyalty of voters by playing on their feeling of ... exclusion under the [Kemalists](#).' Increasingly Erdogan became overtly Islamist, referring to the days of Ottoman glory rather than that of modern Turkey's secular founder, Kemal Ataturk. Cracks within Erdogan's trajectory appeared when the AKP failed to win a parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections. Within a month the Turkish State called an end to the ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and reran elections while at war with its own people. By 2018 Turkey had become a state ruled by an executive presidency and nepotism. The Turkish economy was no longer booming. In September 2018, [Pinar Tremblay](#) observed, 'Not a day passes where the AKP's policy choices do not lead to devastating consequences: [imported meat sickens people](#); houses illegally built upon river beds [threaten lives](#) during floods; a [train accident](#) due to improper repairs and lack of staff have (sic) caused scores of [preventable deaths](#); major construction projects are stopped midway through without any proper explanation; [and] [privatized companies](#) declare bankruptcy, coaxing troubled banks to take on further unsecured loans' In 2017 Erdogan won a referendum to change the constitution and in 2018, Erdogan was elected executive president with extraordinary powers, while AKP was forced to form a coalition with the ultra-Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to achieve a majority in an emasculated parliament. In April and May 2019, Erdogan successfully pressured the Supreme Election Board to overrule unfavourable results in municipal elections for mayors of Istanbul and six Kurdish cities, putting an end to conjecture about how free or fair Turkey's elections really are. Erdogan faces four dilemmas:

- Whether to continue using all means to overturn election results, with the next national elections scheduled for 2023;
- How to tackle Turkey's currency and debt crises, unemployment and inflation;
- Whether to risk ruptures with NATO and the US and proceed with the purchase and delivery of Russia's S-400 missile defence system, and not comply with US sanctions on [Iran](#), thereafter seeking a stronger alliance with Russia, Iran, China and Turkic-speaking countries to the east; and
- Whether to continue a purge of all opposition in Turkey, and a war on Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq.



Many predict that Erdogan will follow an increasingly [hardline path](#) because of his alliance with ultranationalists. Others argue that having gained so much power, he will resist their demands and succumb to international diplomatic pressure and a possible push from a purged, overextended military and public [sector](#) to take more conciliatory positions, especially as Turkey needs foreign revenue to save its economy.

National and Municipal Elections

- Turkey's revised constitution institutionalises an elected autocracy. As ministries become invested over time it will be more difficult for Turkey to return to a parliamentary democracy.
- The 24 June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections were neither free nor fair due to the extent of media censorship; harrassment of the opposition, particularly the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP); 10,000 HDP members being in prison including the HDP presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas; the removal of polling stations and the heavy security presence at polling stations in the Kurdish east; and the Supreme Electoral Board allowing unstamped votes to be counted.
- Erdogan was elected to an executive president with 52.4 percent of the vote.
- Parliamentary elections resulted in an AKP-MHP coalition, AKP winning 295 seats (42.56 percent of the vote), MHP winning 49 seats (11.1 percent of the vote), and the opposition parties CHP winning 146 seats (22.6 percent of the vote), and the HDP winning 67 seats (11.7 percent of the vote).
- Municipal elections on 31 March 2019 were not fair or free, and Erdogan made sure unfavourable outcomes in Istanbul and the Kurdish east were overturned. Again, there was media censorship, harrassment and arrests of the opposition. Erdogan repeatedly claimed that HDP was a terrorist organisation no different from PKK, that CHP and IYI were also terrorists and criminals for co-ordinating with [HDP](#), and that if any HDP or sister party candidate was elected to office he or she would be [removed](#) from office. More than 700 HDP candidates and party members were arrested on charges of belonging to or associating with a terrorist organisation, and HDP offices and campaign booths were attacked. The Supreme Electoral Board restricted prisoners' voting rights so only those imprisoned in their home municipality could [vote](#) (against Article 67 of the constitution) but allowed security forces to vote for the location in which they were stationed.
- Although the AKP-MHP alliance gained 53 percent of the total vote, and AKP won 24 out of 39 municipalities in [Istanbul](#), AKP lost a dozen districts to [MHP](#), and the mayorship of five of seven metropolitan cities to CHP, these being Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana and Mersin. Contributing factors to CHP-iYi wins were the worsening economy, their coordination, and HDP not running mayoral candidates in western cities, instead encouraging their supporters to vote [CHP](#). In the east, HDP candidates won 70 districts including eight metropolitan municipalities, down from 102 municipalities in 2014, with the reduced win put down to media bias and censorship, the imprisonment and harrassment of HDP leaders and supporters, demographic changes as a result



of armed conflict displacing more than a million people and causing an influx of military and police in a renewed militarisation of southeast Turkey.

- The AKP used all means to overturn unfavourable results. It contested CHP wins and AKP and MHP contested HDP wins. All HDP's applications for a recount of votes were rejected. The [Supreme Electoral Board denied six](#) elected HDP mayors and 'dozens' of elected city council members their posts. Although the Board certified the newly elected CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, in mid-April, Erdogan and MHP leader Devlet Bahceli continued to lodge multiple [objections](#). On May 6, the Board ordered a [re-vote](#) for the position of Istanbul mayor on [June 23](#).

The Islamisation of Turkey and other Social Trends

Modern Turkey was founded on a secular system. Creeping Islamisation has involved:

- The Islamisation of education with compulsory Islamic classes in all schools and a dramatic increase in religious schools since 2002. Now numbering over 4,000, these *Imam Hatip* [schools](#) received 25 percent of the 2018 budget despite schooling only 11 percent of all upper school students. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyamet*) and Ministry of Education have equal powers in making decisions on all educational matters, including curricula. Since Erdogan began appointing all university presidents, there has been an increase in the number of pro-Erdogan Islamist scholars at universities;
- The Islamisation of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), with Turkey having purged 40 percent of its generals and 20 percent of its commissioned officers on allegations they were linked to the failed coup and/or Gulen Movement. The total number of purged military personnel far exceeds the 8,561 thought to have participated in the failed coup. Critics claim their dismissals and imprisonments are more about Islamising the TSK, with many of those dismissed being pro-West and [pro-NATO](#). TSK will take years to recover its pre-coup capacities;
- An unprecedented building of mosques, often in the Ottoman style;
- AKP municipalities funding Islamist youth groups, student dormitories and Islamist [foundations](#);
- Islamist extremists being allowed to freely live and operate in Turkey, including [2,000 with EU passports](#); [Turkey](#) being a conduit for ISIS money, and Turkish authorities allowing ISIS to attack and kill civilians in Suruc and [Ankara](#).
- [76,000 Syrian refugees having been granted citizenship](#) by January 2019. Further investigation is required as to why these individuals were selected for citizenship. The opposition claims they were accepted to ensure AKP support.
- The export of religion. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey's mosque building and financing of imams and religious education in Africa, Europe and even south America involves the export of Turkish nationalism, language and culture;
- Turkish imams and the *Diyamet* spying in [38 countries](#) so the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) can hunt down Erdogan's political [enemies](#). For instance, in November 2018, MIT detained 80 Turkish citizens [outside Turkey](#)



and Turkish authorities asked the US to extradite 84 people with alleged links to the Gulen Movement.

Working against this trend of Islamisation is support for nationalists (MHP and iYi), secular Kemalists (CHP) and pro-Kurdish HDP democrats.

Erdogan's inflammatory rhetoric and divisive politics is increasing social tensions, and along with the deteriorating economy, the non-implementation of relevant laws and the increase in gun ownership has led to [an increase in women being murdered](#) and suffering sexual violence. Former or current husbands or boyfriends commit 85 percent of the murders. One third of all perpetrators have not been caught.

Turkey claims to host between 3.5 million and [4 million refugees from Syria](#). Between 145,000 and [235,000 Syrians live](#) in 25 camps. Turkey does not allow visitors inside the camps, and there are allegations that women are being forced to prostitute themselves in return for food. More than three million refugees are left to fend for themselves, with many being exploited as [cheap labour](#). In the worsening economy many have lost work. Turkey is 'encouraging' refugees to return to Syria and settle in Turkey occupied territories, including Afrin. By April 2019, [321,000](#) had done so. This is partly due to Turkey's illegal practice of making Syrian refugees sign a document rescinding their right to seek [asylum](#) and forcing them to go Afrin, the Euphrates Shield Triangle or Idlib, despite these areas being conflict zones.

The Economy

- Turkey's official unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent in [April 2019](#), and includes an unemployment rate of 27 percent for people aged 15 to 24. In reality unemployment is higher as to be counted employed one only has to search for a job and be willing to start work. In December 2018, strikes against dismissals, and unpaid or partially paid [salaries](#) and unsafe work places occurred across 16 sectors.
- In 2018, Turkey had an annual inflation rate of 25 percent. Fresh fruit and vegetables rose [on average](#) 50 percent, with Turkey having become a net importer of food, as an increasing number of farmers leave [agriculture](#). A day after the municipal elections, electricity prices increased by 37 percent.
- In 2018, Turkey experienced a [decrease in foreign investment](#) and faced a currency problem as a result of a falling lira. This led to an increase in foreign exchange prices, and the Central Bank raising the standard interest rate to [24 percent](#) in September.
- In 2019 Turkey faces a debt crisis. In April 2019, Turkey was misrepresenting its Foreign Currency Reserves by up to 100 percent with the Central Bank borrowing from Commercial banks. Over the next twelve months Turkey is liable to repay \$177 billion in short term [external debt](#).
- The US granted Turkey a 180-day exemption, starting November 5, from US energy, banking and shipping sanctions on [Iran](#), but this expired on May 2. Turkey says it will not abide by US sanctions. Turkey and Iran have announced their intention to increase their annual bilateral trade from \$11 billion to [\\$30](#)



[billion](#). Turkey also faces sanctions over its military and energy deals with Russia and its trade with Venezuela.

- 21 of 81 provincial capitals won by CHP in municipal elections contribute 62 percent of [Turkey's](#) Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- It is unknown how much Turkey's military operations in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, its occupation of northern Aleppo and military base in Qatar are costing Turkey's taxpayers.

The Purge

A purge of all those with alleged links to the failed 2016 coup, the Gulen Movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and anyone critical of Erdogan continues, resulting in at least 150,000 political prisoners that can be held for up to seven years without a conviction. The statistics and social and political costs include:

- Between July 2016 and July 2018, Turkey dismissed more than 160,000 civil servants, and detained more than 150,000 people, including [44,000 accused of terrorism](#) as well as [70,000 students](#), these students unaware of the charges against them because their lawyers are not allowed to see their [indictments](#).
- During this period Turkish courts convicted 78,000 people of supporting terrorism or the attempted coup, revoked 234,419 passports and seized [1,020 companies](#).
- Turkey has the highest rate of incarcerated journalists in the world. In April 2019, between [133](#) and [175](#) journalists were in prison.
- [56 Western nationals](#) have been detained on political charges since the failed coup. [Thirty](#) remain in prison.
- The European Court of Human Rights ([ECHR](#)) has ruled on [three](#) of 7,100 cases related to Turkey submitted to the court in 2018. The three rulings related to the detention of two journalists, the HDP presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtas and Constitutional Court judge Alparslan Altan. The ECHR ruled that these detentions were [unlawful](#). Erdogan and courts in Turkey rejected the rulings. Turkish prosecutors are demanding multiple life sentences for Demirtas and an 11-year prison sentence for Altan, who is charged with being linked to the Gulen Movement. The case of Altan could lead to an ECHR ruling against Turkey's [Constitutional Court](#).

A [survey](#) of 3,776 people, found that of those dismissed from their positions since 2016, 92 percent struggled to obtain justice, 86 percent had been socially ostracised, 83 percent remained jobless, 84 percent wanted to leave Turkey (between July 2016 and March 2018, 15,654 Turks sought asylum in Germany, including diplomats and [civil servants](#) but excluding military personnel that have sought asylum) and 41 percent had suffered family breakdown. Of those who had been to prison, 88 percent were denied family visits, 74 percent experienced solitary confinement, 22 percent were denied food and water, six percent suffered physical violence and three percent suffered sexual assault.



Kurds and the Turkish State

- Since the Turkish Grand Assembly lifted parliamentary immunity from prosecution in 2016, 16 HDP parliamentarians and two CHP parliamentarians have gone to prison. As of May 2019, two CHP parliamentarians and [nine former or current HDP parliamentarians](#) remain in prison, including HDP presidential candidate, [Selahattin Demirtas](#), who has been in prison since 4 November 2016. In September 2018 an Istanbul court sentenced him to four years and eight months for ‘making propaganda for a terrorist organisation’ based on a Newroz (New Year) speech he gave in 2013. Multiple charges have yet to be heard.
- 100 elected pro-Kurdish co-mayors were dismissed and replaced with state-appointed trustees in 95 districts in 2016. Of these, [93 have spent time in prison](#). In February 2019, [40](#) remained in prison.
- HDP claims 10,000 HDP members are in prison.
- Imprisoned HDP parliamentarian Leyla Guven started a hunger strike on 7 November 2018 demanding an end to the isolation of imprisoned PKK co-founder, Abdullah Ocalan, whose [lawyers](#) had been denied access since [2011](#), despite Ocalan playing a vital role in the bilateral ceasefire between 2013 and 2015. By May 2019, 7,000 people around the world were participating in the [hunger strike](#), 3,000 of them inside 92 Turkish [prisons](#). After seven hunger strikers committed suicide in the space of a [week](#), HDP and PKK called an end to the protest, but the hunger strike continues.
- Despite HDP helping CHP win major western cities in the municipal elections in March, Kemalist CHP and nationalist iYi did not protest the Supreme Electoral Board’s non-certification of elected [HDP mayors](#) and council members.
- On May 2 lawyers were allowed to visit Abdullah Ocalan for the first time in eight years. Possible reasons include that some hunger strikers were close to death and the US was applying pressure on Turkey to negotiate with Kurds in Syria, with Abdullah Ocalan being key to [negotiations](#). On May 6, the day a re-vote for mayor of Istanbul was announced, Ocalan was allowed to make a public statement through his lawyers for the first time in four years. The statement advocated Kurds in Turkey and Syria to enter political negotiations with the Turkish [State](#), despite Erdogan refusing to do so before and after the statement. Observers wondered if Erdogan was trying to woo HDP voters away from CHP for the Istanbul revote, or at least confuse them into not voting.
- East Turkey continues to be subject to curfews, sieges and military operations. Between 16 August 2015 and 1 October 2018 curfews were declared at least 332 times in 50 districts across 11 Kurdish-majority provinces, including 12 city neighbourhoods, with Diyarbakir province subjected to [351 curfews](#) and military operations between July 2015 and April 2019. These actions have impacted [1,809,000 people](#), with many unable to return home as Turkey is ‘redeveloping’ neighbourhoods.
- PKK’s armed actions in Turkey and Iraq target checkpoints, bases and vehicles of the TSK, gendarmerie and police. In addition, the Turkish State alleges PKK is responsible for a number of attacks that targeted civilians in western Turkish cities in 2015 and 2016, despite these attacks being unclaimed or claimed by a



splinter group (Kurdistan Freedom Hawks or TAK) or leftist groups. The worst loss of life was in attacks attributed to ISIS.

- In March 2019, the Belgium Court of Last Resort ruled that PKK was in armed conflict with the Turkish State and was not a terrorist organisation. This was in line with four previous rulings made by two Belgium Courts, the Permanent People's Tribunal and, in November 2018, the European Union Court of Justice.

Turkey in Syria

Turkey has two goals in Syria: to replace the Assad Regime with a compliant Sunni Islamist government and permanently occupy a contiguous region south of the Turkey-Syria border to prevent Syrian Kurds and their allies establishing an autonomous region. Turkey is delaying a peaceful resolution to the eight-year crisis in actioning these goals, with its:

- Incompatible alliances with (1) Syrian opposition militias, including Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and (2) pro-regime Astana partners Russia and Iran;
- Invasion and occupation of Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle, instigating demographic changes and the Turkification, Arabisation and Islamisation of these regions, while denying access to international humanitarian organisations and [journalists](#);
- Creation of two Syrian proxy armies that oppose Assad and Syrian Kurds and are increasingly Islamist, and over which Turkey has little control;
- Unwillingness to curb HTS' military and political expansion in Idlib. Contrary to its agreement with Russia, Turkey has helped HTS re-establish control over local administrations and is integrating HTS militants into its proxy armies;
- Repeated threats to invade and occupy Manbij and northeast Syria, and 'neutralise' and 'bury' all 'terrorists', the label Erdogan and Turkish media use for all those who support the current administrations and security forces; and
- Refusal to have representatives of these administrations and security forces participate in negotiations on the future of Syria.

Until December 2018, the international community took little action to curb Turkey's destabilising actions in Syria. While it may be in the US-led coalition's short term interest for Turkey to occupy northern Aleppo and Idlib to forestall the Assad Regime retaking these territories, Turkey's formation of two militia armies, with MIT recruiting [former ISIS fighters](#), HTS and other Islamist extremists, could lead to future international security threats when (i.e. not if) Turkey is forced to betray or accept these militias into Turkey because of:

- An Idlib offensive, which may have begun;
- The Astana process, which has not been able to agree on a constitutional committee, a solution for Idlib, north east [Syria](#) or Syria;
- Arab States opposing Turkey's formation of two proxy armies, occupation of northern Aleppo and Idlib cities;



- An UN-aided political solution, if it ever happens; and
- Many Syrians being opposed to Islamists' strict, regressive interpretation of Islam, their infighting (usually over the distribution of loot and control of checkpoints), illegal taxation, [looting](#), harassment, arrest, kidnapping for ransom, and shooting of civilians, all of which reflect Turkey's lack of control, partly caused by Turkey not paying the salaries of many militants, and only intermittently paying [others](#).

The pervasive international silence about Turkey's actions in Syria was broken in December 2018, after Erdogan announced an imminent invasion of Manbij and east Syria and Trump announced a full and immediate withdrawal of US troops. The US Congress, Europe, Russia, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt rejected Turkey's plans to invade and kill or capture all those who support the existing administrative and security structures, after which Turkey proposed to eliminate ISIS fighters 400 kilometres south of the border. By early January Russian military police, the Syrian Army and the US-led coalition were conducting patrols with different Syrian Kurdish forces around Manbij to prevent an imminent attack. The US and Russia are (independently?) trying to negotiate alternative solutions for east Syria.

Under threat of a Turkish invasion and massacre, Syrian Kurds and their allies in the administrations and security forces of north and east Syria are attempting to negotiate with the US to stay in Syria and field a multinational force (excluding the aggressor), and for the US-led coalition to support their participation in negotiations on the future of Syria. In case these negotiations failed, Syrian Kurds and their allies attempted to negotiate with the Assad Regime through Russian mediators. They asked for the Syrian Army to protect the Turkish-Syrian border and offered access to oil and other resources in the east on condition the Assad Regime recognise their cultural rights (e.g. language), administrations and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Assad Regime refused all demands except for a limited recognition of cultural rights, fully intent on re-establishing the pre-war status quo. The US threatened to withdraw support for the SDF if they reached a deal with the regime. Former US envoy to Iraq and Syria, Brett McGurk, clarified this ultimatum by saying that throughout 2018 the US talked to Russia about needing Russia's help to re-energise UN negotiations, and for Russia to broker a deal with the Assad Regime for a partial return of state services in return for granting Kurds and their allies political rights, as well as the right for the US to access Syrian airspace and some military [facilities](#). Since December 2018, the US has been asking Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UK to contribute to a multinational force to police a buffer zone south of the Turkey-Syria border. The US wants a 'limited' number of Turkish troops to join this force. In late April and early May, MIT allegedly met with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Kobane several times in an effort to reach a deal between Turkey and the SDF, these meetings being encouraged by US Envoy to Syria, James [Jeffrey](#). Commander-in-chief of the SDF, Mazlum Kobane, repeated that Turkey had to withdraw from [Afrin](#) before any agreement could be reached, while Turkey insists it takes control of towns inside the buffer zone. Hence, there has been no progress in these negotiations or in any other negotiations for Syria.



Turkey's International Relations

Erdogan has had some significant diplomatic wins. Since 2016 Turkey and Russia have entered military, energy and trade agreements. In the past year Turkey has signed an agreement with the US on Manbij (Syria) in June and an agreement with Russia to delay an offensive on Idlib in September. In October, US tariffs were lifted after the release of imprisoned US Pastor Andrew Brunson, Turkey hosted a summit between France, Germany, Russia and Turkey on Syria, and the US agreed to review fines on [Halkbank](#) owing to the bank evading sanctions on Iran between 2012 and 2013. In November, the US agreed to 'joint' patrols in Manbij; put a \$3 to \$5 million bounty for information on the location of three top PKK leaders and supported an investigation into the Jamal Khashoggi murder at a Saudi consulate in Ankara. The US also gave Turkey a [six-month exemption](#) from US sanctions on Iran, and in December, the US State Department approved the sale of the Patriot Missile System to Turkey. In April, the US promised to increase bilateral trade.

Yet Turkey's domestic and foreign policies are escalating tensions with the US, Europe, Israel, the Gulf States (except Qatar), Egypt, [Iraq](#), [Greece](#), Iran and Russia. For the West, it is about Turkey's descent into authoritarianism, recent human rights record, anti-West rhetoric, gravitation towards Russia, particularly its insistence on taking delivery of Russia's S-400 missile defence system and Russia's proposal to build a port facility for the Russian-built Akkuyu Nuclear Power Station 230 kilometres from Incirlik airbase, possibly deploying the [Russian Navy](#) to the port, these posing threats to NATO. Deteriorating relations are also due to Turkey's threats to take military action against Syrian Kurd-led forces allied to the US-led coalition and Turkey's state sponsorship of terrorist groups like al-Shabaab, Hamas and other Islamist extremists in Syria, Libya, [Nigeria](#) and elsewhere. For the US, there are additional grievances, including Turkey's wish not to comply with US sanctions on Iran, and the imprisonment of a US citizen and three US consular staff. These tensions mean that if Turkey remains on its current trajectory, it is vulnerable to US sanctions while its hope of joining the European Union, visa liberalisation or modernisation of the Customs Union are unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The Gulf States, Syria and Iran reject Erdogan's hubris in claiming parts of Syria and Iraq and wish to become leader of the Muslim world, Turkey's creation of two proxy militia armies and occupation of northern Aleppo, and wish to expand its occupation, and its offensives in northern Iraq, while Israel rejects Turkey's support of Hamas and other anti-Israel policies, and its destabilising actions in [Syria](#). Meanwhile Turkey's relationship with Russia could easily unravel in Syria. It is no coincidence that with Idlib heating up in May, Turkey is contemplating a US request to delay the delivery of the S-400 missile defence [system](#).



Conclusion

Returning to Erdogan's four dilemmas, this report will show that Erdogan is willing to overturn unfavourable election results using any means, including waging war, denying elected mayors their positions, removing the powers of municipal councils and calling for an election re-run. This does not portend well for future elections in Turkey. Instead of tackling Turkey's debt crisis, the government and Central Bank have tried to mask the gravity of the problems facing Turkey's economy. Erdogan's rhetoric and actions remains anti-Kurd in Turkey and [Syria](#), with the exception that Erdogan allowed one meeting between Abdullah Ocalan and his lawyers after eight years, and a public statement from Ocalan after four years of silence. These gestures were tokens, with the public statement calling for Kurds to negotiate discounting Erdogan's refusal to do so. Hence these allowances were designed to sow confusion among HDP supporters before the revote for mayor of Istanbul. Lastly, Erdogan continues to play the US and Russia off each other, despite Putin succeeding in luring Erdogan into Russia's orbit. While the US, Europe, Israel and the Gulf States have many levers available with which to influence Turkey all are reliant on Erdogan being a rational and pragmatic actor.

Ways Forward

Unless Erdogan precipitates a major crisis, he will rule until 2023 or 2028, or change the rules. In the meantime he is capable of doing immense damage. Instead of indulging in wishful thinking, the international community needs to adapt to the 'new' Turkey with co-ordinated policies. Proof of how effective an international response can be is that the international backlash to Erdogan's threat to invade east Syria within days has led to a five-month hiatus.

Until 2019, the US and Europe have employed a carrot and stick approach, generally with more carrot than stick. Conciliatory responses have had little impact, unlike Russia's harsh response to Turkey downing a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Russia's sanctions were effective and did not lead to a permanent severing of ties. Within the year Erdogan and Putin had signed a major gas pipeline deal.

A military red line has belatedly been drawn in relation to Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defence system and threat to invade and massacre Syrian Kurds and their allies in east Syria. In April the Pentagon suspended all deliveries to [Turkey](#) of parts for the [F-35 Lockheed Martin Joint Strike Fighters](#) and US officials said that the sale and delivery of 100 F-35s depended on Turkey not taking delivery of the Russian S-400 system. If Turkey proceeds, NATO will be forced to pull out its Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) radar system from Kurecik, which would make Turkey more dependent on [Putin's largesse](#). Finally realising the seriousness of the situation, Turkey has been trying to negotiate. Even if the US backed away from its position on the F-35s, sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) would automatically be triggered if Turkey takes delivery of the S-400 system. This is an example of a pre-emptive strategy that is not easily overturned by



the whim of a president. There should be more of them, with all parties making clear what their red lines are and the consequences of Turkey crossing them.

The US response to Turkey's forces entering Syria is less coherent. The US absolved itself from any responsibility when Turkey invaded Afrin and since December, while US President Trump threatened 'economic devastation' and the Pentagon threatened military action if Turkey unilaterally invades east Syria, to blur the line, the US is attempting to negotiate various permutations for a buffer zone, including the removal of Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) from a more limited zone (despite these forces being critical in providing security, including US force protection) and a 'limited' TSK deployment co-ordinated with US or other forces. Such a proposal could be another delay tactic, but if actioned, one hopes the negotiators have clearly laid down realisable consequences if Turkey facilitates the entry of its Islamist proxies to assassinate, bomb and stir up trouble (as they are doing in Manbij), or if the TSK attacks and blames their actions on the victims, ISIS, the Assad Regime, Iran or another stakeholder, given that both eventualities would likely lead to a Kurd-led insurgency, an ISIS resurgence and an Iran-backed Assad offensive. Hence, serious responses are needed to Turkey's military aggression in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and the eastern Mediterranean.

Reports and rulings by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, numerous EU and UN agencies and the Permanent People's Tribunal point to political red lines that Turkey has already crossed. Potential political red lines are no less serious, and include Erdogan acting on his repeated threat to let another wave of asylum seekers into Europe, and refusal to politically negotiate with Kurds in Turkey or Syria. Ultimately, for existential reasons, only Turkey can address its fear of Kurds. It would be a more stable, democratic country if it did. But [Amnesty International](#) makes the following recommendations to Turkish authorities:

- Refrain from vilifying or prosecuting human rights and civil society actors, and immediately and unconditionally release those who are being held under anti-terrorism laws if there is no credible evidence of a crime.
- Investigate threats and intimidation of human rights defenders and other civil society actors and bring to justice those responsible.
- Repeal all executive decrees and other measures that go beyond legitimate measures to combat threats to national security.
- Ensure that human rights organizations that have been arbitrarily closed down are reopened and their confiscated assets restored.

Amnesty International's recommendations to the EU and UN and others are to:

- Ensure all political dialogues and bilateral discussions between Turkey and the EU or member states raise concern about the crackdown on civil society.
- Ensure that human rights clauses are enforced when developing bilateral relations and that the Instrument for Pre-Accession funding (IPA) does not contribute to human rights violations.



- Ensure that the Council of Europe uses all tools at its disposal to address the crackdown on civil society.
- United Nations Human Rights Mandate Holders should continue and expand monitoring and reporting of what is happening in Turkey.
- The states on the Human Rights Council must continue and expand their action, including collective action, in particular related to Items Three (Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights) and Four (Human Rights Situations that Require the Council's Attention).

The [Permanent People's Tribunal's](#) recommendations to the Turkish State are to:

1. End all TSK military operations in Syria and ... withdraw troops to within Turkey's national borders.
2. Investigate and punish the responsible persons for war crimes.
3. [Turkey] Restore the rule of law, and release imprisoned magistrates and journalists ...
4. Resume negotiations [with Kurds] in good faith for a peaceful solution.
5. Issue an amnesty for the crimes committed by all parties during the conflict and release all political prisoners.

All recommendations are words on paper unless backed by levers. The international community has multiple levers, which they have yet to apply to any extent. Apart from diplomatic pressure these levers include:

- Deciding whether it is suitable to hold a conference in Turkey;
- Issuing business and travel advice for Turkey;
- Freezing/Unfreezing overseas bank accounts and boycotting or otherwise the supply to and import of products made by Turkish companies linked to Erdogan, his family and associates;
- Withholding/Facilitating foreign investment in Turkey;
- Withholding all sales of armaments that can be used against civilians;
- NATO going beyond identifying alternatives to Incirlik and other [bases](#) (see Appendix A) and it excluding Turkish military personnel from intelligence briefings etc., and undertaking an in-depth review of NATO's purpose, structure and operations, including the development of legally binding requirements for being a member of NATO.
- Forming a commission of international historians, including those from Turkey, to examine evidence of Ottoman's treatment of Armenians and if genocide is proven recognising the genocide (as 22 countries including Germany, France, [Italy](#), Greece and Russia, the Vatican, the European Parliament, [49 out of 50 US states](#) and two Australian States (NSW and SA) have done);
- Forming a commission of international historians, including those from Turkey, to examine the Republic of Turkey's treatment of Kurds, and the history of the PKK's armed struggle since 1984;
- Delisting the PKK as a terrorist organisation, (joining the UN, Russia, Israel et al) if the PKK declares and abides by a unilateral ceasefire in Turkey for a specified time period and agrees to work with others who do not hold its views (e.g.



- who do not idolise Ocalan) in negotiations for a political solution for Kurds in Turkey;
- Denying the right of Turkey to block representatives of the administrative and security structures in north and east Syria from participating in all negotiations on the future of Syria;
 - Freezing/Facilitating Turkey in commercial opportunities afforded during reconstruction in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen;
 - Expanding or consolidating existing responses such as:
 - Replacing the US' de facto no-fly zone over northeast Syria with a UN Security Council no-fly zone;
 - The US applying political and economic pressure on Turkey to politically negotiate with Kurds in Turkey and Syria. For example, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), supported by the US, could make negotiations with Kurds a condition for Turkey to increase its importation of oil from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) since waivers for US sanctions on Iran ended [on May 2](#), as Turkey imports [90 percent](#) of its oil, with the cheapest source being [Iranian oil](#), while alternatives are politically fraught (Turkey has soured relations with all Gulf States except for Qatar) or costly (Russian oil);
 - Continuing the US Defence Department work of training and equipping a SDF stand alone force of 65,000, divided into a internal security force and a combat [force](#) by [2020](#); and
 - Decreasing Europe's reliance on Turkey as a energy transit by fast tracking US-supported negotiations between Cyprus, Israel and Egypt for a Eastern Mediterranean security and energy alliance (begun in early 2018 following the discovery of off-shore gas deposits) to pipe gas to Europe that could avoid Turkey, with some projections including Turkey as a transit and/or [gas](#) receiver, dependent on Cyprus and other issues being resolved.

Levers can be used for reward or punishment. For instance, if the Turkish State was convinced to enter sincere negotiations with Kurds in Turkey, and separately, with representatives of the administrative and security structures in north and east Syria, and these negotiations were to achieve internationally supported outcomes, there could be multiple economic and political [benefits for all parties](#), including the KRG. Such benefits are demonstrated by Turkey's relationship with the KRG in Iraq, when only 10 years ago Turkey remained fiercely opposed to this semi-autonomous region.

At a time when the Middle East is undergoing major transformations, the US administration's incoherent policies and reticence for multilateral non-military engagement risk more war and instability. If multinational institutions and corporations and national governments want alternative futures, KLA argues there is a need to positively reward decentralised transparent and representative governance, and improved decision pathways, justice and education by supporting a mixed economy with an expanded private sector, and local-based security, civil society and projects that provide jobs. All this requires long-term engagement, collaboration and [resources](#). This applies to Turkey as much as to Iraq, Syria and Iran.



What the Australian Government Can Do

The Australian Government maintains Australia has a special relationship with Turkey since Turks slaughtered ANZACs at Gallipoli in 1915. This special relationship did not prevent Erdogan shamelessly replaying footage of the Christchurch massacre at municipal election rallies and threatening anti-Muslim Australians they would return home in coffins like their ANZAC forefathers.

The Australian Government and Australians are mistaken if they think the threats Turkey poses do not affect Australia. If Turkey takes delivery of Russia's S-400 missile system, any [technology transfer](#) will impact countries like Australia that are involved in the manufacture and/or purchase of the F-35 fighter jets. Australia will also be impacted by changes in multiple balances of power in the Mediterranean and Middle East caused by Turkey becoming more aggressive, and if Turkey's support for Islamist militias in Syria seeds the next international terrorist threat. If Turkey is allowed to massacre Kurds in Syria, it will become more difficult to find proxies on the ground to fight future wars while Australians remain safe in the air. War in the Middle East exacts huge military and trade costs on Australian companies and taxpayers, while Australia and other countries' silence in the face of Turkey's authoritarianism and regional aggression is reminiscent of Europe acquiescing to Hitler's excesses before World War II. By not responding appropriately, countries like Australia lose credibility in defending or promoting peaceful solutions anywhere.

The Australian Government must not be seduced by sentiment regarding Australia's relationship with Turkey. Australian officials need to raise concerns with Turkish officials, other allies and at international forums, and seek co-ordinated approaches that clearly state red lines and their consequences, as outlined in 'Ways Forward'.

Three actions are not dependent on international moves. The first action is that the Australian Government should enter discussions with the Returned Soldiers League about cancelling the annual ANZAC ceremony at Gallipoli until Turkey embarks on a democratic trajectory, in respect for the 8,000 Australians who died fighting for freedom and democracy at Gallipoli.

Secondly, the Australian Government needs to critically review the classification of PKK as a terrorist organisation in light of Turkey's broad definition of terrorism that includes speech deemed 'making propaganda for an armed terrorist organization' or causes an individual to be accused of being an 'enemy of the state', and Turkey's crackdown on elected Kurdish parliamentarians and mayors, media and civil society, especially after the rulings made by:

- Three [courts in Belgium](#), one in 2016, the second in 2017 (Court of Appeals), and a third in 2019 (Court of Last Resort) that ruled the Kurdish PKK is a 'party to an armed conflict' and not a 'terrorist organisation';
- The [Permanent Peoples' Tribunal](#)'s ruling on 24 May 2018 that ruled PKK was in an armed conflict with the Turkish State and that the Turkish State was



guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity against Kurds in east Turkey between July 2015 and December 2016.

- The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in [November 2018](#) that ruled evidence does not support the Council of Europe listing the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

Since the Australian Government relisted the PKK as a terrorist organisation in 2015, there has been ample evidence of Turkey's political, cultural and military repression of Kurds in Turkey and Syria, as outlined by Kurdish Lobby Australia, Human Rights Watch in [February 2018](#), [June 2018](#), and [April 2019](#), Amnesty International in [August 2018](#), and the UN [in June 2018](#) and [February 2019](#). Yet in September 2018 the Australian Government reclassified PKK as a terrorist organisation based on 'intelligence' reports that claimed the PKK continued to commit terrorist acts, that it intimidates other political parties in Turkey (to which this KLA report will provide ample evidence to the contrary), that its attacks endanger Australian tourists in Turkey, that an Australian (Renis Lelikan) due to face court on charges of belonging to the PKK demonstrates there is a potential threat on Australian soil (despite Australian law maintaining a person's innocence until guilt is proven), and that PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the US, Canada, UK and [New Zealand](#). In making this ruling the Australian Government did not distinguish between PKK and TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) and relied on unsubstantiated [information](#), with one claim being a rehash cited in the 2015 ruling, on both occasions without supporting evidence, that PKK 'kidnapped' 300 'children'.

When next reviewing the classification of PKK the Australian Government needs to take into account the ruling of the NSW Supreme Court on the Australian-Kurd, Renis Lelikan, who pleaded guilty to being a member of the PKK between 2011 and 2013. Instead of being indicative of a PKK threat on Australian soil, in May 2019, Justice Lucy McCallum found that Lelikan was not a militant, that he spent his time with the PKK searching for the body of his dead brother, and as a sympathetic chronicler taking photos and writing. McCallum described his writings as 'philosophical, and almost poetic', 'contributing more to the world of ideas than the prospects of violence'. For joining PKK she gave him 500 hours of community [service](#).

Anomalies in the classification of PKK as a terrorist organisation relates to a third action that the Australian Government, individuals and companies must consider when assessing all security, political and economic matters related to Turkey. KLA strongly advises that all information (and misinformation) emanating from the Turkish State and media, whether supplied by MIT directly or through ASIO, must be cross-checked with evidence from reliable independent sources. These sources could include non-Turkish intelligence agencies, and think tanks and human rights groups in Turkey and Europe. Australian decision makers must not rely on information supplied by ASIO that lacks independently verifiable evidence, given ASIO's transfer of information gives the information credibility. With hindsight, if ASIO continues to pass on unverified 'information', it may be ASIO that loses credibility.



Main Report: Inside Turkey

Turkey's 'Free and Fair' Elections

Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018

Elections are no longer free or fair in Turkey. Between 1986 and 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won 15 local and national elections and two referendums on constitutional reform, with wins in 2015, 2017 and 2018 clouded by intimidation and vote rigging. In the lead up to the 24 June 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, he claimed it was a clear choice between him and AKP, or 'terrorists' running the country. Some [57 million voters](#), among them 19 million voters under the age of 32, including [four million](#) first time voters, were eligible to vote. They were voting for a 600-member parliament (increased from 550 members) from among 4,200 parliamentary candidates representing eight parties, plus [74 independents](#). They were also voting for one of six presidential candidates to decide who would become an executive president with the powers to issue presidential decrees; override parliament, appoint and remove cabinet ministers, senior judges, Central Bank officials,¹ military commanders, other senior public servants; prepare the annual budget; and declare a state of emergency, approved by the constitutional referendum in 2017. All opposition parties advocated a return to a parliamentary system, but stakes were high. If Erdogan lost the presidency or the AKP lost the parliament, Erdogan could be put on trial for corruption and fraud.

All opposition parties were critical of Erdogan's mishandling the economy, leading to high inflation and unemployment and a widening trade deficit; the corruption of institutions; the prolonged state of [emergency](#) and the polarisation of Turkish society. Some were critical of Turkey's destabilising foreign policies and renewed armed conflict with Kurds. Such views were rarely heard because of Erdogan's strangle hold on a cowered media, the election campaign being conducted during a state of emergency and security force intimidation. HDP MP and co-chair, [Pervin Buldan](#), summed up the campaign environment: 'Demonstrations are banned, ... criticizing the government is banned, even defending peace is considered terror propaganda.' Fervour and [fear](#) prevailed.

Turkey's 10 percent voter threshold for a party to gain seats in parliament is the [highest](#) in the world. All votes for a party that fails to exceed this threshold automatically go to the winning party. A new law introduced by the AKP government in March 2018 meant that if a small party teamed up with a large party it did not have to exceed the 10 percent threshold. This was behind two alliances formed in early May, a precedent for Turkey. Fighting to remain in government the AKP formed the 'People's Alliance' with the ultranationalist MHP and the small ultra Right Great Unity Party (BBP). The opposing 'National Alliance', consisted of four opposition parties: the

¹ On [June 10](#), Erdogan issued an emergency decree that gave him the right to appoint the Central Bank governor, his deputies and the policy committee.



Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), and three small parties: the newly formed nationalist Good (İYİ) Party, the pro-Islam Felicity Party (SP), and the centre right Democratic Party (DP).

The second largest opposition party, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), was left out of the alliance, and tried but failed to form its own alliance.² Nevertheless, with AKP having a solid support base of about [40 percent](#), if the HDP exceeded the 10 percent threshold, the AKP could be denied a majority in parliament as it had been in June 2015, when HDP won 80 seats. Within a month of HDP's electoral achievement, the AKP government announced the end of the first bilateral ceasefire with PKK. Ever since Erdogan has accused HDP of being a terrorist organisation linked to PKK.

When the parties put forward their [list of parliamentary candidates](#), on top of the list of AKP candidates for Istanbul was Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albarak, implicated in buying oil from ISIS. On top of AKP's list for the Kurdish-majority province of Van was [Osman Nuri Gulacar](#), detained for two months in 2009 for allegedly being head of Van's Al-Qaida branch. A controversial feature of the CHP's list of candidates was that it excluded close colleagues of their presidential candidate, Muharrem Ince. HDP candidates included Turks, Armenians and Kurds, and had the most female candidates of all parties – 230 out of 600, compared to AKP's 126 female candidates.

Erdogan's campaign mantra was that 'A great Turkey needs a great leader'. He [promised](#) that Turkey would become a [global power](#), that more offensives would be conducted against 'terrorists' in Syria, and that an executive presidency would implement justice and democracy, and make Turkey one of the [top ten economies](#) in the world by 2023. With wages [falling two percent](#) in 2017, inflation in the double digits, and the economy burdened by foreign debt, measures to strengthen the AKP vote included the government temporarily [lowering taxes on home purchases](#), [capping commissions](#) on house sales to 4 percent, sending a cheque of 1000 liras or \$244 to more than [12 million Turkish retirees](#) (about 15 percent of the population) in early June, and promising retirees debt forgiveness, interest free loan repayments, and the restructuring of fines, taxes and social security. Erdogan also promised financial aid to [50,000 farmers](#), that 680,000 students dismissed from tertiary institutions since 2016 would be allowed to return to studies and a state-run café would be established in every neighbourhood to offer [free tea and cake](#)! The inauguration of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, which will carry Azeri gas through Turkey to Europe, was brought forward to mid June. The AKP government pressured the state-owned [Ziraat Bank](#) to offer an interest rate of less than one percent on home loans, forced all banks to extend credit despite them carrying a large proportion of non-performing loans, and reduced the tax on repatriated money to three percent until the election. These measures would be paid by taxation on

² The HDP tried to form the [Kurdistan Election Alliance](#) with the small Kurdistan Freedom Party, Kurdistan Socialist Party, Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey and the Azadi Movement, with the Kurdish pro-Islamic [Huda Pa \(Free Cause Party\)](#), formerly pro-Erdogan, but now critical of the president and the purge, refusing to join. The alliance was not formalised.



incomes and goods and in some cases endangered the banking system. Despite the bribes, on May 8 [Erdogan](#) made the mistake of saying, 'If one day our nation says 'tamam' (enough), then we will step aside.' Within 24 hours, there were 1.8 million tweets saying 'tamam', and 300,000 tweets saying 'devam' (continue).

Opposition parties had to rely on [social media](#) as [Turkish media](#) blacked out news of opposition rallies and was saturated with Erdogan's daily repetitive [speeches](#). Between April 1 and May 13, [TRT](#) (a state-run TV station) gave 89.5 hours of airtime to the ruling AKP, 7 hours to CHP, 28 minutes to MHP, and no time to HDP. [Non-state media](#) showed a similar bias. As a token gesture, in early June, the Erdogan-stacked Supreme Electoral Board ruled that the imprisoned HDP presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, was entitled to 20 minutes of airtime during the campaign. For this TV crews could visit him in Edirne High Security Prison.

In fear of losing their job, [no economist](#), stockbroker or journalist dared comment on the falling lira, which lost 18 percent in May. Anybody critical of Erdogan was labelled a terrorist, and at the end of May, Erdogan filed a [criminal complaint](#) against the CHP presidential candidate, Muharrem Ince, for noting Erdogan's past respect for Fethullah Gulen.

The AKP's main partner, MHP, did not run a presidential candidate and only held [three election rallies](#). Head of the party, [Devlet Bahceli](#), proposed a widespread amnesty for Turkish prisoners, excluding child abusers, rapists, murderers, Kurdish militants and Gulen supporters. The AKP rejected the proposal. [Another rift](#) was that the AKP failed to nominate a single MHP representative for a post-election cabinet position. On June 22, Bahceli warned that the AKP-[MHP](#) alliance would not continue if the AKP did not respect the alliance. Otherwise, the MHP manifesto [promised economic relief to many segments of society](#).

The CHP presidential candidate was a former high school physics teacher, social democrat, and parliamentarian since 2002. [Muharrem Ince](#) promised to return Turkey to a parliamentary system, remove emergency rule and implement justice, make peace with Kurds and allow [education](#) in the Kurdish language, sell Erdogan's grand palace and prioritise [accession](#) to the EU. He visited Selahattin Demirtas in prison on [May 9](#), and called for his release, having opposed the lifting of parliamentary immunity back in 2016, despite his party having supported the move. Ince promised to raise the minimum wage, provide free high quality [education](#), 10,000 student scholarships for overseas study, and biannual stipends to pensioners and young people. Like Erdogan, he called on the US to [extradite Fethullah Gulen](#), who he blamed for the failed coup in 2016. As the campaign progressed, [Ince](#) gained support. His party leader, [Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu](#) emphasised that the urgent issues were justice, education, the economy, peace and foreign policy. He claimed, 'Turkey wants peace, not fighting. Turkey wants freedom, not autocracy,' and promised to establish a [Middle East Peace and Co-operation Organisation](#) with Iran, Syria and Iraq.

The devout Muslim nationalist and former MHP Minister of Interior in the 1990s, now leader of the iYi Party, Merkal Akşener, campaigned for economic relief for all those



nominated by her former party, MHP, and a [return to the rule of law](#) and European standards of human rights and media freedom.

The small Islamist *Saadet* (Felicity) Party's presidential candidate, Temel Karamollaoğlu, former mayor of Sivas when Islamist extremists massacred 33 Alevi and other leftist intellectuals in 1993, and the main driver behind a failed attempt to unite the opposition behind one presidential candidate, identifies as a Muslim, but not an [Islamist](#). He promised to lift the state of emergency, end the purge, government corruption and nepotism, resolve Kurdish issues, and negotiate a privileged trade and investment partnership with the EU.

Doğu Perinçek was nominated the presidential candidate for the left wing party, VATAN. He was staunchly [against](#) joining an 'imperialist EU', preferring Turkey to pivot towards Euroasia. After saying he would shut down the [HDP](#), VATAN officials in Diyarbakir resigned from the party, saying they would vote HDP.

HDP's presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, had been in prison since 4 November 2016. At the time of the election he had not been convicted of any charge. After his official nomination on May 4, the HDP, some [CHP candidates](#), and three presidential candidates ([Muharrem Ince](#), Temel Karamollaoğlu and [Merkal Akşener](#)) called for his release. The Ankara High Criminal Court rejected an HDP application for his release on May 21, as did the Constitutional Court. Throughout the campaign, Erdogan repeatedly called Demirtas 'that terrorist in Edirne' and Turkey's 'top terrorist'. He accused Demirtas of being responsible for the violence during a protest in October 2014 that resulted in 43 people being killed. The protest was against Turkey's inaction during ISIS' siege on Kobani. In response, Demirtas published a [damning statement](#) outlining how the government had not investigated who was responsible for the deaths.

Demirtas ran his campaign by sending tweets through his wife and lawyers. On Twitter he had [1.6 million](#) followers. The [HDP manifesto](#) called for the immediate lifting of the state of emergency, the release all political prisoners, the annulment of the terror law, the return to a parliamentary system and respect for women's rights. Demirtas also promised stipends for young people, retirees, and elderly people ineligible for pensions, but like the other presidential candidates, failed to outline how these financial promises would be paid, although most opposition candidates supported the [cancellation](#) of at least some of Erdogan's mega-projects. [Demirtas was cautiously](#) positive about joining the EU, given its xenophobic politics and neo-liberal economic agenda that practically destroyed Greece. On Sunday June 17, Demirtas gave a ten-minute speech from prison, which was broadcasted in several major cities. His message was that it was time to vote for hope and democracy, not fear and one-man rule. Demirtas gave the same message on June 22 in an [e-rally on Twitter](#).

Since 2016, 16 HDP parliamentarians had been dismissed from parliament, and 100 out of 102 elected pro-Kurdish co-mayors had also been dismissed, most having been detained and released repeatedly. During the election campaign, nine former HDP



parliamentarians remained in prison with HDP claiming another 10,000 members were also in prison. During the election campaign the crackdown on pro-Kurdish politicians intensified. By June 22, at least [375 HDP campaigners had been detained](#), and [17 HDP rallies](#) were banned. In May Day rallies, the Kurdish message 'Long live peace' was banned. On May 4 a prison sentence of eight years was confirmed for a HDP parliamentarian representing Diyarbakir, Abdullah Zedan. On [May 5](#), at least seven HDP members were detained and on May 18, the AKP government announced that [30 Kurdish politicians](#) were being investigated for terrorism and spreading terrorist propaganda because they expressed support for the referendum on independence held in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and criticised the military takeover of Kirkuk and Afrin. On [May 25](#), the Gaziantep District Court of Justice confirmed the prison sentences of 89 Kurdish politicians, [one being a candidate in the upcoming elections](#), and four other parliamentarians who had been elected in 2015. Fourteen were given 21-year sentences; 14 were given 18-year sentences; 18 were given nine-year sentences, and the remainder were given six-year sentences.

When [HDP rallies](#) were allowed, armoured police vehicles encircled the crowds, and heavily [armed](#) police took photos and conducted random ID checks. AKP and MHP supporters attacked those attending HDP rallies in Ankara, Istanbul and Antalya, leaving people injured and vehicles damaged. [Police](#) visited HDP offices daily to demand background checks on all who were present. Between April 18 and June 10, there were [57 attacks](#) on [HDP offices](#), [HDP election booths](#), cars, buses and supporters. HDP billboards were torn down, a band that played at a HDP rally was arrested and AKP officials visited villages to tell voters to vote for AKP 'or else'.

On [May 27](#), following AKP government instructions, the Supreme Electoral Board moved [68](#) geographically spread voting centres in the Kurdish-majority province of Diyarbakir to 'more secure' locations. A total of [1,090 polling stations](#) were moved, this impacting [170,000 voters](#). The HDP organised 3,000 buses to transport the voters to polling stations, with buses having to pass through multiple checkpoints.

The bloodiest incident in the campaign resulted in four people dying and nine people being injured. It occurred ten days before the election, and a day after Erdogan told supporters to target HDP saying 'You know who is in your neighbourhoods, do what is [necessary](#),' also telling party officials to carry out 'special work' on [voter lists](#) at polling stations, presumably to keep the HDP below the 10 percent threshold.

Urfa AKP candidate [Ibrahim Halil Yildiz](#) was campaigning in the Kurdish-majority town of Suruç, accompanied by 20 to [50](#) heavily armed relatives. Kurdish shopkeepers did not welcome him. Hereon, reports differ and the following is an attempt to provide a coherent account. In one shop, run by the Şenyaşar family, Yildiz objected to a [red, green and yellow banner](#) representing the colours of Kurdistan. When Mr. Şenyaşar said he would not vote for AKP, or that he no longer had any interest in politics, Yildiz's brother swore at him. Mr. Şenyaşar ordered Yildiz and his armed relatives out of his shop. It is unknown what they said as they departed but video footage posted on social media shows Mr. Şenyaşar and a couple of other men hitting Yildiz's armed relatives with bats as they left. Outside the shop, Yildiz's guards opened fire. In one



version of events, Yildiz's brother shot and killed one member of the Şenyaşar family on the spot. Another version is that he later died at the hospital later. His body was riddled with [17 bullets](#) fired from close range. Outside the shop, Fadil Şenyaşar arrived and allegedly shot Yildiz's brother, who was also taken to hospital. The violence continued at the hospital. Some reports claim it was here that the father and two sons of the Şenyaşar family were killed, the father having been beaten with an [oxygen bottle](#). Three AKP supporters and five others were wounded in the fracas, either at the shop or hospital.

Another AKP candidate for Urfa, [Hüseyin Seyhanlıoğlu](#), confirmed that after a quarrel, the first to open fire were Yildiz's relatives. He claimed that at the hospital, Yildiz's relatives disabled the security cameras and ambulances by shooting at them, and [attacked hospital staff](#), forcing them out of the hospital. He claimed that in front of the Urfa governor and 'dozens' of police, Yildiz's relatives brutally killed the father and two sons. The Turkish Medical Association confirmed that the hospital's security camera footage had been [destroyed](#). An autopsy indicated that the Şenyaşar brothers had been sprayed with [23 bullets](#) in all, while their father, who according to some sources, had rushed to the hospital upon hearing of his sons' injuries, had died from injuries inflicted by 'sharp objects'.

As news got out, Erdogan and Turkish media claimed the family were PKK, and blamed the violence on PKK and HDP. The brothers' mother denied her family had any links to PKK. Selahattin Demirtas called for calm and for people not respond to provocation.

The next day police targeted the family's funeral procession with tear gas and water cannons, and at the cemetery a 'large number' were detained. By June 17, 19 people had been arrested in relation to the incident, including HDP Urfa candidate, Ismail Kaplan, other HDP officials, and Fadil Şenyaşar, who was allegedly responsible for the murder of Yildiz's brother. No AKP supporter was arrested. Amnesty International called for an independent [investigation](#) but representatives from 25 organisation that travelled to Suruç by bus to investigate the incident, including the Diyarbakır Bar Association, Human Rights Association (İHD), Confederation of Public Labourers' Unions (KESK), Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TİHV) and the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), were stopped by police, and for 'security' reasons not permitted to enter Suruç.

In a second incident in Urfa on June 20, ten attackers [threatened HDP supporters](#), saying 'We will bury you in the mountains.' Three days earlier, about 20 people attempted to burn down a HDP booth in the island of Büyükkada, İstanbul. When CHP supporters from the next booth and shopkeepers tried to stop the attack, the attackers stabbed two of the CHP supporters. The police arrived and beat the victims of the attack before arresting the two injured CHP supporters. The police did not arrest the attackers. This pattern of events was frequent. Even with video evidence, the authorities did not investigate any of these attacks or arrest the perpetrators.



HDP supporters were not the only victims of attacks. CHP, iYi and Felicity Party campaigners were also subject to [attack](#) and arrest. Between June 4 and June 11, [771 people were arrested](#), 492 for alleged links with the 2016 failed coup, 234 for alleged links with PKK and 37 for alleged links with ISIS. On the eve of the election, a major CHP rally in Istanbul was not broadcast.

With the economy deteriorating, Erdogan played the security card. In the week before the elections, news of Turkish offensives in northern Iraq invariably preceded Erdogan's [election rallies](#). Four days before the elections, 50 HDP and Democratic Regions Party (DBP) members and ballot box monitors were [arrested](#) in Erzurum, Sirnak, Bursa and Izmir. A day before the elections gunmen [opened fire](#) on the HDP candidate's house in Kocaeli and [PKK](#) announced a 24-hour ceasefire to encourage people to vote.

Fear of election fraud escalated after the Supreme Electoral Board ordered that unstamped votes would be counted, that pro-AKP civil servants were to monitor and count votes at all polling stations, and security forces would be allowed inside polling stations. These orders caused all opposition parties to unite and form a [Fair Election Platform](#) at the end of May to mobilise civic groups and train volunteers to act as observers and use smartphone apps to communicate between observers and tally votes. The only problem was that [MIT](#) and a cyber security response team had the authority to monitor and block telecommunications, social media and other Internet sites on election day. Opposition parties and NGOs managed to gather more than [half a million voluntary monitors](#) for the elections. Also present were 350 representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCEPA) and [seven other organisations](#) attempting to monitor some of the [181,000](#) polling stations across the country.

Between [June 7](#) and June 19, [48.8 percent of three million eligible voters in the diaspora cast their vote](#). On the day of the elections, state media claimed voter turnout was [86 percent](#) despite [Turkey's Human Rights Association \(IHD\)](#) reporting that in Kurdish areas voters were threatened, had their mobile devices confiscated, and an unknown number were [prevented from voting](#). Some opposition observers claimed that their voting data appeared to be under cyber attack. In Suruc, the number of people who voted at [Anadolu High School](#) exceeded the 1,068 people eligible to vote, and an AKP candidate's bodyguards injured a 'score' of people. [Afterwards](#), police confiscated four sacks of voting papers from a car. In Van, military helicopters took away sacks of votes. In Kurdish areas, some ballot boxes were closed early, and social media published images of officials stamping AKP votes en masse and other images of sacks of votes being thrown into garbage bins. [Ten European observers](#) were detained at polling stations in different Kurdish cities for not having sufficient accreditation, [opposition monitors](#) were prevented from entering some polling stations and some were beaten by mobs. On Twitter, reports claimed that at one Urfa polling station (Ululan Middle School) 25 observers were attacked and hospitalised.



No poll had predicted that Erdogan would receive over 50 percent in the first round of voting for president, but [three days](#) before the election a pro-government television station accidentally aired results that Erdogan received 53 percent of the presidential vote. Official results were that [Erdogan](#) achieved 52.4 percent of the vote, Ince 30.8 percent, Demirtas 8.3 percent, Akşener 7.4 percent, Karamollaoğlu 0.9 percent and Perinçek 0.2 percent. All failed presidential candidates could not take a seat in parliament.

In the election for Turkey's 600-seat Grand National Assembly:

- AKP won 295 seats (42.56 percent of the vote, a decline of 7 percent from the November 2015 elections), hence losing its parliamentary majority;
- MHP won 49 seats (a surprising 11.1 percent of the vote) giving the AKP – MHP People's Alliance enough seats to form a government;
- CHP won 146 seats (22.64 percent, a decline of 2.4 percent from the November 2015 elections);
- HDP won 67 seats (11.7 percent, coming [first in 11 provinces](#) but a decline of 2 seats compared to the November 2015 election); and
- İYİ won 43 seats (10 percent) with 'others' receiving 2 percent of the vote.

HDP performed surprisingly under the circumstances, but so did MHP in the Kurdish east. This was put down to:

- More than one million Kurds having been displaced in the 2015 – 2016 curfews, sieges and military operations, and having been unable to return because Sur, Cizre and Nusaybin were being 'redeveloped';
- [1,052,269 votes for the HDP](#) being ruled invalid. These votes mainly came from ballot boxes that had no HDP observers;
- An increased presence of security forces, state-appointed officials and workers in Kurdish-majority areas and harassment of HDP voters;
- Security personnel able to vote at any polling station and possibly voting multiple [times](#);
- Other forms of vote tampering;
- Ballot boxes being moved to security zones; and
- Kurds seeking seasonal employment elsewhere.

The results meant that 43 percent of voters supported an increasingly Islamist AKP, and 43.7 percent of voters supported varying degrees of nationalism by voting for MHP, İYİ and CHP. Erdogan's success was thought to be a [vote for stability](#), while the nationalist parties' successes was [thought](#) to be due to increased nationalist sentiment arising from a growing resentment towards Syrian refugees (accused of taking jobs and lowering wages) and pride in the Turkish Army's invasion and occupation of Afrin, especially as none of the war crimes and crimes against humanity were being reported in Turkish media.

With the AKP reliant on the ultranationalists to form government, in his [victory speech](#) Erdogan promised to continue fighting 'terrorists' in Turkey, Syria and Iraq and to



make Turkey a great power. Ince conceded defeat but warned that Turkey was entering an era of one-man rule. With MHP being anti-West, better relations with Kurds, the EU and US seemed unlikely.

In a [meeting between Erdogan and Bahceli](#) on June 27, it was agreed to end emergency rule on July 19, but in return, MHP wanted amendments to the anti-terror law, internal security law and penal code that would make lifting the state of emergency of no consequence. Hopes that more than 30 emergency decrees would be repealed and political prisoners released were dashed on June 30, when the [Constitutional Court](#) claimed it was unable to void emergency decrees, that they were law unless parliament decided otherwise. The new parliament passed an [anti-terror package](#) on [July 25](#) that enabled dismissals and detentions to continue, also granting provincial governors the right to restrict movement if it threatened 'public order'.

The first post-election presidential decrees were issued on July 9. One scrapped the five-year term limit of the Central Bank governor. Another gave Erdogan the right to nominate his cabinet, resulting in Erdogan immediately announcing a [16-member cabinet. It excluded any MHP representatives](#). Those who kept their ministries were Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül (responsible for the purge on civil servants), and Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu (who oversees operations against the PKK). Erdogan appointed his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as Minister of Treasury and Finance, despite Albayrak having been implicated in off shore tax evasion schemes and buying oil from ISIS, but in the new constitution, the [president proposes the budget](#) and the parliament ratifies it. If the parliament does not do so, the previous year's budget stands. Abdullatif Sener, a former deputy prime minister, claimed that Erdogan now had the right to spend [25 percent](#) of Turkey's national income as he wished. To further consolidate his power over the economy, on September 12, Erdogan appointed himself chair of Turkey's non-transparent \$200 billion [Sovereign Wealth Fund](#) and made [Albayrak](#) deputy chair. This fund is not independently audited, and can claim public assets, issue bonds, and borrow as much as it likes from whomever it [likes](#). Since its inception in 2016, it has not invested or embarked on a single project.

Erdogan claimed his centralised control would help fix the economy but after temporarily becoming mayor of Istanbul in April Ekrem Imamoglu's discoveries of the state of Istanbul's finances tell a different story. He discovered that Istanbul was in debt. There had been reckless unaccounted spending, a lack of competition between tenders and a lack of oversight on tenders and projects, with tenders and sub-contractors overcharging, and those close to Erdogan invariably [benefitting](#). After the cabinet was announced the lira sunk three percent. It sunk another three percent following the Central Bank's decision on July 24 not to raise [interest rates](#).

Back on July 9, Erdogan appointed the Chief of General Staff, [Hulusi Akar](#), Minister of Defence, despite or because of Akar's inexplicable delay in taking action on the night of the failed coup. Erdogan then undertook the [biggest shake up of the Turkish military since Ataturk](#) established the Republic of Turkey. No longer would the military be able to stage a coup as it had so successfully done in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997,



and failed to do in 2016. Having purging 40 percent of all TSK commanders since 2016, Akar and the new Chief of Staff, Yaşar Gürel, would co-ordinate on all matters, including communications and in actioning the decisions of the Supreme Military Council. This council was formerly a semi-independent group made up of ranked generals and admirals that determined all military assignments, promotions and [dismissals](#). Instead, Erdogan would chair the council. It would be made up of six cabinet ministers, including his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak. That the TSK now served the ideology of an increasing Islamist and authoritarian president has profound implications for [NATO](#) and foreign endeavours. For instance, the once secular TSK has collaborated with Islamist militias to fight Kurds in Syria.

Centralised control extended to all ministries. Under the new constitution, all ministers answer to Erdogan, not to the [parliament](#), as do all boards and committees that develop each ministry's policies. Presidential decrees become law. If the parliament pushes for different legislation, the matter must go before the Constitutional Court, where Erdogan has the right to appoint 12 out of 15 judges. Having purged 4,000 judges and prosecutors since 2016 (i.e. one in four judiciary officials), and moved 3,320 judges and legal officials to different positions, under the new constitution [Erdogan](#) also has the right to appoint all members of the Court of Appeal, three quarters of all Council of State members, and four of the 13 members on the Higher Board of Judges and Prosecutors. Hence, Erdogan has the power to completely reshape the judiciary.

Then there is education. Since the coup, more than 33,000 teachers and academics have been sacked, and 2,250 educational institutions have been closed, including 15 universities. Half of all textbooks have been confiscated for featuring subjects outside AKP's worldview. As executive president, Erdogan has the right to appoint all heads of universities.

Optimistic Kurds suggested that the [newly elected 80 AKP MPs who were Kurdish](#) and the 67 HDP MPs could convince Erdogan to issue decrees on greater provincial autonomy, the election of provincial governors, and schools being able to teach in a community's mother tongue. This proved wishful thinking. AKP's reliance on MHP, the appointment of a military hawk as Defence Minister, and the reappointments of the hardline ministers of Justice and Interior assured a different future.

What is deeply concerning is that institutions will become invested in the new autocracy, which will make it increasingly [difficult](#) for Turkey to return to a parliamentary democracy (if it ever was one). Under these circumstances, Turkish society will remain polarised and opposition groups will have no legal means to address matters. If an unfettered Erdogan pursues his [Ottoman dreams](#), Turkey's foreign policies will increase regional instability. Hence, there is a critical need for the international community to adjust to the changing dynamics of Turkey.



Municipal Elections, 31 March, 2019

Municipal elections on 31 March 2019 involved electing a metropolitan mayor, a municipal mayor and council members and a mukhtar (neighbourhood representative) if voting in one of 31 metropolitan cities (i.e. a city with a population over 750,000); a municipal mayor and council members, provincial assembly members and a mukhtar if voting in one of 50 other provincial capitals, and a municipal mayor and council members and a mukhtar if voting in 957 towns and [villages](#). Surprising outcomes included AKP losing the mayor of Istanbul and Ankara to the CHP and a major shift to the ultranationalist [MHP](#).

From October 2018 Erdogan ran a polarising campaign, repeatedly demonising all opposition parties and their leaders as [terrorists](#), claiming the outcome would determine [Turkey's survival](#) as a nation. To help in the appointment, removal and moving of mayors, on October 27 Erdogan appointed 39 new provincial [governors](#) and issued a decree that reshuffled the structure of municipal [councils](#).

The first set back for AKP was that after months of disagreements,³ Devlet Bahçeli, announced that MHP would run their own [candidates](#), although a short time later MHP decided to support AKP by not running candidates in Istanbul, Ankara or Izmir.

From the start of the campaign there was a crackdown on HDP candidates and members. Between October 2018 and 31 March 2018, 713 HDP members were arrested and in prison, with 107 remaining in prison on election day. For details of arrests and imprisonments see 'Kurds and the Turkish State: Arrests and imprisonments of elected officials, political party members and activists', taking particular note of the October – March campaign period. In February 2019, the Batman Electoral Authority barred Sabri Ozdemir, who had been removed from office in September 2016, from being a mayoral candidate (but another eight candidates running elsewhere, who had also been dismissed in 2016, were allowed to run). Turkish courts blocked 317 websites and social media [accounts](#), and the judiciary targeted political and business organisations with the word 'Kurdistan' in their name, claiming they were fracturing the unity of the [state](#). Police blocked marches in several cities, and throughout [February](#) and [March](#) HDP campaign centres were attacked. A day before the election 60 HDP candidates in the towns of Istanbul, Adana, Van, Igdir, and in Sanliurfa province were arrested on unspecified or terrorist-related [charges](#).

Back in December, a government-sponsored bill extended the tenure of the chairman and five members of the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) by one year, as their tenure was due to expire in [January](#). In January, the Board barred several Labour and Leftist parties from running in the elections and even pro-government Turkish media was questioning the Board's voter lists. CHP had found they contained 6,389 names of people aged between 100 and 165, with some names appearing on a list for the first

³ These disagreements included MHP's wish for an amnesty for those languishing in prison on allegations they were linked to the coup, and Erdogan's opposition to a court decision to reintroduce an oath in schools beginning, 'I am a Turk,' and ending, 'How proud is the one who can say 'I am a [Turk](#).''



time, and that 7,000 people were registered at addresses of several local AKP councillors in the Istanbul district of Üsküdar. In the Kurdish east, HDP found 224 voters registered at one address in Bingöl, 338 voters at one address in Bitlis, 627 voters at one address in Çukurca and 1,108 voters at one address in Hakkari. Other voters did not have [surnames](#). Although the Board struck 56,495 names off the lists, tens of thousands remained, including soldiers, trainee soldiers, police and government workers on municipal lists in Kurd-majority areas, despite these areas not being their permanent place of residence. Another Board ruling prevented hundreds of thousands of prisoners from voting because they were imprisoned outside their home municipality, the ruling impacting many thousands of HDP supporters, including former co-chair, parliamentarian and presidential candidate, Selahattin [Demirtaş](#). A HDP motion in parliament to launch an investigation into all these matters was voted down. Meanwhile, more than 53,000 Syrians of those made Turkish citizens were eligible to [vote](#).

With Erdogan repeatedly claiming that HDP and PKK were indistinguishable, in December, the Patriotic Party submitted a petition to the Supreme Court requesting the HDP be banned, alleging it was a terrorist organisation, and on January 11, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu sent a memo entitled '[Election Measures](#)' to governors and security forces in 81 cities. It warned 'Remarks [by anyone] that attempt to manipulate the [results of the elections](#) will not be allowed' and ordered 7,000 security personnel to be stationed in 'risky' areas. The AKP-MHP government also called for volunteer security guards to be on duty on election day. These included pro-Erdogan paramilitary forces. Night guards were given guns when formerly they were armed with batons, and a convicted criminal boss, Sedat Peker, joined the call for people to arm themselves on election day. One report claimed that the AKP-MHP government planned to deploy 553,000 security guards, drones and helicopters to guard polling stations against [PKK attacks](#). This was despite PKK having conducted no attacks during the two 2015 elections, the referendum in 2017, or 2018 elections.

In January, [surveys](#) found that voters were most concerned about the economy, unemployment and Syrian refugees. Terrorism was no longer a priority. Erdogan tried to rearrange voters' priorities with repeated threats of going to war on Kurds in Syria, and claiming HDP was linked to [PKK](#), while AKP candidates resorted to [smear campaigns and threats](#) against their rivals. A study found that state banks increased credit in AKP-held municipalities and decreased credit in opposition held municipalities during the [campaign](#).

Big cities like Istanbul and Ankara were hotly contested, and AKP was under pressure, not only because of the deteriorating economy. In early January, five Kurdish parties announced the formation of the [Kurdistani Election Alliance](#). The alliance included HDP, the Kurdistan Islamic Movement (Azadi), People and Freedom Party (an Islamist group), Kurdistan Communist Party (KKP), Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey



(KDP-T), and the Revolutionary Democratic Kurdish Association (DDKD).⁴ Its successful followed the establishment of the Kurdish Language Protection and Development Platform. HDP also announced it would not run candidates in Istanbul, Ankara, Mersin, Adana, Antep, Urfa and Izmir, where HDP have significant numbers of voters (Kurds comprise 11 percent of [15 million voters in Istanbul](#)), and that it would encourage their supporters to vote CHP so as not to divide the opposition [vote](#). In late January, the CHP and İYİ Party announced an agreement to co-ordinate across 27 provinces, including 22 metropolitan municipalities. CHP candidates would stand in 16 of the 27 provinces, and İYİ party candidates would [stand](#) in 11 districts, each party encouraging their supporters to vote for the other in the municipalities they were not running in. This co-ordination among opposition parties was unprecedented. A tweet claimed that the number of women running for mayor were two from the Saadet Party, four from the İYİ Party, 14 from MHP, 14 from AKP, 41 from CHP and 208 from HDP.

The official turnout on March 31 was [83 percent](#), down from 87.5 percent in the June 2018 elections. Although AKP won 44 percent of the total vote, it lost 42 districts it had won in 2014, including the mayor for Ankara, Istanbul, Antalya, Adana, Bolu, Bilecik, Hatay, Mersin, Mulga, Tekirdag, and Sinop – all vital to Turkey's [economy](#). These all went to CHP. CHP achieved a net gain of 17 districts. However MHP had a net gain of 40 districts, especially in Anatolian towns, bringing their total win to [156 districts](#), while İYİ won 13 districts. The swing against AKP was thought to be about rising unemployment and inflation, voters becoming tired of Erdogan's vitriol, and HDP not running for mayor in western cities, the co-ordination of CHP and İYİ and a rise in [ultra-nationalist sentiment](#) that favoured MHP.

In the 11 Kurdish-majority provinces and other eastern provinces, HDP won [70 municipalities](#), including mayor of the provincial capitals of Diyarbakir, Batman, Hakkari, Mars, Mardin, Van and Siirt, as well as Iğdir and Kars (taking Kars from MHP). But HDP had a net loss of 32 district legislatures, including the Kurdish strongholds of Agri, Bitlis, Sirnak and Mus, where they lost to AKP and MHP and in Dersim, they lost to a [highly respected Communist Party candidate](#). The mayorship of Mus was lost to AKP by 538 votes, and in the Mus district of Malazgirt, by three votes.

Six of AKP's wins over HDP can be explained by demographic changes since the [military operations in Kurd-majority cities](#) in 2015 – 2016. For example in [Sirnak](#), there was a surprisingly large swing to AKP. AKP won the position of mayor and three out of six districts. During the armed conflict in 2015 – 2016 there were 1,020 deaths in Sirnak alone, out of total of 4,260 deaths. Many residents were unable to return home because their houses were destroyed or the government refused them the right of return. There was also an influx of security forces that were allowed to vote for the location where they were stationed. On election day the military trucked in at least [12,000 AKP supporters](#). Other AKP wins were thought to be about civilians being

⁴ Parties that did not join either the Language platform or political alliance included the Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK); Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK); Rights and Freedoms Party (Hak-Par); and Hezbollah's extension, the Free Cause Party (Huda-Par), an Islamist [group](#).



conservative and devout Muslims, or being tired of [armed conflict](#) and/or wanting AKP to invest in their districts.

AKP did not accept its losses. Within days AKP challenged the CHP's wins in Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere, and AKP and MHP challenged HDP's [wins](#). The [Supreme Electoral Board agreed to a recount](#) for 84 percent of AKP's requests, 60 percent of MHP's requests and 31 percent of CHP's, but rejected all requests made by HDP, and AKP's request to recount all votes in Ankara and 31 out of 39 districts in İstanbul. In Istanbul, the Board agreed to recount [15,000 votes](#) in 51 ballot boxes across [21 districts](#). Despite pressure from Erdogan, backed by Bahceli, the Board refused to rerun the election for mayor and the lost districts in Istanbul, prompting Erdogan to claim the Board had been taken over by [Gulenists](#), and that there had been a criminal stacking of votes in favour of CHP. After the recount, the margin of votes for winning CHP candidate for mayor of Istanbul, [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#), was reduced from about 25,000 votes to [16,000](#), and in mid-April the Board confirmed his election as mayor of Istanbul. This outcome continued to be challenged by Erdogan and the [AKP](#) as neither wanted to lose Istanbul's revenue or symbolic value. The Board dismissed Erdogan and the AKP's demand to annul 14,712 votes from dismissed civil servants in [Istanbul](#), but investigated at least 32 [AKP allegations](#) made to support a rerun of the election for mayor of Istanbul.

After Imamoglu was certified mayor, he began investigating Istanbul's economic records. A court stopped him copying databases that showed that the municipal was in debt, that millions had been spent on official's homes and that [contacts](#) worth 60 percent of the budget were with 28 AKP-affiliated companies, while sizeable donations had been given to Erdogan's family-run charitable [foundations](#). On April 12, a new Municipality Law No. 5393 gave the Ministry of Interior control over all municipal databases. A municipal council no longer had unconditional access to its own [database](#).

Elsewhere, the Board agreed to a rerun of the election in three districts where an AKP or İYİ candidate won by one to six [votes](#) but refused a rerun in the Mus district of Malazgirt where HDP lost to AKP by three votes, while the official confirmation of 50 out of 70 HDP mayors was delayed. On April 10, the Supreme Electoral Board ruled that no elected mayor or public servant who previously had been dismissed could become mayor. This impacted the HDP elected mayors in [eight](#) districts, including a teacher who had been caught up in the purge. After protests, two of these elected mayors were allowed to assume their post, including [Ahmet Türk](#), but the [Supreme Electoral Board continued to deny six](#) their post, giving their position to the [AKP runner up](#), despite the HDP candidates winning by large [majorities](#). The HDP questioned why these people were accepted as candidates only to have their win refused. Street protests about the issue prompted the Hakkari governor to ban all public meetings and [protests](#), but protests continued and in one, police injured [two HDP parliamentarians](#). Those who were denied the mayorship were elected for Bağlar (Diyarbakir), Tekman (Erzurum), Dagpınar (Kars) and Caldiran, Edremit and Tusba



(Van). Those allowed to take up their position of mayor discovered that the AKP trustees had placed municipalities in enormous [debt](#).

Erdogan called for an 'Alliance of Turkey' inferring some sort of reconciliation with CHP, but on April 21, Bahceli rejected this move. On the same day more than 1,000 'unknown' perpetrators (thought to be Grey Wolves linked to MHP) attacked CHP head Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu at a funeral for a soldier killed by PKK. Nine perpetrators were taken into custody. Eight were released. Only the person who had punched Kılıçdaroğlu in the face was detained, but he was then released under judicial control. The Interior Minister said it was about standing up for the right to protest! CHP gathered evidence showing it was an orchestrated [attack](#) and members of the security forces chose not to intervene. The matter has yet to be investigated.

Seventeen days after Ekrem Imamoglu was confirmed mayor of Istanbul, on May 6, the Supreme Electoral Board voted seven to four in favour of a rerun of elections for the mayor of [Istanbul](#) on [June 23](#). There would be no rerun for municipal mayors, councillors, or the neighbourhood mukhtar despite these votes being overseen by the same 'inadequately qualified' polling officials, (i.e. not civil servants), which was the rationale behind their decision to allow a [revote](#). In the re-run, former PM Binali Yildirim will again face Imamoglu, three independents have chosen not to run, and six parties had yet to [decide](#) at the time of writing. Erdogan will use all means to [win](#) Istanbul back, with some conjecturing that lawyers being allowed to visit PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan for the first time in eight years, and being allowed to read a public statement from Ocalan for the first time in four years is an attempt to lure HDP voters away from CHP.

A Struggling Economy

The Turkish economy is valued around [\\$860 billion](#) and until 2017 had been growing three to four percent a year. But in 2017 – 2018, Turkey faced a currency crisis and was officially in recession by the end of [2018](#), the first time since the Global Financial Crisis. Excessive government spending, public and private sector reliance on foreign debt, and Erdogan's pressure on the Central Bank to keep interest rates low gave rise to a depreciating lira, which fell 25 percent in 2017 and another 37 percent in the first eight months of 2018. The decline in the lira was not helped by the US doubling tariffs on Turkey's aluminium (to 20 percent) and steel (to 50 percent) in [August](#), in response to Turkey refusing to release imprisoned US Pastor, Andrew Brunson.

[In response to the crashing lira](#), the [Central Bank](#) raised interest rates on May 23 and June 7, but not enough. Instead, it imposed a limit of holding foreign currency to 50 percent of all shareholder equity in a bank (later reduced to 25 percent) and raised the Turkish lira transaction limit for commercial lenders from 7.2 billion to 20 billion. These and other measures, along with [Albayrak's](#) 'recommendations' that banks keep credit channels open and classify any default as *force majeure* were designed to allow further borrowing in lira. This benefitted companies run by Erdogan's cronies but not banks. Other measures included reducing a withholding tax on lira deposits from 10 percent to [zero](#), increasing tax on foreign currency [deposits](#) from 18 percent to 20



percent, and announcing that those who published misleading information on the economy could be fined or sentenced to between two and five years in prison. Finally, in September 2018, the Central Bank was forced to raise the standard interest [rate](#) from 17.75 percent to [24 percent](#), resulting in a wave of highly indebted construction companies filing for [bankruptcy](#). Erdogan decreed [all property sales](#) had to be transacted in Turkish lira, and continued to blame foreign conspiracies for Turkey's economic [woes](#).

Back in 2017, foreign owned assets in Turkey had reached [\\$684 billion](#). Since then many [multinational companies](#) including retailers ZARA, Mango, H&M, German energy company EWE AG, Lancia, Tesco, SwissAir and the Canadian hi-tech SOTA, and the credit rating agency Fitch, have relocated their factories and offices because of economic instability, or staff being caught up in the purge. [Foreign direct investment](#) in Turkey declined by a third between 2017 and 2018. By 2019 Turkey's lack of foreign currency reserves was being masked by up to 100 percent because the Central Bank had been borrowing from Commercial banks. In reality, the Central Bank had \$16 billion in foreign reserves in April 2019 when Turkey needs to pay back \$177 billion short-term [external debt](#) within the next 12 months.

There has been a dramatic rise in unemployment and inflation. Turkey's official unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent in April 2019, with a 27 percent unemployment rate among people aged 15 to 24. More than 25 percent of all those unemployed are [university graduates](#). In reality the unemployment rate is higher one only has to search for a job and be [willing to start work](#) to be counted as employed. Meanwhile, between March 2018 and March 2019, people faced an annual inflation rate of 25 percent, with fresh fruit and vegetables rising [on average](#) 50 percent, and overall food prices rising [30 percent](#), with prices affected by the falling lira as Turkey having become a net importer of [food](#).⁵ Residential electricity prices also rose, in September, by [nine percent](#), and after the municipal elections, by [37 percent](#).

With the average rent being 1,000 liras a month, those particularly impacted are the 60 percent of all wage earners on 1,600 liras or less a month. Their wages have decreased by 42 percent between January and September 2018, from \$426 to [\\$246](#) based on 6.5 liras to the US dollar. People are selling gold to make ends meet.

To tame inflation, in 2018, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak announced cuts in prices of at least 10 percent of all goods included in Turkey's measurement of inflation (already altered to cover real inflation) and put a hold on electricity and gas prices until the end of 2018. The government also set up sales points that allowed producers to sell direct to consumers. Customers queue for hours to buy basic [foods](#).

⁵ Turkey's domestic food production has declined as a result of increased competition after [Turkey](#) cut tariffs in the 1980s, with farmers also being subject to a five fold increase in the price of agricultural inputs in the last 15 years. Destitute farmers have been selling their small land parcels and moving to urban centres.



Added to the economic squeeze, workers' conditions in Turkey are among the ten worst in the world according to the International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index for 2018. In the first seven months of 2018, there were 1,103 [workplace deaths](#). On September 14, workers building Istanbul's new airport, which will be the biggest in the world, went on strike. One of their grievances was that dozens had died due to unsafe working conditions. *Cumhuriyet* newspaper reported that [400 people](#) had died and that 500 workplace accidents have been occurring each week at the airport. The Ministry of Transport admitted to 27 deaths. Four hundred strikers were arrested, 15 were released awaiting trial, [24 were formerly arrested and remanded](#) and prosecutors wanted to charge another 27, including two union [leaders](#) for contravening protest laws, resisting police and damaging property. Pro government media called them 'terrorists'. By December 2018, strikes against dismissals and unpaid or partially paid [salaries](#) were occurring across 16 sectors.

In sum, Turkey faced a currency crisis in 2018, and in 2019 faces a [debt crisis](#), to which EU, [Spanish, French, Italian and German banks](#) have a [\\$180 billion exposure](#). To prepare, Turkey brought back its gold held in the US Federal Reserve in 2018, suggesting Turkey might default.

In the 2019 budget, some ministry budgets were cut and others increased. For example, the budget of the Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology was cut by 56 percent but the budget for the presidential office was raised [2.3 times](#) to \$529.6 million and the budget for the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), was raised from \$1.3 to \$2.1 billion, making its budget exceed that of [29 other state institutions](#) including the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, MIT and Energy and Natural [Resources](#). The increased budget for the *Diyanet* follows a 2017 regulation that requires the *Diyanet* to have equal decision making with the Ministry of Education in all fields, including school curricula. Already the number of religious schools has increased from 450 in 2002 to 4,112 in [2017](#). The *Diyanet* also funds imams, mosques and religious schools in more than [100](#) countries.

Other headwinds are Turkey losing preferential US trade status in March, Turkey's six-month waiver for US sanctions on Iran expiring on May 2, and possible US sanctions on Turkey if it continues to buy Iranian oil or Russia's S-400 missile defence system. If Turkey decides to abide by US sanctions against Iran it will then face an extra cost in purchasing oil from elsewhere, unless it is from the KRI.

It is unknown how much Turkey's military operations inside Turkey, Syria, and the KRI have cost Turkish taxpayers. Given any expansion of military operations will be more costly, the country's need for foreign currencies and investment, and rising cost to purchase oil in the face of US sanctions on Iran could be used as levers to curb Turkey's military operations.



The Purge: Ongoing dismissals, arrests and imprisonments

Between mid 2016 and the end of 2018, Turkey dismissed 175,000 public service employees, including more than 15,000 military personnel; 33,500 teachers and 31,500 police officers, with only 6,000 of those dismissed having been allowed to return to [work](#). In the same period the authorities arrested 402,000 people, of whom an estimated 80,000 remain in prison, including [17,000 women](#). These people face charges or have been convicted of being linked to the Gulen Movement or PKK, making propaganda against the state or insulting the president. In 2017 alone, [20,539 investigations](#) were opened into those who had allegedly insulted the president, a crime that carries a prison sentence of up to four years. In December 2018, two veteran comedians were detained for saying that Turkey had become polarised, with one daring to infer that Erdogan's end will be that of other dictators. They were released under conditions, and await [trial](#).

An [Amnesty International Report](#) released in April 2018 documented the human rights abuses as a result of the purge that has devastated the public sector and civil society. It provides different figures for those dismissed, awaiting trial and in prison to those given above, but all sources indicate extraordinary numbers when only 8,561 military personnel are thought to have participated in the failed coup. Critics claim dismissals and imprisonment of the security forces is more about Islamising these forces, with many who were dismissed being pro-NATO and [pro-American](#).

The Amnesty Report noted that 180 media outlets had been closed down, as had more than 1,300 associations and organisations, including the Contemporary Lawyers Association (ÇHD) and Lawyers for Freedom Association (ÖHD). One hundred and ten lawyers had restrictions placed on their legal practises and 265 academics had been prosecuted for terrorism after signing a petition calling for peace between Kurds and the Turkish State in 2015. They are among 6,000 academics that have been dismissed from their university jobs, including 378 who signed the peace petition.

Amnesty International highlighted that Turkey was breaking international covenants to which it is a party with a purge that went against the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly; the protections of human rights defenders; Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) regarding arbitrary arrests, detentions and imprisonments, as well as the European Convention on Human Rights and other relevant agreements. The report explained that many were arrested for links with terrorists, but that the definition of terrorism in Turkey is broad. For instance, Article 7/2 of Turkey's Anti-Terrorism Law criminalizes speech deemed 'making propaganda for an armed terrorist organization' or suggests an individual is an 'enemy of the state'. Not in the report is that the AKP government employs an estimated [12,000 trolls](#) that search the internet for critical statements about Erdogan and Turkey. In one week in June 2018 legal action commenced against 306 people for spreading terrorist propaganda on [social media](#).



Significantly, the report failed to mention that 11 elected HDP parliamentarians had lost their seats in parliament, 16 HDP parliamentarians had been given prison sentences, and [100 elected](#) pro-Kurdish co-mayors (in all Kurdish-majority districts, a man and a woman are elected as co-mayors) had been arbitrarily dismissed since 2016 and that 60 of these mayors remained in prison as of April 2018.

The TSK has been gutted by the post-coup purge and will take years to cover its pre-coup capacities. In November 2018, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar reported that 150 Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) generals, 7,595 officers, 5,723 NCOs, 1,261 contract sergeants and 424 civilian staff — a total of 15,153 personnel — [had been discharged](#) as part of the anti-Gülen campaign, although 323 [mostly low-ranking officers](#) had been reinstated. Another 15,000 were under investigation. The Defence Ministry has sole discretion in the discharge [process](#). At the end of January 2019, a Gülenist website claimed 17,844 military officers, 16,409 cadets,⁶ 33,417 police⁷ and 851 foreign service staff had been dismissed. Since the start of the purge on 27 July 2016 until September 2017, Turkey lost 50 percent of its air force combat pilots, 40 percent of its generals and 20 percent of its commissioned officers on allegations that these people were linked to the Gülen Movement and/or the failed coup. Between July 2018 and January 2019, another 1,076 TSK personnel were [suspended](#).

A lack of transparency in Turkey's investigative processes is highlighted by the investigation into the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey in December 2016 taking 698 days to complete while the investigation into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul took [47 days](#). Trials are no better. Covering 71 trials of lawyers, academics and artists in over 10 provinces in the second half of 2018, a study by the Turkey-based Media and Law Studies Association and the International Press Institute found that prosecutors used news reports, anonymous witness statements, footage of defendants attending press briefings and footage of demonstrations as evidence for people linked to terrorists or who were charged with having defamed the [president](#). Multiple submissions about unfair trials to the European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR) have been rejected, on the basis that domestic remedies have yet to be [exhausted](#).

Turkey's prisons are filled with political prisoners. They come from all walks of life. [Those](#) convicted of being linked to the Gülen Movement since the failed coup of 2016 include:

- 705 judges and prosecutors;
- 78 members of the Supreme Court;
- 26 members of the Council of State;
- Two members of the Constitutional Court;
- 51 local authorities;

⁶ The Tr724 website claimed 40,000 military personnel, including gendarmerie and military cadets, were dismissed between July 2016 and August 2018.

⁷ The Director of Public Security, Selami Altinok, claimed 22,987 police had been dismissed as of December 2017.



- 6,954 soldiers;
- 5,139 law enforcement officials;
- 116 staff members of the General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses;
- 6,587 teachers;
- 317 lawyers;⁸ and
- 398 doctors.

Turkey has become the world's top jailer of journalists. In May 2018, 182 journalists were in prison for being linked to a terrorist organisation, spreading terrorist propaganda or 'insulting' Erdogan. In early July 2018 [six journalists](#) received prison sentences of eight to 10.5 years, including [two](#) journalists, Sibel Hürtaş and Hayri Demir, who were sentenced for criticising Operation Olive Branch in Afrin on social media. It was thought pro-Erdogan journalists were safe, but in June 2018 an Izmir court sentenced Nagehan Alci, her husband and two other journalists to 105 days in prison for writing and broadcasting about a notorious torturer, Colonel Esat Oktay Yildiran, who served in Diyarbakir prison during the 1980s. In December 2018, [five journalists were given prison sentences](#): Ayşe Düzkan (18 months), Hüseyin Aykol (three years and nine months), and Hüseyin Bektaş, Mehmet Ali Çelebi and Ragıp Duran (each given 18 months). In January 2019, an [Istanbul Court](#) accepted a prosecutor's indictment against Necla Demir, the publisher of the Turkish news site *Gazete Karınca*, for making 'terrorist propaganda' in writing about the TSK offensive in Afrin and Turkey's airstrikes and ground offensives in the KRI. In late February, the Appeals Court upheld the convictions and sentences of 14 journalists and executives from *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, with those receiving less than five year sentences being Hakan Kara, Güray Öz, cartoonist Musa Kart, lawyer Mustafa Kemal Güngör, board member Önder Çelik, and accountant Emre İper, and those receiving sentences of more than five years being Editor-in-Chief Murat Sabuncu, and journalist/HDP MP, Ahmet Şıkas, well as journalists Hikmet Çetinkaya, Orhan Erinç, Akın Atalay and Aydın [Engin](#). On May 8, Cansu Pişkin was sentenced to 10 months in prison for publishing the name of a prosecutor and by doing so, allegedly making him a target for terrorism, despite at least two other newspapers also publishing his [name](#).

Since the coup, 80 authors have faced court, mostly on terrorism charges, and 29 publishing houses have been closed down. Turkey's remaining publishing houses fear closure and their staff fear imprisonment if they publish books about Kurdish issues or if the book is critical of Erdogan. Authors who have been denied publication or who have experienced an indefinite delay in their books being published include Hasan Cemal, Oya Baydar, Nedim Gürsel and Nurcan Baysal. Baskin Oran claims post-coup censorship is worse than after the military coups of 1971 and [1980](#).

⁸ Another source claims that 216 lawyers have each been sentenced for up to 11 years among 1500 lawyers who have been prosecuted for various 'crimes' including defending those charged with being linked to the coup or the Gulen Movement.



After the nation-wide elections on 24 June 2018, the purge continued. Although [14 students](#) from Bogazici University in Istanbul, charged with 'spreading terror propaganda' for protesting Turkey's military offensive in Afrin, were freed pending trial, [on June 29](#), the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in Ankara issued arrest warrants for four former police commissioners and 44 former police officers. In the first week of July, [885 people](#) were detained for alleged links with the Gulen Movement and [271 arrest warrants](#) were issued for TSK personnel, including ten serving colonels. Also in July 2018, another [18,632 civil servants](#) (including 9,000 police officers, 6,000 military personnel, and hundreds of teachers and academics) were dismissed from their jobs and had their passports revoked and 1,500 retired military and police officers had their ranks annulled, which deprives them of their pensions and passports. Another 12 NGOs, three newspapers and one television station were shut down.

By 10 July 2018, 661 aggravated life sentences, 888 life sentences and 718 sentences of between one and 20 years were given to people convicted of links to the failed coup or Gulen Movement. These figures include an [Istanbul court](#) sentencing 116 Air Force Academy cadets on May 25 to life in prison for 'attempting to overthrow the constitutional order'. The families of the imprisoned cadets, many of whom surrendered after causing no harm on the night of the coup, protested the handing down of life sentences to 19 and 20 year olds.

Although the two-year state of emergency was lifted on 18 July 2018, new decrees and laws replaced it. Hence, the aforementioned statistics exclude:

- On July 12, [life sentences](#) given to 72 people, and prison sentences of between 15 and 17 years for another 27 people;
- In September, the arrest of 85 soldiers, including three colonels, two lieutenant colonels, and five pilots for allegedly having links with the Gulen Movement, with another 25 suspects facing [arrest](#);
- In October, arrest warrants being issued for 55 active duty members of the military, 19 former military members and 22 civilians for alleged links with the Gulen [Movement](#), with other arrest warrants being issued for 36 military officers. Two admirals were sentenced to [life in prison](#);
- In November, arrest warrants issued for [195 TSK personnel across 21 provinces](#) for being connected to the coup and another 53 arrest warrants for people suspected of using ByLock, an encrypted smartphone messaging app commonly used by members of the Gulen movement. Of these 53, 37 were immediately detained. Arrest warrants across several provinces were issued for another 94 people, with police detaining 49 of them on alleged links with the [Gulen Movement](#); and prosecutors ordered the arrest of another 103 soldiers, immediately detaining 74 across 31 provinces for alleged links with the attempted [coup](#).
- In the first 10 days of December, [Turkish police detaining 696 people](#) and fellow gendarmerie troops arrested 40 members of Istanbul's gendarmerie command for alleged links with the Gulen Movement. Ankara prosecutors issued arrest warrants for 87 former members of the Turkish Air Force, 41 of them being immediately detained on charges of being connected with the



failed coup. Meanwhile, İzmir prosecutors issuing arrest warrants for 62 prison guards in an investigation into prison staff connections with the Gulen Movement, with 53 of them being [detained](#); and [Ankara police detaining 12 people](#) including the journalist, Kenan Kirkaya;

- In January 2019, life sentences being given to at least 58 generals and another 629 senior [officers](#), as reported by the Ministry of Justice, with another 192 arrests related to the failed [coup](#) and 70 people arrested across 21 provinces on suspected links with the [Gulen Movement](#). Within days, another 63 arrest warrants were issued, 46 of them for helicopter pilots on active duty.
- In April 2019, arrest warrants issued for 210 military personnel from the air, marine and land forces, gendarmerie and coast guard, including five colonels, seven lieutenant colonels, 14 majors and 33 [captains](#), all accused of being linked to the Gulen Movement.
- In May 2019, prosecutors ordered the detention of 61 people, including more than 20 military personnel, as well as doctors and students, for alleged links with the Gulen Movement, the only 'evidence' for 29 of them being they had the smartphone application [ByLock](#).

Arrests and imprisonment of Kurds are described in 'Kurds and the Turkish State'. Some prominent non-Kurdish cases that need to be highlighted are:

- Former CHP parliamentarian and author of nine books, [Eren Erdem](#), becoming the second CHP parliamentarian to be imprisoned (with Enis Berberoglu remaining in prison). In July, Erdem was detained on charges of 'aiding a terrorist organisation', having published police reports and wire taps that exposed the Turkish State's tolerance of ISIS operations inside Turkey. He had published 10,000 ISIS addresses that were not followed up.
- As of 17 October 2018, 335 academics had been put on trial on charges of 'propagandizing for a terrorist organization.' They are among 1,128 academics who signed a petition in January 2016 titled 'We will not be party to this crime' calling for a peaceful solution to Kurdish issues in [Turkey](#). Many others had been removed from their posts. On 11 December 2018, an Istanbul court sentenced one of Turkey's top neurologists, 79-year old Gencay Gursoy, to two years and three months for having signed the [petition](#). An order to investigate another 170 signatories was withdrawn at the end of [December](#).
- In November, 13 individuals were taken into [custody](#), including Turgut Tarhanli, a renowned academic on human rights law and dean of the Faculty of Law at Istanbul Bilgi University, and 12 intellectuals and activists, many being staff of the [Anatolian / Mesopotamia Culture Centre](#). All were arrested for their links to the cultural rights activist and businessman, [Osman Kavala](#), who had been in prison for a year without charge. All were accused of wanting to overthrow the government because of their participation in the [Gezi Park protests](#) in 2013, which opposed a shopping centre being built in Gezi Park. Following a strong European response to these arrests, within 36 hours all but one was released, although all have to report to the police once a [week](#). In March 2019, indictments sort life sentences for 16 Gezi protesters on the basis



Kurdish Lobby Australia

- that they intended to force the then Prime Minister Erdogan to resign, or wanted to incite a civil war or a [coup](#).
- On November 28, Erdogan's presidential office demanded that parliamentary immunity be stripped from another 12 HDP parliamentarians, leader of CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and seven other CHP MPs (Istanbul MPs Mustafa Sezgin Tanrikulu, Mahmut Tanal and Aykut Erdogdu, Burdur MP Mehmet Goker, Edirne MP Okan Gaytancioglu, Tokat MP Kadim Durmaz and Antalya MP Cetin Osman Budak).
 - On 18 January 2019, Murat Arslan, former assistant judge to the Constitutional Court, rule of law activist, head of Turkish judicial association YARSAV, and recipient of the Vaclav Havel Prize for Human Rights in [2017](#), was sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly having links with the Gulen Movement, the evidence being that he had downloaded the ByLock app. He had already spent two years in an overcrowded prison, during which time, the testimonies of witnesses and the presiding judges kept changing.
 - In late March 2019, the Istanbul chief prosecutor ordered the detention of 144 people for alleged links with the Gulen Movement. The people included 108 lawyers on active duty and nine judges or prosecutors, eight of whom had already been dismissed from their [positions](#). Dismissed lawyers who are not in prison are banned from practising law. A [Human Rights Watch report](#) released in April 2019 documents the imprisonment of lawyers convicted of links with the Gulen Movement or PKK after they were hired to defend another accused of one of these links.
 - In early May 11 leading doctors in the Turkish Medical Association were given prison sentences of between 20 months and three years three months for 'inciting hatred and hostility' after publicly condemning Turkey's invasion of Afrin and claiming 'war is a man-made public health [problem](#)'.

Turkish prisons are notorious for being overcrowded, and for systematic abuse of prisoners, with prison doctors not reporting evidence of abuse for fear of losing their jobs. In fact, Decree No. 667, issued on 23 July 2016, grants immunity from prosecution to all law enforcement officers. A report compiled by the [European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CPT\)](#) based on investigators visiting Turkish prisons and interviewing imprisoned foreign nationals in 2015, found no evidence of ill-treatment but sufficient evidence of overcrowding, poor hygiene, lack of ventilation and light, and either no or inadequate access to lawyers, along with the detention of unaccompanied minors. In July 2018, the Diyarbakır branch of [Turkey's Human Rights Association](#) (IHD) released its biannual report that included an assessment of the abuses occurring inside Turkish prisons in the first six months of 2018. The organisation found that 700 individuals below the age of 7 were in prison with their mothers, as were 44 individuals under the age of 18. There were 1,154 sick inmates that were not receiving medical treatment, including 402 in a critical condition. They also noted an increase in cases of violence against female inmates.

Back on 24 September 2018, MHP again put forward an amnesty law for all political prisoners but AKP blocked it. On 14 November 2018, the parliament passed a law that



[strips the right of doctors and dentists to practise medicine for 450 days](#) if they have been dismissed from their job because of a Special Decree, or if they do not pass a security investigation.

Kurds and the Turkish State

Erdogan and other politicians in Turkey have a much-repeated mantra: that they have no issue with Kurds, only PKK. There is much evidence to contradict this claim including the dismissal and imprisonment of elected Kurdish parliamentarians, mayors, members of pro-Kurdish political parties and organisations; pro-Kurdish NGOs being shut down and books about Kurds and Kurdistan being [banned](#), as well as ongoing military operations in east Turkey and north Syria that are enforcing demographic changes.

Arrests and imprisonments

HDP claims 10,000 HDP members have been imprisoned since 2015. Since January 2018, the following cases show the Turkish State's harsh crackdown of Kurds' peaceful political activities.

January 2018:

- HDP parliamentarian, Leyla Guven, was arrested and imprisoned for voicing her opposition to Turkey's invasion of Afrin. A court ordered her release in June, but this was overturned when a new arrest warrant was [issued](#). On November 7, at her court appearance in Diyarbakir she announced she was going on an indefinite [hunger strike](#) in protest against Abdullah Ocalan's continued isolation, and no access to lawyers since 2011. On 12 January 2019, Abdullah Ocalan's brother was allowed to visit him in prison, with family members having been blocked from visits since 2016. On 25 January, a Diyarbakir court ordered Leyla Guven was to be [released](#) as her health had deteriorated from being on a hunger strike for [78 days](#). She continues her hunger strike outside the prison. By May 2019, 7,000 people around the world were participating in the [hunger strike](#), 3,000 of them inside 92 Turkish [prisons](#). After seven on hunger strike committed suicide in the space of a [week](#), HDP and PKK called an end to the protest, but the hunger strike continues.

July 2018:

- An elected Kurdish co-mayor for Siirt, [Tuncer Bakirhan](#), who had been in prison since November 2016, was sentenced to ten years on charges of being a member of a terrorist organisation and spreading terrorist propaganda;
- At least [16 people](#) were detained for alleged links with PKK and the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in a raid on a HDP headquarters in Istanbul;
- The recently elected HDP MP for Zonguldak province was [detained](#), as were [16 others at a HDP office](#) in an Istanbul district, with [eight going to prison](#) on charges deemed 'confidential'.



August 2018:

- Turkish police detained a dozen Kurds from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP), including the co-mayor of Kömür in Adıyaman province, and senior members of HDP across several provinces.
- At least [50 people were detained by police](#) after police used tear gas at the Saturday Mothers sit-in in Istanbul's central Galatasaray Square. Among those attacked was Istanbul HDP MP Huda Kaya. Saturday Mothers had gathered each Saturday since May 1995, asking for information and demanding justice for their relatives who have 'disappeared'. Riot police and water cannon again blocked the gathering of 300 mothers on September 1. Minister of Interior Suleyman Soylu accuses them of being linked to [PKK](#);
- Former HDP parliamentarian, Leyla Birlik, [fled Turkey and applied for asylum](#) in Greece, having been in prison since November 2016 for allegedly distributing terrorist propaganda.

September 2018:

- An Istanbul court sentenced former HDP leader [Selahattin Demirtas](#) to four years and eight months in prison for 'making propaganda for a terrorist organisation' in his speech at Newroz 2013. He has yet to be sentenced for other charges. On November 20, the [ECHR](#) ruled that Selahattin Demirtas' two-year pre-trial detention could no longer be justified, and that it was [politically motivated](#). Based on the ruling, Demirtas' lawyer, Mahsuni Karaman, applied for his release at an Ankara criminal court. The court dismissed the application, and the matter was submitted to the [Constitutional Court](#) in Turkey, which also dismissed the case. In December 2018, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Federica Mogherini, criticized the Turkish government for Demirtas' imprisonment at a [European Parliament Plenary Session](#) for Human Rights saying, 'The independence of Turkey's judiciary is being undermined.'
- Former HDP parliamentarian [Sırrı Süreyya Önder](#) was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison for 'making propaganda for a terrorist organisation'.
- A Van court sentenced the twice elected but deposed mayor of Van, Bekir Kava, and 12 other local politicians to between seven and nine years for allegedly being members of a terrorist [organisation](#).
- Five students from Amasya University were charged with 'propagandising for a terrorist organization' because they [followed HDP parliamentarians on social media](#).
- International observers were denied access to the court when former HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ faced charges of supporting terrorism as a result of speeches she made at Newroz in 2015, in which she condemned the Turkish State's inaction when ISIS attacked Kobani. Ankara prosecutors are pursuing an aggravated life sentence, which could mean living out her days in solitary confinement. She is a Turk, and therefore a thorn in the side of a state determined to wage war on [Kurds](#).
- An Istanbul court sentenced the Kurdish musician and singer, [Ferhat Tunc](#), to one year, 11 months for supporting a terrorist organisation because of his social media posts supporting Kurds fighting ISIS in Kobani.



- The Kurdish film director [Giyasettin Sehir](#) was arrested on the same charges.

. October 2018 (The start of the campaign for municipal elections):

- An Ankara prosecutor demanded the revocation of immunity from prosecution of another 12 HDP parliamentarians for disseminating terrorist propaganda due to their criticism of the Turkish army offensive in Afrin and sought the same for three CHP parliamentarians for remarks considered insulting to [Erdoğan](#).
- The Ministry of the Interior dismissed 559 village guards in eastern Turkey because of alleged links with [PKK](#).
- Between [90 and 158](#) HDP members, including politicians and eight journalists across eight cities, were [arrested](#) on unknown charges. One journalist, Abdurrahman Gök, had photographed the moment when police shot and killed a university student, Kemal Kurkut, at the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır in 2017;
- Another 40 Kurdish activists and party members were arrested in Van, Istanbul, Bursa, Sakarya, and Antalya. It was thought that the crackdown occurred ahead of the municipal elections in March;
- [Eight former HDP parliamentarians](#), as well as HDP officials and human rights activists were arrested, including former parliamentarians, Ibrahim Binici, Savak Onzali and Ali Riza Yurtsever, the last also a member of Turkey's Human Rights Association (IHD).

November 2018:

- HDP parliamentarian for Gaziantep, Mahmut Togrul, was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for disseminating terrorist propaganda in speeches he made in 2016. He is one of 16 HDP MPs given prison sentences since [2016](#).
- A German Kurdish singer, Hozan Cane, was sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of belonging to a terrorist organisation because she sung at a HDP election rally during a visit from [Germany](#).
- Kurdish film director, [Kazim Oz](#), was arrested on charges of terrorism.
- At least [38 HDP administrators and members, union members and lawyers](#) were arrested across five provinces. Those arrested include former HDP parliamentarian for Kars, Mulkiye Birtane, on charges of being linked to PKK.
- Another eight HDP members were taken into custody for participating in a district congress, and thus spreading propaganda for an illegal [organisation](#).
- 15 people in Agri were arrested for alleged links with PKK.
- Military operations began in 19 Diyarbakir [villages](#);
- On November 28, Erdogan's presidential office demanded Turkey's National Assembly strip the parliamentary immunity of HDP co-chair, Pervin Buldan and another 11 HDP parliamentarians. These were Batman MPs Feleknas Uca and Ayse Acar Basaran, Agri MPs Dirayet Dilan Tasdemir and Berdan Ozturk, Diyarbakir MPs, Imam Tascier and Garo Paylan, Sanliurfa MP Nimetullah Erdogmus, Kars MP Ayhan Bilgen, Van MP Bedia Ozgokce Ertan, Gaziantep MP Mahmut Togrul and Ankara MP Filiz Kerestecioglu Demir. All are likely to face



charges of terrorism, spreading terrorist propaganda or criticising the [president](#).

December 2018:

- A Turkish court ordered red notices for the [arrest of 12 suspects](#), including three senior members of PKK – Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık and Duran Kalkan - for a June 2016 terrorist attack on two riot police transports in central Istanbul that killed 12 people, including six police officers, claimed by the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks, a radical offshoot of the PKK.
- Within days of the issuing of these red notices, police raided HDP offices in Urfa and arrested 47 people, and in Ankara, 12 journalists and HDP members were detained. The HDP headquarters in Diyarbakir and Batman were also raided and 53 people were arrested, [most being women](#). A few days later in Diyarbakir another [49 HDP members](#) were arrested;
- A Sirnak court gave former HDP parliamentarians Osman Baydemir and Leyla Birlik an 18 month prison sentence each for ‘violating the law on meetings and demonstrations’ in participating in protests in 2015 against Turkey’s declaration of curfews and military offenses on a dozen Kurdish towns. Birlik was previously sentenced to 21 months in jail for ‘insulting’ the president. In October 2015, Turkish Special Forces killed her brother-in-law, Hacı Lokman Birlik, in Sirnak and dragged his corpse behind an armoured vehicle with a rope that was tied around his [neck](#).
- The Turkish Supreme Court re-confirmed the sentence of seven years and six months imprisonment for former HDP parliamentarian, Idris Baluken, who was among the 11 HDP parliamentarians originally imprisoned in November 2016. Baluken has been convicted of ‘membership of a terror organization’.
- A Turkish Appeals Court confirmed the sentence of three years and six months for former HDP parliamentarian, [Sırrı Süreyya Önder](#), because he praised Ocalan in a speech in March 2013. Onder had worked on the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK between 2013 and 2015.
- A Kurdish HDP politician, Abuzer Kısa, was detained.
- Ten Kurdish civil servants were dismissed from their positions and detained (Deniz Aydın, Murat Çeşme, Gülnaz Bozkurt, Simge Aksan, Mahmut Konuk, Özge Çırpan, Burak Aydemir, Selvi Polat, Mehmet Dersulu and İlker Işık).
- Demirtas’ hearing for ‘insulting the president’ was postponed to March 27, [2019](#). It has yet to be heard.
- In Van, a Turkish court issued a 15 months prison sentence for Yadisen Karabulak, the Co-Chair of HDP Van for clicking ‘like’ on a Facebook post. The court charged her with ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’;
- Eight Kurdish students in Dersim were detained for having ties with Kurdish political parties.
- In Urfa, a Turkish court sentenced dismissed Kurdish co-mayor of Halfeti district, Mustafa Bayram, to nine years 4.5 months for ‘membership of a terrorist organization’. Four other Kurds were each given prison sentences of between eight and nine years in prison.
- Former HDP parliamentarian for Izmir, Ertuğrul Kürkçü, was sentenced to two years in prison for spreading terrorist propaganda in a speech he delivered



during Newroz celebrations in Iğdir in [2016](#). Two other lawsuits were filed against Kürkçü in relation to three speeches he made in Mardin and Diyarbakır in 2012 and 2015 – 2016. If these lawsuits are successful, he faces between 13.5 and 33 years in [prison](#).

January 2019:

- On January 18, three Peace Mothers, also called ‘Saturday Mothers’ were arrested for unknown reasons. The women were aged in their seventies.
- Another 11 HDP and Democratic Regions Party (DBP) [officials](#) were arrested;
- Across seven provinces a candidate for mayor of Cizre and 21 female members of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party were detained, most of them being accused of having links with PKK, a number of them being candidates running in the municipal elections in [March](#);

February 2019

- Former mayor of Diyarbakır, [Gultan Kisanak, and former HDP parliamentarian, Sebahat Tuncel](#), both having been in custody since 2016, were convicted of belonging to a terrorist organisation and disseminating terrorist propaganda for speeches they made at rallies. Kisanak was sentenced to 14 years and three months. Tuncel was sentenced to 15 years.
- Police detained 735 people for attending demonstrations in support of the hunger strike protesting Abdullah Ocalan’s isolation. In Hakkari the police arrested nine HDP members and Kurdish activists and a Kurdish lawmaker from Diyarbakır, Saliha Aydeniz, was hospitalized after being attacked by police. At the end of February more HDP members were arrested.
- Police detained 735 people for attending demonstrations in support of a hunger strike protesting Abdullah Ocalan’s isolation.
- Turkish authorities arrested more HDP members, confiscating their cell phones and computers, including five HDP members for having joined the hunger strike.

March 2019

- At [Newroz celebrations](#) 110 people were arrested in Diyarbakır and at least 38 people were arrested in Istanbul, some being minors. Some reasons for the arrests were individuals were wearing red, yellow and green or T-shirts bearing the word ‘Kurdistan’ or ‘Kobani’.
- A day before the election 60 HDP candidates in the towns of Istanbul, Adana, Van, Iğdir, and in Sanliurfa province were arrested on unspecified or terrorist-related [charges](#).



Armed conflict with the PKK in Turkey

Historically, the Republic of Turkey denied the existence of Kurds and banned the words 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan', the Kurdish language, and all pro-Kurdish political parties and organisations, and strongly suppressed numerous uprisings. After 60 years of oppression the PKK took up an armed struggle in 1984.

During the conflict, far more Kurds have been killed than security forces, which prompted the PKK to enter a number of unilateral ceasefires from the 1990s, until finally the AKP government agreed to a bilateral ceasefire between 2013 and 2015. Erdogan's leniency towards Kurdish issues enabled the establishment of HDP in 2012. But HDP's achievements in the national elections in June 2015 prevented the AKP forming a government on its own and within a month of the elections, Erdogan called an end to the bilateral ceasefire with the PKK.

The State's military response to PKK and Syrian-Kurd inspired youth barricading city neighbourhoods and demanding autonomy, resulted in too many civilians being killed and too much destruction of the neighbourhoods. Consequently, in 2016, the PKK and its armed wing, the People's Defence Forces (HPG), took the fight back to attacking TSK and police checkpoints, bases and vehicles mostly outside urban centres. In most cases when innocent civilians were killed, PKK apologised, but its actions against security, police and State-hired village guards are [classified](#) as [terrorist](#) acts by most sources. The Turkish State also blamed PKK for other attacks that targeted civilians in Western Turkish cities, some of which were claimed by a radical splinter group, the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), whose current ties to the PKK are unclear, or two leftist groups. However, with multiple sources apportioning blame of the same attack to different groups, and using different criteria to define a terrorist act, all statistics and attributions are questionable, even when a group claims responsibility.

While PKK's attacks in Turkey had noticeably declined by the end of 2018, whether as an outcome of Turkey's military operations, US pressure, PKK being focused on fighting ISIS in Syria, where Turkish officials claim [78 percent of all 17,000 PKK militants are located](#), or as an election strategy, the following highlights some PKK actions in Turkey and some of the circumstances surrounding them since KLA's last report on the matter in [May 2018](#).

On 11 [June 2018](#), the armed wing of PKK, the People's Defence Forces (HPG), claimed to have killed four TSK soldiers after the TSK launched an operation on the village of Derxust in the Lice district of Diyarbakir province. In response, TSK helicopters bombarded the village and ground forces detained villagers. Five days later, the HPG claimed that they conducted two attacks on TSK soldiers, killing two in one attack, and 14 in the other, resulting in Cobra helicopters strafing the area.

In July, TSK bombardments caused [90 fires in wooded mountains in 33 districts](#) around [Dersim city](#) in the province of Dersim (Tunceli). The fires burned throughout August and [September](#) because no official body acted to put them out. Across Turkey, [ecologists gathered to protest](#) the deliberate burning of the ancient forests.



On July 25, the [Diyarbakır governor](#) declared an indefinite curfew in eight villages in the Kulp district on the grounds that a military operation would be launched ‘to protect people’s lives and property’. On July 30, in Hakkari province, [HPG targeted Turkish military units](#) that were preparing for an operation in the Çarçela region of Yüksekova district, with the PKK claiming to have killed ‘dozens’ of Turkish soldiers in this and another action in Sidekan in the KRI. On July 31, a [roadside IED](#) in Yüksekova, where fighting was taking place, killed Nurcan Karakaya, and her 11-month-old son, as they travelled back from visiting Nurcan’s husband, a non-commissioned TSK officer. Their deaths were attributed to PKK, which was silent on the matter. The two were given a state funeral, at which Erdogan raised his wish to introduce the death penalty for PKK terrorists.

In August, TSK killed a number of [high profile PKK leaders](#), including [Ismail Ozden](#) in Sinjar, and in Turkey, Ibrahim Coban in Dersim, Yusuf Sungur and Serbest Gun in Sirnak, and [Baris Oner](#) in the Black Sea province of Gumushane. In September, Turkish authorities declared an indefinite curfew in 116 villages in Diyarbakir province, before launching a military [offensive](#). In the first week of October, following Turkish officials announcing that eight TSK soldiers had been killed in Batman, authorities [arrested](#) 137 suspected PKK militants and sympathisers, with Erdogan promising to wipe out all Kurds from Turkey living in the KRI.

In early September, yet another curfew was instituted in the Lice and Hazro districts of Diyarbakir. Armed vehicles blocked roads during airstrikes, and TSK shot at houses and arrested people they accused of harbouring [PKK terrorists](#). In late January Turkey announced a new curfew in 43 Kurdish villages in Bitlis ahead of [military operations](#), and in April, a HPG attack on a military installation near the border with Iraq killed four TSK soldiers. In response, the military launched an air operation in the district of Çukurca, afterwards claiming to have neutralised [20 PKK militants](#).

In April 2019, the [Human Rights Foundation of Turkey \(TİHV\)](#) reported that curfews had been declared at least 332 times in 50 districts across 11 provinces, including 12 urban neighbourhoods and 282 villages, between 16 August 2015 and 1 October 2018. In Diyarbakir province alone, 196 curfews had been declared by December 2018, this increasing to [351 curfews](#) and military operations by April 2019. The curfews and military operations have impacted the lives of 1,809,000 people.

According to Crisis Group, the number of confirmed [deaths](#) from the armed conflict between July 2015 and April 2019 are 223 individuals with unknown affiliations, 464 civilians, 1,144 Security forces and 2,499 PKK militants, although the Turkish government claims to have neutralised (killed, captured or surrendered) more than 10,000 PKK terrorists and Kurdish sources claim over 4,000 civilians have been killed by the TSK or another security force. Most deaths occurred between July 2015 and December 2016, in response to youth barricading urban neighbourhoods.



The goal of eliminating all PKK members and HPG fighters in Turkey, Syria and [Iraq](#) is not the sole reason for so many curfews, sieges and military offensives. These are also designed to eliminate or displace all those who have sympathy with PKK's aims, such as attaining language rights and regional autonomy within a democratic federation of Turkey. For instance, after military operations in seven urban centres in 2015 – 2016, people were not allowed to return because the state embarked on '[redevelopment](#)' of these neighbourhoods, which meant more houses were bulldozed. In Sur, the old centre of Diyarbakir city, an estimated 4,000 properties were demolished. This impacted 50,000 people. Yet the administrative court has rejected 700 people's challenge to the expropriation and settlement terms for their homes, and appeals to the Constitutional Court have been delayed.

Other measures are designed to prevent Kurds from having a voice. For instance, in 2015 new restrictions on publishing in the Kurdish language were introduced. This could be behind the Ministry of Health instructing Elazig Medical Park Hospital not to issue a health card in the Kurdish language in June 2018, despite the language being widely spoken and the health card being issued in 17 other languages, including English, German, French, Italian, Japanese, Dutch and [Albanian](#). To counteract such measures, in October 2018, HDP and eight other pro-Kurdish political parties⁹ announced the establishment of the Kurdish Language Protection and Development Platform to encourage people to use the Kurdish language and to work with the government to allow the Kurdish language to be used in education and the media, with the stated intention of making Kurdish an official language in [Turkey](#).

Throughout all the political and military crises, the co-founder and leader of PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, remains in solitary confinement on the prison island of Imrali, where he has spent the last 20 years. He has been allowed only two visits from his family since 2016, and had been denied access to his [lawyers](#) since [2011](#), despite playing a leading role in negotiations for the bilateral ceasefire and subsequent negotiations, and despite this being against international law and Turkey's own laws. After 810 requests by Ocalan's lawyers to visit him, with rejections including 'bad weather', 'broken boat', and 'State of Emergency', on May 2, two of Ocalan's lawyers were allowed a one hour visit, the first in eight years. It is thought reasons included that some hunger strikers were close to death and the US was applying pressure on Turkey to negotiate with Kurds in Syria, with Abdullah Ocalan seen as key to [negotiations](#). Then on May 6, for the first time in four years, Ocalan's lawyers were allowed to publicly read a statement from Ocalan calling for Kurds of Turkey and [Syria](#) to politically negotiate with the Turkish State, the statement in no way acknowledging Erdogan's refusal to negotiate before or after the statement was released. Observers speculated that Erdogan was trying to woo HDP voters away from CHP, or at least cause them to stay at home on the day of the Istanbul revote.

⁹ These parties are the Democratic Regions Party (DBP/DBK), the Freedom and Socialism Party (also called the Communist Party of Kurdistan or KKP), the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Bakur (PDK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party - Turkey (PDK-T), the People and Freedom Party, the Azadi (Freedom) Movement, the Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK) and the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK).



Armed conflict with the PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Turkey's Defence Minister Nrettin Canikli claimed that in 2018, [500 PKK](#) had been neutralised in the KRI. Since May 2018, [the Turkish – PKK conflict](#) inside the KRI has increased in intensity, with [Erdogan](#) determined to destroy PKK's Qandil headquarters, despite its reinforced concrete bunkers and moat of mountains, as well as cut PKK's supply lines into Turkey and Syria and neutralise all PKK in Iraq. In view of this, as well as an increase in airstrikes, in June 2018 about 1,500 TSK commandoes in armoured vehicles were sent in to reinforce [1,500 TSK soldiers at 11 military posts](#), the closest being [50 kilometres](#) from Qandil. As the TSK advanced, they frequently [clashed](#) with HPG, both sides incurring [casualties](#). For instance, on [June 22](#), the TSK claimed they had neutralised 87 PKK in the previous week but the PKK claimed they had suffered [no casualties](#) that week.

The problems are that Turkey's F-16s, assault helicopters and armed drones (all likely needing US clearance) have also killed [20 Iraqi Kurdish civilians](#) between January 2017 and January 2019, and along with clashes on the ground, have [damaged](#) roads and destroyed livestock, with PKK claiming that Turkey has used illegal [cluster bombs](#) on some villages, with an estimated 350 villages having to be evacuated. For instance, on 14 November 2018, Turkish airstrikes killed [three beekeepers](#) in Dohuk province. On December 13, [19 Turkish military jets](#) struck 'PKK' targets in the disputed district of Sinjar. Eight 'PKK' militants were killed. Other airstrikes on the same day targeted a refugee camp in [Makhmour](#), where 12,000 Kurds who escaped Turkey in the 1990s live. The airstrikes killed [four civilians inside the camp](#). Another [four civilians were killed](#) by Turkish airstrikes near the village of Shiladze in Dohuk province on January 23. Two of those killed had been out in the mountains tending their [bees](#). On [January 25](#) two relatives searching for two civilians who had yet to be found were killed by more Turkish airstrikes. In response to the six deaths, a peaceful protest of [600 people](#) was held in Shiladze in the Amedi region of Dohuk province on January 26 calling an end to both Turkey's and PKK's presence, and for the Government of Iraq and KRG to do something about the ongoing air and ground offensives. When protesters stormed a Turkish military base at Sirye [Turkish soldiers](#) fired on them, killing a 13-year old boy and 60-year old man and [wounding 15](#) others. In response, civilians arrested two Turkish soldiers and handed them to Kurdish security while the other soldiers [withdrew](#) between the protesters. Civilians then set fire to two Turkish [tanks](#). It was the first time Iraqi Kurds had stood up Turkey inside the KRI. Turkey claimed PKK was behind the incident, and the KRG promised to arrest the provocateurs, but also expressed sympathy for the families of the dead and called for an end to Turkish airstrikes, as did Baghdad. But Turkey vowed to increase its efforts to kill PKK in the [KRI](#) until there was no longer a PKK presence. More [airstrikes](#) caused more villages to be [evacuated](#).

Some Turkish Human Rights associations express concern for the safety of 'dozens' of TSK soldiers and others held prisoner by the PKK, with some having been held since 2015, yet the Turkish government and various organisations have done nothing about negotiating their [release](#).



International Responses

In 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report condemning [the brutality and human rights abuses of the Turkish military against Kurdish citizens](#) in its operations in south east Turkey. In May 2018, the [Permanent People's Tribunal](#) ruled that the Turkish military had committed war crimes against the Kurds in 2015 – 2016. In November 2018 the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) [determined](#) that it was wrong for the Council of Europe to list the PKK resistance group as a terrorist organisation, and in March 2019, a landmark ruling of the Belgian Court of Last Resort, in line with [two previous rulings of courts in Belgium](#) in 2016 and 2017, [ruled](#) that the PKK (in Turkey) [is a](#) 'party to an armed conflict' and not a 'terrorist organisation', with all three rulings declaring as a result that PKK should come under international humanitarian law rather than terrorism laws. The 2019 decision also meant that terrorism laws could no longer be used against Kurds in Belgium simply for supporting the PKK. These rulings call into question the continued classification of the PKK as a terrorist organisation by the US, UK and [Australia](#).

In 2018, [7,100 cases](#) against Turkey were filed in the ECHR. The ECHR has ruled on three cases, one related to the detention of two journalists, another to Selahattin Demirtas' detention and the third on the detention of Constitutional Court judge Alparslan Altan. In each case the court ruled that the detention/s were unlawful and that the individuals should be released. Turkey's courts rejected all three rulings despite Turkey having ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1954 and having accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the ECHR in [1990](#).

The ECHR has also rejected some cases. For instance, in February 2019 the ECHR rejected the case of [Orhan Tunc and Omer Elci](#) who were among 130 people trapped in basements and killed by the Turkish military in Cizre between December 2015 and February 2016. The ECHR asserted that the plaintiffs had not taken their case to Turkey's Constitutional Court so 'all domestic remedies had not been exhausted'. Another 33 cases related to Cizre are pending. Turkey settled 146 cases in [2018](#).

Despite numerous reports and rulings, and countries being divided about the classification of PKK, most countries have not changed their classification. The UN, UK, Russia, Israel and Switzerland do not classify the PKK as a terrorist organisation but the US, Australia, Canada, Germany and Spain continue to do so.

Turkey's relations with ISIS

It is ironic that PKK continues to be classified as a terrorist organisation by so many countries despite having saved many thousands of Yezidis in Sinjar from ISIS in August 2014 and having spent five years fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In contrast, the Turkish State's dealings with ISIS, these dealings including allowing ISIS members and ISIS suppliers to use Turkey as a transit in either entering or leaving Syria, members of Erdogan's own family having profited from buying ISIS oil and other activities, and MIT



sponsoring ISIS activities and recruiting [ISIS](#) and [HTS](#) fighters into Turkey's Islamist proxy armies, are documented by [academics](#), [think tanks](#), [media sources](#), and the release of emails by [WikiLeaks](#).

In Turkey itself, ISIS has warehouses, training bases, living quarters and special hospitals, their locations well known to local police, yet the available information on the number of ISIS members arrested in Turkey, and the duration of their detention compare unfavourably to those arrested for alleged links to the Gulen Movement, PKK or failed coup. For instance, in 2018, [3,038 ISIS suspects were arrested](#) but only 408 were sent to prison pending trial. With the defeat of the ISIS caliphate in March 2019, despite Turkey having built a high tech security wall along its border with Syria, ISIS still manages to enter and leave [Turkey](#). As a result of ISIS funds being transferred through Turkey, in April 2019, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned the Rawi (monetary exchange) Network, its central node in Turkey, and seven of its staff, for their role in transferring terrorist networks' [funds](#) across the Middle East, Africa and [Europe](#).

An even more damning indictment on Turkey's relationship with ISIS is contained in a [report](#) by the EU's official intelligence body EU INTCEN dated October 13, 2015. This report claims that evidence points to Turkish authorities having let ISIS kill 33 young people in Suruç on 20 July 2015, after these people had gathered to organise help for Kobani, and also having allowed ISIS to attack the peace march in Ankara on 10 October 2015. This attack killed between 109 and 125 people, depending on the source, and injured hundreds. The report claims that 'police had stopped monitoring ISIS bomber Yunus Emre Alagöz 11 days before his brother Yusuf Alagöz carried out the Suruç bombing and three months before he became one of two bombers involved in the Ankara attack. ... (Yet) 'security staff responsible for (such) severe oversights in the surveillance of the suspects from ISIS were not put on trial'. Gaziantep Police had an arrest warrant for Yunus Durmaz, another prime suspect in the Ankara attack, but did not arrest him. Even more damning, the report says of the Ankara massacre:

'Given the circumstances (buses full of demonstrators not being searched and a lack of police), there is reason to believe that in this case, forces within the AKP commissioned the Da'esh operatives.'

In contrast to the lenient treatment of ISIS members, who are often released within days of being detained, in March 2019, a Turkish Prosecutor demanded an aggravated life sentence for a school teacher, Mustafa İlhan, who informed security that trucks were carrying arms into Syria in November 2013 and February 2014. Two prosecutors had ordered the trucks to be searched. MIT detained at least 30 gendarmerie officers who had searched the trucks. MIT had then ordered three of the four trucks to cross into [Syria](#).

Most observers consider Turkey's invasions of the Euphrates Shield Triangle and the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin were more about preventing Kurds establishing a contiguous autonomous region along the border than fighting ISIS, and in fact,



distracted from the YPG and SDF's fight against ISIS, with these forces leaving the front during Turkey's Afrin offensive, and when Turkey attacked various towns during the Hajin offensive.

Syrian refugees in Turkey

[Interior Minister Suleyman Soyly](#) claims Turkey hosts more than 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection status and provides education for 916,074 Syrians. By January 2019, Turkey has granted citizenship to [76,000 Syrian refugees](#). Only 145,000 to [235,000 Syrian refugees live](#) in 25 camps. Turkey does not allow any visitors inside the camps, and there are allegations that women are being forced into prostitution in return for food. This leaves more than three million refugees to fend for themselves with many being exploited as [cheap labour](#). In the deteriorating economy, there have been increased tensions between Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees. For instance, on June 17, an argument in [Gaziantep](#) escalated into a clash involving knives and guns. Three people were killed and five were injured. Many Syrian refugees have lost their jobs, some only eat one meal a [day](#), they must move into smaller spaces and are no longer able to send remittances home to their families. Some are trying to escape to Europe and others are returning to Syria. [Soyly](#) claimed that nearly 295,000 Syrian refugees returned 'home' from Turkey in 2018, and this was made possible by Turkey's Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations. By April 2019 he claimed [321,000](#) Syrian refugees had returned to Turkey-occupied territory and Idlib. Erdogan has repeatedly maintained that Turkey intends to settle Syrian refugees in the Kurdish-majority belt of northeast Syria.

Turkey in Syria

Introduction

Turkey had two priorities in Syria. The first was to replace the Assad Regime with a Sunni Islamist government allied with Turkey. The second was to prevent Syrian Kurds and their allies establishing a contiguous region south of the Syrian – Turkish border from Afrin in the west to the Fysh Khabor border crossing into the KRI in the east, which by 2016 the Kurds and their allies were well on the way to achieving.

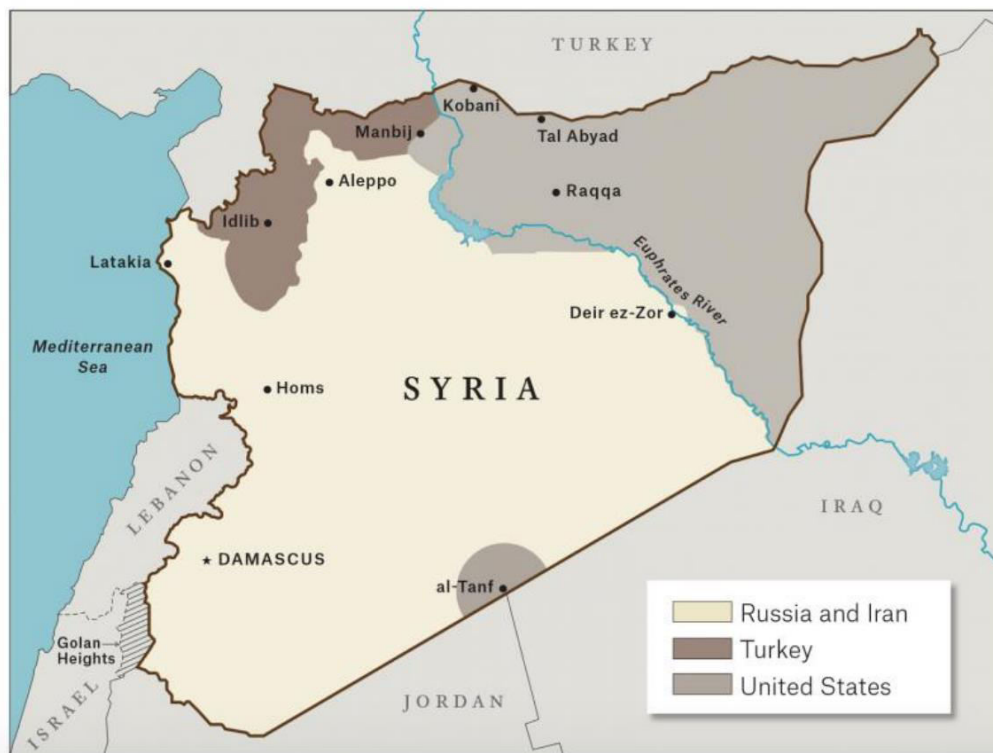
West of the Euphrates

By 2016 the tide had turned in the civil war, with the Turkey, Saudi, UAE and US-backed opposition suffering military losses after Russia militarily intervened in the war on the side of the Assad Regime in September 2015. UN negotiations had stalled and Russia convinced Turkey that if the opposition was to have any say in the future of Syria negotiations had to be fast tracked. This led Turkey to join Russia and Iran in January 2017 in what was to become known as the Astana process: a series of 12 meetings (to date) between the troika, the regime and vetted opposition. In doing so, Turkey was to betray the opposition both militarily and politically. Firstly, Russia and Iran tasked Turkey to convince the opposition to agree to four de-escalation zones

that ostensibly would result in ceasefires. In reality, the creation of these zones involved the surrender of three of them to the Assad Regime, with those unwilling to surrender being removed to the remaining zone of Idlib and parts of Hama and Aleppo, and Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo. In northern Aleppo, Turkey gave [multiple militias](#) comprising around 70,000 militants another task: to fulfil Turkey's second goal of curbing Syrian Kurds and their allies expanding or consolidating their zone of control west of the Euphrates. After Kurds and their allies captured Manbij, Turkey embarked on Operation Euphrates Shield in the Azaz – Jarablus -al-Bab triangle in 2016, and Operation Olive Branch in Afrin in 2018. By this time the US had ceased supporting opposition militia, and with these new developments, Gulf State support (except for Qatar) also ceased. Turkey was left to train, arm and pay these militias, that included Islamist groups, some with links to HTS and ISIS, with MIT also recruiting ISIS and HTS members. From these militias Turkey formed two proxy armies, one in northern Aleppo and one in Idlib.

Divide and Rule

Syria's zones of great-power influence, December 2018



[Map](#) of Syria showing zones of control, December 2018

Turkey's occupation of the Euphrates Shield Triangle and the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin was entrenched by Turkey's proxy armies, over whom Turkey has inadequate control, partly because they answer to their own commanders and partly because Turkey's salary payment of \$100 a month for each militant is limited to a pre-determined number of militants in each militia,¹⁰ comes with conditions such as

¹⁰ For instance, Turkey pays only [3,000 of 5,000](#) militants in *al-Jabhat al-Shamiya*.



coming under the command of one of Turkey's proxy armies, and has always been intermittent. Hence, militias supplement their income by looting, illegally taxing civilians and vehicles at checkpoints and border crossings, and kidnapping for ransom. This has led to frequent fighting between militias over the distribution of goods, and who controls which checkpoints and border crossings. Turkey did little to stop the infighting, and other activities, including the arbitrary arrest and shooting of civilians, bombardment and burning of houses and villages; the destruction of statues, non-Islamic places of worship and cemeteries; and the conversion of houses to [mosques](#), except to train police from the same militias and have the TSK conduct some limited actions. For instance, in [November](#), a curfew was declared in Afrin, Aziz, Jarablus and al-Bab for the TSK and its proxies to embark on a clean up of 'rogue' [elements](#). In [December](#), 200 Turkish Special Forces were dispatched to Afrin to curb fighting between *Jaysh al-Islam* and *Ahrar al-Sharqeh*. In response, some militants planted bombs in civilian houses in readiness to detonate them if the Turkish army [passed](#) by. The TSK-led operations had no impact on militant crimes, partly because TSK is generally supportive of their actions against Kurds. For instance, [MIT trains cells in northern Aleppo](#) to conduct assassinations, bomb attacks and other operations against the SDF further east and when Turkey-backed militants asked TSK if all Kurds from Afrin could be permanently expelled, TSK allegedly told them to wait, that less obvious methods were [required](#) to prevent an international backlash. One former Afrin resident observed, 'Turkey puts Islamic groups in the forefront to achieve its goals indirectly ... In order to evade legal responsibility and to increase hostility between (Syrian) Kurds and [Arabs](#).'

In other ways, Turkey has consolidated its occupation of these two enclaves by establishing local administrations that answer to governors in Turkey, issuing Turkish identity cards and car registrations, paying salaries in Turkish lira, supplying electricity from Turkey, teaching the Turkish language in [schools](#) and having street signs in Turkish and Arabic, employing imams and teachers, building mosques, hospitals and schools, with [4,000 Turkish companies](#) operating in the districts.

Yet for all Turkey's investment in the Euphrates Shield Triangle regular protests are held, for instance, in Azaz, al-Bab and Suran over local [Turkey-backed councils being corrupt, and not providing](#) sufficient bread, water, electricity and other necessities or holding promised elections. Azaz's local council had to resign due to protests but the councils in al-Bab and Suran are holding on.

Afrin

20 January 2019 was the first anniversary of Turkey's invasion of Afrin, and was marked by protests in the Shebha/Tel Rifaat region east of Afrin and in towns east of the Euphrates. War crimes and crimes against humanity committed under Turkey's occupation is well documented by KLA, Human Rights Watch in [February 2018](#), [June 2018](#), and [April 2019](#), an Amnesty International in [August 2018](#), and two UN reports released [in June 2018](#) and [February 2019](#).



The pro-PKK media outlet [ANF](#) claims that between January 20 and March 18, during the invasion, Turkey conducted 1,098 airstrikes and 900 engagements that killed 224 civilians (other sources say [384 civilians](#)), and wounded another 650 civilians, with the YPG killing 2,422 TSK soldiers and Turkey-backed militants and the enemy killing 544 YPG militants. The UN claims [151,000 Kurds](#) were displaced from Afrin, with some sources claiming the number was as high as 350,000. Most have not [returned](#). They remain in the Shebha/Tel Rifaat region controlled by YPG but where there is a Russian police and Syrian army presence. In the occupation period between 18 March and the end of September 2018 - TSK and mercenary operations killed 335 civilians and wounded another 729, with 72 children having lost their lives from land [mines](#).

The [28 February 2019 report](#) by the United Nations' Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria concluded 'there are reasonable grounds to believe that armed group members in Afrin committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and pillage', and that 'numerous physicians, pharmacists, and other civilians perceived as affluent or their children were abducted for ransom. In some instances, individuals were re-abducted after having been released', and there were 'credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment'; 'Credible estimates indicated that over 50 armed groups, ... remained present throughout northern Aleppo, predominantly in Afrin District and in (the) neighbouring Azaz District.' The report observed that here was a lack of effective complaint mechanisms, including a functioning [judiciary](#) and 'Due to the glaring absence of the rule of law, it ... remains unclear whether Turkish forces were capable of exercising overall control over any armed groups present in the district.'

So many reports and so little action! Ongoing incidences and conditions include:

- Turkey-backed militias, having divided Afrin city into zones of control, conducting daily raids on houses on the pretext of looking for weapons and Kurdish sleeper [cells](#), meanwhile looting and carrying out arbitrary arrests;
- The kidnapping 2,600 civilians between March 2018 and March 2019, the whereabouts of [1,000 of these civilians being unknown](#). [Kidnappings](#) for ransom [continue](#);
- The arrest of [nine IDP journalists](#) from the south between March and November 2018. One was told that he had to go to Turkey to get permission to be a journalist in Afrin. Turkey continues to ban all international journalists and human rights observers from entering [Afrin](#);
- Turkey-backed militia continuing to [fight](#) each other; making purchases on credit and not paying their debt; moving from one vacant house to another and emptying their contents; intruding on occupied houses and demanding food and possessions and if the men are out, molesting the [women](#);
- Anyone that cannot produce official documents to prove ownership having their property and possessions confiscated and sold at auction;
- TSK, Turkey-trained police and Turkey-backed authorities not responding to any [crimes, which are causing more Afrin residents to flee the district](#);



- Those who return to Afrin only to be robbed, assaulted, kidnapped, detained, tortured or otherwise harassed often leave within a month or [two](#);
- Turkey banning the Kurdish language and only allowing Arabic and Turkish to be spoken, written, taught or broadcast;
- The authorities [banning](#) the celebration of Newroz (Kurdish New Year) on March 21 in Afrin (while even in Turkey this celebration is no longer banned);
- Further demographic change caused by HTS expanding the territory it controls in in [Idlib](#), Hama and Aleppo, at the expense of Turkey-backed National Liberation Front and Syrian National Army mercenaries, leading to another 1,700 Turkey-backed militants, mainly from *Nour al-Din al-Zenki*, and their families moving to [Afrin](#) in January. Meanwhile, Arabs from al-Bab with no identity papers are being encouraged to migrate to Afrin where they are being registered by the Turkey-backed administration and given houses owned by Kurds. People fear this will establish them as permanent residents, preventing the return of Afrin's Kurdish population;
- Citing 'Salafist religious rules' that require tombstones to be laid horizontal to the ground, Turkey-backed militias destroying [cemeteries](#);
- Attacks by unknown assailants. For instance, on December 16 a car bomb exploded in a vegetable market in the centre of Afrin city that killed at least nine people, including five civilians, and wounded at least [eighteen](#);
- An [economy impacted](#) by insecurity, high unemployment and IDPs having little money;
- Deforestation. In November, Turkey cut down olive trees to make a 40 metre wide road from Jandares (Afrin) to [Idlib](#), and since January, the TSK has expelled villagers, cut down trees, confiscated agricultural land, and destroyed houses and [water reservoirs](#) to establish TSK military bases, which house tanks, armoured vehicles and [weapons](#).¹¹ Turkey-backed militants also illegally cut down trees to sell the wood for fuel, with farmers not complaining in case their complaint brings retribution and the military police powerless to stop the [activity](#);
- Building a three metre high concrete wall with observation towers to divide Afrin from the rest of Aleppo, but not [Idlib](#);
- [Imprisoning](#) representatives of the Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council ([ENKS](#)), including the head of ENKS and KDP-Syria in Afrin, Hussein Ibesh, on April 7, after he protested Turkey-backed militants continuing to arrest and kidnap Afrin residents.

Before and during the olive harvest of 2018 Turkey-backed militants seized 75 percent of all olive farms and confiscated their produce. Records presented to the Turkish parliament, indicated 200,000 tons of olive oil were produced in Afrin's 2018 olive harvest. In parliament, HDP MP Nurettin Macin claimed that Turkey-backed militants confiscated and smuggled at least 50,000 tons of olive oil into Turkey, which was then sold on the open market. Turkey's Minister of Agriculture Bekir Pakdemirli replied,

¹¹ Turkey has also built a large military base and buffer wall in northern Latakia, and in doing so has destroyed farmland and damaged [water reservoirs](#).



'We don't want the PKK to make money.' According to a Swiss parliamentarian, Afrin olive oil was sold to the EU, with one third of the revenue being used to pay Turkey-backed militants in [Afrin](#). An economist from Afrin, Celeng Omer, claimed that farmers had to pay bribes to the militants to have any access to their olive groves, and were prevented from selling their produce at market prices to Syrian merchants. Instead, militants forced them to sell at half the price to middlemen of the militia's choosing, with the Turkey-backed councils taking a 15 percent tax, this also being used to pay militants. Afterwards, the Sultan Murad Brigades, Hamza Division and [Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade](#) dismantled 109 of 295 olive presses, and burned and bulldozed many hectares of olive trees.

In response to Turkey's occupation of Afrin, from 18 March until the end of December 2018, YPG carried out between 147 and [220 operations](#) against the occupiers. These actions killed 65 TSK and 258 mercenaries, and 56 Kurdish insurgents, including 16 YPG fighters. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) claims much higher casualties although their figure that 1,584 Kurdish insurgents have been [killed](#) most likely includes non-YPG insurgents. Most of the Kurdish insurgent attacks involve roadside ambushes or IED attacks targeting TSK, Turkey-backed militants or the Turkey-recruited and trained Islamist police force. Insurgents mostly enter Afrin from the Kurdish-controlled Shebha region and get ammunition and arms, including [Anti-Tank Guided Missiles](#) from intermediaries or the regime. There are also unclaimed attacks and assassinations possibly carried out by minor insurgent groups or Turkey-backed militias. For instance, YPG denies conducting [assassinations](#) but a Kurdish group not linked to YPG, *Ghadab al-Zaytoun* (Wrath of Olives), which began operating in Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle in June 2018, became notorious for a series of kidnappings and executions of alleged collaborators in August 2018. It has since changed tactics. Another group, *Hezen Rizgariya Efrine* (HRE) or Afrin Liberation Forces was formed in December 2018. It conducted 33 attacks between December and January and remains active.

Scattered and possibly inaccurate reports of the Afrin insurgency since November 2018 (the date of [KLA's last report on Afrin](#)) include the pro-PKK news outlet ANF claiming that in November, YPG killed [25 Turkey-backed militants](#), and injured another 20 in Afrin. In December, YPG killed at least [17 militants](#); an anti-tank guided missile destroyed a *Jaysh al-Islam* base near [Afrin city](#); an attack involving a [motorcycle explosion](#) on Rajou Street in Afrin city centre killed four civilians and wounded nine others, and a [car bomb exploding](#) at a fruit and vegetable market in Afrin city killed five civilians and four Turkey-backed militants, the last attack claimed by *Ghadab al-Zaytoun* which was targeting a passing militia patrol. ANF reported that on December 13, Turkish forces based in Afrin exchanged artillery shells with the Syrian Army positions in northern [Aleppo](#), and the YPG killed [five Turkish soldiers](#) in Afrin, and at the end of December, in [two separate attacks](#), one in Afrin and another in the Azaz region, killed and wounded 17 Turkey-backed militants. YPG attacks on TSK soldiers and Turkey-backed [militias](#) were [on-going](#) in January, as were retaliations. Attacks in the second week of January killed or wounded [15](#) TSK and Turkey-backed militants. On January 20, the anniversary of the invasion, a bomb exploded in Afrin city killing three



people and wounding [twenty others](#), including Turkey-backed [militants](#). In villages in the YPG controlled Tel Rifaat region, the TSK targeted YPG with artillery fire on January 23, [24](#) and 25; in the last week of January, the 'SDF' (this may not be accurate) clashed with Turkey-backed militants near al-Bab, and two attacks in the centre of Afrin city killed two Turkish soldiers and wounded four, also resulting in *Ahrar al-Sham* [casualties](#). FarsNews claimed YPG was responsible. In February, *Ghadab al-Zaytoun* claimed two attacks involving car bombs, one killing three police at a checkpoint in al-Rai, and another during a militia parade in the centre of [Afrin city](#), which killed and wounded 'many'. Clashes involving missiles and mortars between Turkey-backed militants and Kurdish fighters in several locations in northern Aleppo intensified in the third week of [April](#). In the last week of April, Afrin Liberation Forces blew up a Turkish intelligence centre in Azaz, killing two intelligence officers and injuring [seven](#); another attack inside Afrin killed seven TSK soldiers; and an attack near Azaz killed two TSK commanders and injured [others](#).

ENKS is attempting to work diplomatically with Turkish authorities, protesting the ongoing human rights [violations](#) in Afrin and asking various stakeholders to prevent a repeat of Afrin occurring east of the Euphrates. After the last of the ISIS 'caliphate' in Baghouz was liberated in March, [YPG, SDF](#) and [senior administrative officials](#) announced that the SDF would liberate Afrin through diplomacy or military means. Military action would be difficult. Russian and Syrian forces surround Afrin, and in Afrin TSK and Turkey-backed militias are building bases and numbers. The liberation of Afrin would require significant numbers of fighters to come and go from [Sheba](#), which would impact up to 200,000 Afrin IDPs in the [region](#). Turkey knows this and in April there were increased clashes between the Turkish army, supported by Turkey-backed militias, against Kurdish insurgents in areas around Azaz and [al-Bab](#). In the first week of May, Turkey-backed militants advanced and captured three villages in the Tel Rifaat region but were forced to retreat because of Syrian army [shelling](#) their positions and YPG killing four Turkish soldiers and wounding others in two separate [attacks](#). What could change the standoff is if Russia and Turkey negotiate a swap – Turkey giving areas of Idlib in return for Turkey taking control of [Tel Rifaat](#).

Euphrates Shield Triangle

Before the Turkish invasion of Jarablus, Azaz, and al-Bab in 2016, there were 130 Kurdish villages in the triangle. Days after the invasion, the Turkish government emptied the Kurdish villages and replaced Kurds with Turkey-backed militants and their families. The crimes committed by Turkey backed militants in Afrin are replicated, albeit on a lesser scale in the triangle. Hence, having cracked down on rogue elements in Afrin on 18 – 19 November, the Turkey-backed militia and TSK announced it was moving operations to Al-Bab, Azaz and Jarablus to similarly clean up these elements, announcing a curfew in [Jarablus](#) on November 21. Insecurity continued. A car bomb in Azaz on December 13 killed a girl and wounded 20 others, also damaging a mosque, school, houses and [shops](#). Other car bomb attacks occurred in Rae and [al-Bab](#) and at the end of January there were five explosions, four the result of motorbike suicide attacks in Azaz, al-Bab and elsewhere, which killed one and



injured another [30 people](#). Nobody claimed responsibility for the attacks. Turkey blamed [YPG](#).

Manbij

Manbij is located on the main highway from Turkey to Raqqa, and also on the main west-east highway east. This is why the US needed to capture Manbij before attempting to liberate Raqqa, and why different forces vie for control of the city, with Manbij now a testing ground for US and Russian actions to appease Turkey.

By 27 August 2016, Kurd-led forces had liberated Manbij city and district. This caused Turkey to launch Operation Euphrates Shield to the immediate west on 26 August. Since then the town and district has been secured by the multi-ethnic Manbij Military Council (MMC) and administered by a multi-ethnic administrative council. Turkey claims these structures answer to the YPG and Democratic Union Party (PYD), and has applied constant pressure on the US to rid the district of these influences. In June 2018 the US and Turkey agreed on a conditions-based road map for Manbij and in early November 2018 US and TSK troops began 'co-ordinated' patrols, the US patrolling south of the Safur River, the frontline between Manbij and the Euphrates Shield Triangle, and Turkish forces patrolling north of the river.

Despite the agreement, Turkey continued to threaten it would invade Manbij. Attacks inside the town and on MMC positions increased, as outlined by a KLA report published in [November 2018](#). Since that report:

- On November 20, unknown assailants targeted a MMC base inside Manbij city killing three and wounding others. A MMC vehicle sent to the scene was attacked near Manbij hospital, and more fighters were killed or wounded;
- On November 22, a MMC intelligence commander was [killed](#);
- On November 23, Turkey-backed militants attacked a MMC position in a village on the [Safur River](#).
- In December and early January intermittent attacks continued, with Turkey reiterating its threat to invade Manbij city if YPG did not leave. Both the US and YPG maintain that YPG have left.

On December 23 (after Trump announced US troops would withdraw from Syria) a convoy from Turkey of [200 vehicles](#), including 35 Turkish tanks and vehicles carrying howitzers and artillery, crossed into Syria via Jarablus and arrived at the [Safur River](#), and on December 25, [Yeni Safak](#) reported that the TSK and around 13,000 Turkey-backed militants from Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle had amassed at the border awaiting orders to advance on Manbij.

To prevent the threatened invasion, US aerial and ground patrols increased in the district and along the border, and on December 25 Russia completed negotiations with the MMC and SDF to deploy Russian [military police](#), [300 Syrian forces](#) from the First Armoured Division, and Syrian [tanks](#) and armoured vehicles to Arima, 25



kilometres northwest of [Manbij city](#) on the condition they would not enter the town. In subsequent days, the 4th Armoured Division, Republican Guard and some Tiger Forces units arrived. These forces formed a crescent shaped buffer zone to the west, northwest and northeast of the town, away from the Safur River frontline. If the arrangement succeeded Russia proposed extending the deployment further east to protect the border east of the Euphrates, reassuring Kurds these forces would not enter any towns. Representatives from the east said this could only occur if the Assad Regime guaranteed citizenship, language and cultural rights, recognised the military service of those in the YPG and SDF, and gave the region some form of [constitutionally](#) recognised autonomy.

[FarsNews](#) reported that among Kurds, some advocated a road map with the Assad Regime to secure the border, with the YPG eventually co-ordinating with the Syrian Army to force Turkey out of northern Aleppo, and others preferred to rely solely on the US, the UK, France, Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Canada to implement a no-fly zone and provide ground [support](#). Kurds were to pursue both strategies.

On December 26, an over eager faction of Turkey-backed militias declared the '[start](#)' the offensive. A few days of inaction followed but on [December 30 and 31](#), and [January 2](#), Turkey-backed militants targeted at least seven front-line positions of the MMC and al-Bab Military Council with gun and artillery fire. From January 7, Manbij city was 'fully protected' with Russian police and the SDF-affiliated al-Bab Military Council conducting joint patrols in the Arima area, and US-led coalition troops and MMC conducting joint [patrols](#) along the Safur River. These measures did not stop an explosion on January 16 that targeted a restaurant in the centre of the town, where US and French troops and MMC personnel were meeting. The explosion killed [18 people](#), including nine Manbij civilians and four US citizens (two troops, a Department of Defence civilian and a civilian [contractor](#)), and injured others, including three to four [US troops](#). ISIS claimed responsibility, although making a distinction between ISIS and Turkey-backed militants can be difficult. Within hours MMC claimed the ID of a known Turkish agent was found at the scene of the explosion, and proceeded to arrest seven well-armed Turkey-backed militants, with the MMC claiming they had evidence the cell was planning more [attacks](#). US spokespeople continued to publicly state ISIS was 'likely' behind the attack. Five days later, a car bomb hit a US-SDF convoy in Hasaka in the east. Depending on the source, zero to two US personnel were injured, and zero to five SDF fighters were killed. ISIS claimed responsibility but Kurds suspected Turkey-backed [militants](#). Turkey initially argued that whoever was behind these attacks wanted to keep the US in Syria (inferring the Kurds). Within days Turkey changed its line of reasoning, arguing that these attacks proved Kurds were incapable of securing the [area](#).

To appease Turkey, in January, the US asked the Manbij leadership to submit the names and background information of all 171 people in leadership positions. The information was given to Turkish officials who selected 67 people who had to be removed from their positions. The US refused. Turkey resubmitted another list of 13 names. The US asked 10 of these people, including an Arab and a Kurd in charge of defence, to leave their [posts](#).



[Turkey-backed militant attacks](#) continued into February and March, even when US troops signalled their presence. In early March, Russians told the MMC that Russian forces would defend the Safur River front line 'the minute Americans [leave](#)'. The MMC agreed but told media they would prefer the US to stay. And the attacks continued. Three days after the SDF defeated ISIS in Baghouz, suspected Islamists killed seven MMC members at a checkpoint on the outskirts of [Manbij city](#).

Idlib: Testing Russia – Turkey Relations

Events in Idlib highlight the transactional, duplicitous and volatile nature of alliances in the Syrian Civil war, that Turkey-Russian relations are as precarious as Turkey-US relations and that Turkey's presence in Idlib, like its presence in northern Aleppo, has not stopped armed robberies, kidnappings and torture for ransom and assassinations that particularly target humanitarian workers, lawyers and activists. The prevalence of these crimes led to the HTS' National Salvation Government announcing in December 2017 the introduction of *hirabah* Sharia law, which stipulated that perpetrators would be executed, have their hands cut off or be exiled, depending on the [crime](#).

Sources vary on the numbers of opposition militants in Idlib. Military sources told Enab Baladi that HTS has no more than 40,000 fighters, whereas the Turkey-backed National Front for Liberation' has in excess of 70,000 [personnel](#). Fabrice Balanche estimated there are 50,000 full-time militants and about 40,000 part-time militants in Idlib. With the majority of Idlib under the control of HTS, which both Russia and the US classify as a terrorist organisation, Russia applied increasing pressure on Turkey to disarm HTS. (Turkey's relationship with HTS is outlined in a [KLA Report](#) published in February 2018.) From the end of August and into September, [Turkey](#) sent commando units, convoys of military hardware and construction materials into Idlib and continued its efforts to unite its Aleppo proxy militias called the Syrian National Army with its Idlib proxy National Liberation Front to defend [Idlib](#) in case of a full scale regime offensive.

In response to Turkey's pressure for HTS to disarm and be absorbed into the National Liberation Front, [800 HTS militants defected](#) to the more hardline Religious Guardians' Organization, or [Hurras al-Din](#) on August 30. In the following days, the Assad Regime promised to take back all of Idlib, but [UN envoy to Syria Staffan De Mistura](#) asked for the offensive to be delayed until humanitarian corridors were established. This proposal assumed that civilians would want to 'temporarily' leave for unknown destinations and conditions, with many having refused to surrender before this likely to face arrest, torture and execution in regime held areas. A Syrian Opposition spokesperson rejected the [plan](#) as unhumanitarian, saying that if an offensive went ahead it demonstrated the duplicity of Russia in creating de-escalation zones (which had already been demonstrated in the other three zones). In early September, Mistura claimed that the Assad Regime had given Turkey and Russia until September 10 to resolve the situation in Idlib diplomatically, and that a deadline should be set for all opposition militias to leave urban areas to spare civilians.



Instead of leaving the towns, in first seven days of September, the National Liberation Front [blew up two bridges](#) over the Orontes River linking a regime-controlled area in Hama with Idlib, and continued to build tunnels and other [defensive](#) structures. Explosions in four Idlib towns killed [six HTS commanders](#); [trade ceased](#) between Idlib and regime-controlled areas; Russia began air and sea [exercises](#) in the eastern Mediterranean; [NATO warships](#) moved in some days later; [Turkey classified HTS](#) as a terrorist organisation and continued to send reinforcements to its [12 observation posts in Idlib and surrounds](#); bombs exploded in Saraqeb, Dana and [Idlib city](#) killing HTS and [civilians](#); [Iraq closed its airspace to Russian flights](#) on route to supply Khmeimim airbase in Latakia; and Russian and [Syrian](#) warplanes conducted 30 strikes on 16 opposition bases in western Idlib and Latakia near Jisr al-Shughour, [killing 13 civilians and no militants](#); the Syrian regime shelled other opposition areas in Idlib; the opposition blew up a [third bridge](#); the newly appointed US Envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, said that the US would not leave Syria until ISIS and Iran were no longer a threat, and the country had gone through a political [transition](#) (basically reverting to Rex Tillerson's plan announced in January); Russia responded by saying if the US interfered in Idlib Russia would back a regime attack on the US base at al-Tanf; and the Astana troika met in Tehran. Things were heating up.

At the meeting in Tehran President Erdogan failed to convince Putin and Rouhani of the need to stop the offensive. Instead, it was agreed that it would be a phased offensive, giving Turkey time to separate 'terrorists' from more 'moderate' militants. If Turkey failed, then a [full offensive on Idlib](#) was inevitable. Turkey allegedly offered to evacuate 12 armed rebel groups, including HTS (even though Turkey had recently classified HTS as a terrorist organisation) from Idlib to the Turkey-occupied areas of Afrin and the Euphrates Shield triangle, thus removing their threat to the main highways and Latakia. The militants would be overseen by Turkey's National Liberation Front, and disarmed and trained as an Idlib security force. Foreigners would be allowed to return to their country of [origin](#), which was unappealing to Russia and China, and did not address HTS' intention to fight to the death in Syria. Turkey's plan was rejected by Russia on all counts. Instead, Russia offered Turkey to remain in northern Aleppo in return for withdrawing from [Idlib](#) before an offensive. Turkey was in a bind. HTS was strongest along its border with Syria, and many of the militias in the National Liberation Front were also rejecting a ceasefire. If Turkey was seen to have betrayed its proxy armies and HTS, Turkey faced a significant threat as demonstrated by footage on [social media in September](#) of a man claiming to be from eastern Ghouta threatening Turkey if Turkey betrayed the opposition in Idlib. Cengiz Candar in *Al-Monitor* concluded the outcome of the meeting in Tehran was an indication of how isolated Turkey had [become](#). In *The Gulf Today*, [Michael Jansen](#) concluded that Turkey-backed militias in northern Aleppo and Idlib would ultimately have to seek 'reconciliation' with the regime, or be resettled in Turkey.

On September 8, [68 Russian and Syrian air raids and 19 barrel bombs](#) targeted *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* positions in southern Idlib and northern Hama. The Assad Regime claimed to have killed many militants and cut off their supply routes, saying these actions were in retaliation for *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* having shelled the government-



held town of [Mahardah](#) the previous night, killing nine civilians and wounding 20 others. [Fars News](#) alleged that the militias used Turkey-made cluster bombs in Mahardah. Militants claimed the regime bombardments killed at least [16 civilians](#), but a ground offensive had yet to start.

[Turkey dispatched more special forces](#), and [185 truckloads of weapons, equipment and tanks](#) to Idlib, with Russia claiming that all this was to fight HTS. MIT told all militias to report their numbers and battle readiness and the TSK informed up to [50,000 militants](#) in Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle to be ready for deployment to Idlib. An estimated 20,000 were ready for immediate deployment. The Turkey-backed National Liberation Front continued to arrest those seeking reconciliation with the [regime](#), and [HTS](#) set up gallows to deal with 'traitors'. Others were trying to flee to Turkey with [Fars News](#) reporting that Turkish border guards near Jisr al-Shughour were charging \$10,000 from each HTS militant and \$5000 from each militant in the National Front Liberation to enter Turkey. When militants tried to enter without paying there were exchanges of fire. Another report claimed Turkey was 'facilitating' 'hundreds' of Islamist militants to leave [Syria](#).

On September 10, [regime bombardments targeted two hospitals and two schools](#) using [cluster munitions and barrel bombs](#) that killed nine civilians, the majority being children. In retaliation, the National Liberation Front bombarded a school in Hama that they claimed had become a [regime](#) operations centre. While it was thought the regime actions were an attempt to convince militants to surrender, one militia commander claimed Turkey had not only increased its supply of armaments to the militias but had promised to support them even in a protracted [battle](#).

In the first nine days of September, [30,542 people were displaced](#) from southern and western Idlib and another [8,000](#) had fled by September 14. Half went to poorly equipped camps in northern [Idlib](#) and others arrived in [Afrin](#) and the Euphrates Shield Triangle. From [September 11](#) no air raids took place, although the Syrian army continued [striking HTS targets](#) with artillery and missiles. When it became obvious Turkey was reinforcing its observation posts with tanks and supplying the National Liberation Front under the guise that this was to tackle non-compliant terrorists, the US saw an opening and threatened military action if the regime used chemical weapons or commenced an [offensive](#), prompting Russia's Special Envoy to Syria, Alexander Laverntiev, to claim on September 13 that the offensive would be delayed to give time for Turkey to separate extremists from other [militias](#).

On September 7, 14, 21, and [28](#), large demonstrations against the Assad Regime were held in 47 cities and villages in Idlib, 20 locations in Aleppo and 10 locations in [Hama](#). In some cases, demonstrators opposed HTS raising HTS flags, and chanted against extremism, wanting to show the world there were still reasonable people who supported the revolution. Many demonstrations featured Turkish flags, while *Hurras al-Din* (Guardians of Religion) stopped protests in [Jisr al-Shughour](#). Protests on October 5 differed from previous protests when demonstrators shouted a slogan that the Turkey and Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee did not represent [them](#).



Slogans for each demonstration were decided by a committee, and distributed via WhatsApp. The last slogan proved [controversial](#).

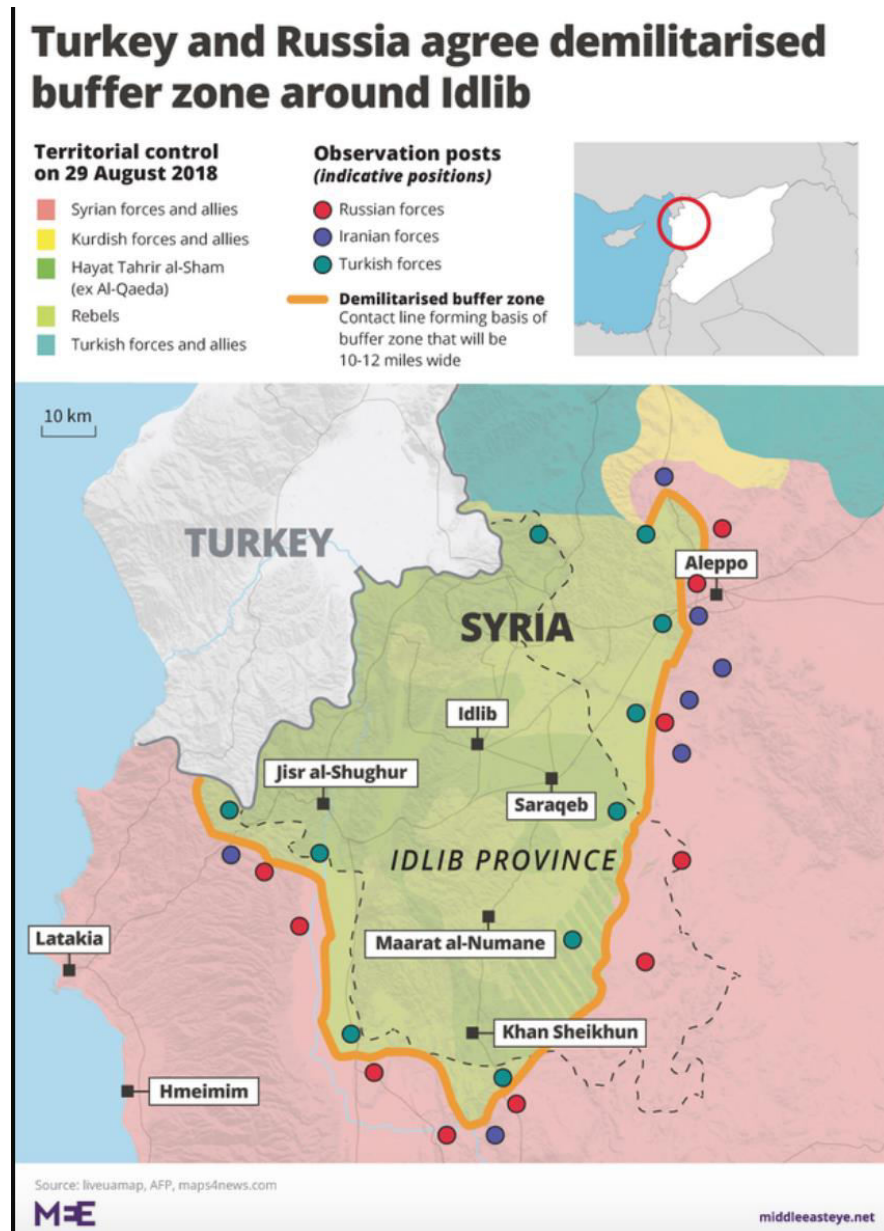
Throughout September, Turkish officials repeatedly claimed that YPG fighters would co-ordinate with the Assad Regime to attack Idlib. On September 17, a YPG spokesperson stated there were [no plans for YPG to participate in the offensive](#).

Tensions were becoming too much, even for Putin. He needed Turkey to negotiate with the opposition and for the opposition to remain a diminished power broker to give legitimacy to the Astana process and Russia's call for the international community to facilitate a return of refugees and invest in reconstruction. Putin also wanted to avoid the US being able to drive a wedge between Russia and Turkey. He initiated a countermove. On September 17, after Erdogan and Putin met in Sochi, Putin announced that instead of an offensive, the present 10 kilometre wide buffer zone between the regime and opposition forces would be expanded up to 20 kilometres by October 15. Turkey and Russia would police either side of the buffer zone. Turkey would ensure all heavy weapons (including those of its National Liberation Front) were removed from the demilitarised zone by October 10, and all 'radical elements' (that controlling 70 percent of the zone) would leave by [October 15](#). In return, Russia would stop a regime offensive until such time Turkey proved it had failed in these endeavours. Most observers concluded 'elimination' would be achieved by Turkey absorbing HTS and others into its proxy army, or allowing them to leave Idlib (to unspecified destinations), and for those who refused these options, there was a possibility [Turkey would provide Russia with intelligence](#) to carry out [surgical strikes](#). At the end of September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov clarified Russia's position on what was to be done with 'radical elements': they were either to be killed or brought before a court, but would not be allowed to leave Idlib 'for other [hotspots](#)'.

The agreement allowed time for negotiations, but had a low probability of [success](#). Russia and Turkey were the only guarantors. They claimed to have agreed on the definition of 'radical militants', but this was far from reality. The memorandum of understanding did not name specific groups. The agreement put onerous responsibilities on Turkey that were impossible to accomplish in the time frame, especially as it relied on Turkey's militias being unified and willing to fight 'radical elements' and gave no incentives for HTS and other 'radical elements' to withdraw or dissolve. Instead, the hiatus allowed all militias to strengthen their positions, with many, including those answering to Turkey, claiming they would defend Idlib and northern [Aleppo](#), and would 'never give up our weapons, land, or [revolution](#).'

On Russia's side the agreement assumed Assad and Iran would co-operate, and that Russia would be free to conduct surgical strikes. Assad initially opposed the agreement, but was finally convinced as it was to his advantage if Turkey was able to eliminate hardliners and free the [M4 and M5 highways](#) south of Idlib city that connect Aleppo to Latakia and Damascus, Turkey and Jordan. The increased width of the demilitarised zone affectively shrunk opposition held territory from 30 by 60 kilometres (1800 square kms) to 10 by 40 kilometres (400 square kms), which would [make the regime's task of securing these highways](#) easier although the agreement did

not specify how the highways would be secured, or how nearby Tel Rifaat would be protected.



[Map](#) of Idlib showing demilitarised zone and force positions

In the ten [days following the agreement](#), Turkey and the regime continued to build up their respective forces. Turkey began moving HTS into Afrin, and to house them, was forcing east Guouta IDPs to go to [Idlib's](#) refugee camps. HTS proceeded to take control of a village near Janderes (Afrin) killing all *Faylaq al-Sham* members in the [village](#), in full view of MIT, and in early October, HTS' *Tahrir al-Sham* militants were negotiating with the National Liberation Front to join forces in [Afrin](#).



Kurdish Lobby Australia

Back in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, HTS and Turkey-backed militants continued to arrest people seeking reconciliation with the [Assad Regime](#); the National Liberation Front [refused to withdraw](#) from the demilitarised zone; *Hurras al-Din*, the Turkistani Islamic Party, *Jaysh al-Izza* and other ‘radicals’ rejected the agreement outright; and there was no [response from HTS](#) until October 14, when it announced it would not disarm and not give up fighting the Assad Regime. It did not clarify its position on the demilitarised zone but one report said it had removed its heavy weapons, although not its troops. In a statement HTS thanked those ‘abroad’ for protecting the ‘liberated’ area, but did not mention Turkey by name. HTS was split about relations with Turkey and Turkey’s role in Syria, with many determined not to become Turkey’s [proxy](#).

Between [September 29](#) and [October 15](#) unknown gunmen assassinated more than 13 high profile opposition commanders, including non-Syrians from HTS, *Hurras al-Din*, *Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham*, the Turkistani Islamic Party and the National Liberation Front.¹² *Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham* arrested 30 foreigners from its own militia; 50 people were kidnapped for ransom in areas controlled by them; others were kidnapped for ransom by *Ahrar al-Sham* and the National Liberation [Front](#); there was heavy fighting between *Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham* and factions within the National Liberation Front, and between [regime forces and Jaysh al-Izza](#), while some ‘radicals’ continued to pay Turkish businessmen to cross into [Turkey](#).

Reports conflicted about what was happening inside the demilitarised zone. The SOHR claimed that the third largest militia, Turkey-backed *Faylak al-Rahman* had begun withdrawing from southern [Aleppo](#), taking with them heavy weapons and tanks. A day later the National Liberation Front claimed no militia had [withdrawn](#), but heavy [weapons were being withdrawn](#). Turkey claimed [likewise](#), but [SOHR](#) claimed that heavy weapons were being hidden in tunnels, and tanks were being stored in [warehouses](#) away from the front lines but inside the demilitarised [zone](#). Meanwhile, MIT continued to demand all the names, photos, and weaponry of all militants in all [militias](#).

Clashes between HTS and Turkey-backed [militias](#) were frequent. On the day of the first deadline, October 10, Turkey announced all heavy weapons had been withdrawn but a Russian spokesperson said only 100 pieces and 1,000 militants had [withdrawn](#), adding ‘The figures appear quite modest.’ HTS was particularly reluctant to give up its revenue-generating checkpoints along the M4 and M5 highways and on October 10, HTS attacked the Turkish army and Turkey-backed militias [in Idlib](#), and the next day, HTS, *Hurras al-Din* and the Turkistani Islamic Party announced that their condition for leaving the zone was that Turkey guarantee their security, especially for foreign [members](#), which Turkey refused to do. On October 14, HTS issued a statement saying it would not disarm or give up jihad (i.e. the revolution). On the day of the deadline,

¹² The commanders were Abu Abdullah Turki, Mohammad Rahal, Abu Haziqa Turkistani, Abu Zeid Tunisi, and Chechen commander Abu Mas'ab al-Dayeri (HTS), Abu Jafar Janoubi (*Hurras al-Din*), Abdul Latif Beiraqdar, Abu Osama al-Terablosi and non-Syrians Abu Mo-aviyah Tukamani (Turkamani?), Mustafa Abu Dajanah (Uyghur), Abu Yusef al-Jazrawi (Saudi) and Mohammad Abu Salam (Turkish) from *Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham*. Other assassinations targeted commanders of the Turkistani Islamic Party or [Turkey-backed National Liberation Front](#) (e.g. Abdul Hamid al-Azo).



October 15, [reports conflicted](#) about whether HTS had withdrawn but reports on [October 18](#) clarified they had not.

Part of the agreement was that Turkey had to stop the opposition attacking regime forces, but *Hurras al-Din*, *Ansar al-Tawhid*, *Ansar al-Din* and *Ansar al-Islam* had formed a [joint operation room](#) with the stated aim of assaulting regime forces. On October 11, HTS, *Hurras al-Din* and the Turkistani Islamic Party launched missiles on Syrian army positions in [Latakia](#), and on October 15, shells killed two Syrian soldiers in [Hama](#). A day later, MIT announced that Turkey would cut all support to any militia that did not abide by the Idlib agreement, and a day after that, Turkey negotiated a [delay](#) in the deadline for getting rid of 'radical elements'. Meanwhile, unknown assailants assassinated two commanders and several members of *Hurras al-Din* and two *Ahrar al-Sham* militants in different locations inside the demilitarised [zone](#). On October 21, a car bomb exploded in the centre of Idlib city killing civilians and foreign HTS militants; on October 24 and 25, the regime and opposition had their fiercest exchange of fire since the agreement in [western Aleppo](#) and in the following days HTS and the regime exchanged fire in [northern Hama](#); and on October 26 Russia accused a US Navy P-8 Poseidon patrol plane of directing 13 drones over its Khmeimim [airbase](#). Daily low level [exchanges of artillery fire between HTS and pro-regime forces](#) and exchanges of fire between Turkey-backed militias and pro-regime forces inside the demilitarised zone continued in [November](#). With Russia pressuring Turkey to speed up the removal of radical elements from the demilitarised zone Farsnews reported clashes between HTS and the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front militias, and the arrest and assassinations of each others [militants](#) and leaders, including four HTS commanders (Mohammad Kibar nom de guerre Abu Zeid, Abdollah Ansari, Abu Jalbib, Abu Abdolsami), one commander of Turkey-backed *Faylaq al-Sham* (Abu al-Bara al-Homsi), and a former commander of *Jaysh al-Mojahedin* by [unknown gunman](#). HTS also arrested one of its former commanders, Maher Fajr al-Khalil, while an unconfirmed Syrian State media report claimed that Turkey had handed the demilitarised zone to HTS in preparation for Turkey's offensive east of the [Euphrates](#). Days later, a Sputnik report claimed that Ankara was transferring convoys of militants from the demilitarised zone to the Kurdish town of Nusaybin inside [Turkey](#).

On November 23, unknown gunmen killed Raed Fares and Hamod Jnaid. Fares had started the Fresh FM radio station in 2013, initially receiving US funding, on which he and his colleague broadcast their opposition to Assad and Islamist extremists. For this, Fares and Jnaid had been regularly detained and tortured by [HTS](#).

In late November, elite Syrian Army forces and an armoured brigade were deployed to Latakia, Iran-backed Iraqi militants were deployed to northern Hama and Russia-backed forces were deployed to Hama and Aleppo. In response to an alleged chlorine attack launched from the demilitarised zone by [HTS](#) militants, (although this was denied by the US and others), Russia conducted [airstrikes in Idlib](#) and [Hama](#) on November 24, which hospitalised 107 people. These were the first airstrikes since the September 17 agreement. Turkey and Russia continued to [disagree](#) over:



- The depth of the decentralized zone, Russia wanting it to include Idlib city;
- Who should control the M4 (Aleppo to Latakia) and M5 highways (Aleppo to Hama), with Russia wanting these highways to come under regime control and Turkey insisting they be monitored by Russia and Turkey;
- The fate of 'radical' militants;
- Whether the Idlib agreement was temporary or 'permanent'; and
- What to do about the autonomous region of north and east Syria.

HTS destroyed multiple front line bridges near El-Eis in southern Aleppo on December 2, and on December 3 – 5 negotiated a ceasefire with Turkey-backed *Ahrar al-Sham* in western Idlib after days of [fighting](#). Then HTS made its move. Between January 1 and 5, HTS fought its former ally, the Turkey-backed militia, *Nour al-Din al-Zinki*, in western Aleppo and southern Idlib after claiming *el-Zinki* killed five HTA militants. In two days of fighting HTS took four villages, the town of [Daret Azzeh](#) and [four other towns](#) in western Aleppo, with all *al-Zinki* militants being captured by HTS, or fleeing with their families to [Afrin](#).¹³ By January 3, fighting had spread to northern [Hama](#), and by the fourth day, HTS had captured 20 villages, with the total number killed being 114 militants and eight [civilians](#). Turkey did [not intervene](#). The Syrian Army deployed reinforcements to northeast Latakia and [Hama](#) and on January 4 – 5, Russian and Syrian jets targeted at least five HTS positions in the demilitarised zone. These strikes did not stop HTS besieging the town of Atareb on January 5 and [shelling suburbs of Aleppo city](#) that night. After HTS took control of Atareb on January 6, parties agreed to a ceasefire, and at least 120 Turkey-backed militants and their families left Atareb for Afrin [city](#). By January 9, 300 militants from Turkey-backed *Ahrar al-Sham* in northern Hama agreed to hand over weapons and two territories to [HTS](#). Others who refused to do so were ordered to go to Afrin. Between 1,700 and 2,500 militants along with their families moved to [Afrin](#).

HTS had regained control of [80 percent of Idlib](#), including the [M4 and M5 highways](#) and most of the demilitarised zone and other parts of Hama and Aleppo. They now surrounded Turkey's 12 observation posts, with Turkey doing nothing to stop the advance except to amass troops and equipment in Hatay, north of the [border](#). A Turkey-backed ceasefire was announced on January 10. That day, an official statement from the Turkey-backed 'Free Syrian Police' in Idlib announced the police would dissolve (many having not been paid for four months) and HTS' Islamic Police and Salvation Government administrations would take over the security and administration of all areas reclaimed by HTS. It seemed Turkey's National Liberation Front and Syrian National Army were no match for HTS whether because of divisions between militias, them wanting to join forces with HTS, and/or them being diverted for an invasion of [eastern Syria](#). This was not part of Turkey and Russia's agreement!

¹³ Some observers claim that *al-Zinki* had started talking with Russia and the Assad Regime, so MIT encouraged HTS to attack *al-Zinki*. MIT would then allow HTS to reclaim Idlib so Russia would approve an offensive on Idlib in return for Turkey invading northeast Syria, with Turkey co-ordinating HTS and Turkey-backed militias to send a message to Russia and Assad that Turkey was in control.



HTS continued to attack Turkey's militia and Syrian army positions in the [de-escalation zone](#). In early February, HTS' Syrian Salvation Government took over Turkey-backed police stations in western Aleppo, and sacked all Free Syrian Police (formed from Syrian Army deserters in 2012) who were unwilling to apply to the Interior Ministry of the Syrian Salvation Government for a position in the Islamic Police, in which they would have to abide by and apply HTS' version of Sharia [law](#). International donors like the German development agency GIZ, suspended funding to civil society organisations and local administrations. This meant 50 health directorates could not pay staff, the lack of funding also affecting schools and water provision.

Since February, the Assad Regime has been shelling opposition areas including the demilitarized zone in between Turkey's [patrols](#), and since March Syria and Russia have been conducting airstrikes over [Idlib](#), causing civilians to flee. In March, Russia increased pressure on Turkey to live up to the agreement, with each signing a new agreement, and on March 26 Russia and Turkey patrolled either side of the demarcation line separating Tell Rifaat in Aleppo governorate and Marea in the [Euphrates Shield zone](#). Turkey's solution to being caught between Russia and the opposition was to increase pressure on HTS and others to join its National Liberation Front, to pressure HTS' Salvation Government to amalgamate with the Turkey's [Syrian Interim Government](#), and lobby for HTS to be taken off US and Russian lists of terrorist [organisations](#).

From the beginning most observers believed [Turkey had no interest in eliminating HTS](#) as they would prove useful in fighting the SDF in the east. Some HTS leaders announced they were against going to war with the Kurds because Islamists had no business in a war between secularists (Turkey) and atheists (Kurds), but after reclaiming Idlib in January, the head of HTS, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, announced HTS backed Turkey's invasion of east Syria.

With the regime building up [forces](#), intensifying its shelling and use of barrel [bombs](#), and Syrian and Russian airstrikes increasingly ubiquitous in April and May, and with the regime taking villages and a town in Hama and southern Idlib by May 8, an opposition spokesperson claiming the regime was undertaking a scorched earth policy some think the Idlib offensive has begun. The problem is Turkey has banned all journalists from Idlib since 2015, so it is difficult to know what is truly going on. Some predict the offensive will target Turkey-backed militants represented in negotiations first, as this would discredit Turkey in the eyes of the Front, but it will also push more militias to join up or co-ordinate with HTS. They already have a joint operations room and have co-ordinated their recent fighting and [withdrawals](#). The offensive is also endangering Turkish forces, with three observation posts being shelled on April 28, May 4 (wounding two Turkish soldiers on this [occasion](#)) and [May 12](#). By this time, 150,000 people had fled to camps near the Turkish border, often forced to sleep in the [open](#). Despite the dangers and complexities, Turkey will be reluctant to withdraw, before negotiating with Russia, at a minimum, a land swap to gain YPG-controlled Tel Rifaat, and otherwise permission to enter Manbij and infiltrate east Syria. Hasan Basri Yalcin, director of the Turkish think tank, SETA, observed, 'An Idlib that is not allied



with Turkey could become a strategic [threat](#)'. Yet an Idlib dominated by veteran extremist fighters is also a strategic threat to Turkey and beyond.

Russia has shown strategic patience with Turkey over Idlib, wishing to maintain relations, at least until the delivery of the S-400 missile defence system, and knowing that a full scale offensive leaves extremists nowhere to go except to Turkey or east of the Euphrates. No doubt Russia is also concerned about the US and EU's [response](#), with the US and Russia engaged in several high level discussions, including a meeting between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and President Putin on May 14. Ironically, the UN, US and European's humanitarian concerns that stalled the Idlib offensive has served to protect veteran terrorist fighters and allow them to expand their territory, while the agreement to stall the offensive has only lasted this long because Russia and Turkey were willing to stand by their allies. Is the US-led coalition willing to do the [same](#)?

East of the Euphrates: Testing US – Turkey Relations

Are Syrian Kurds a threat to Turkey?

Turkey perceives the local administrations of north and east Syria, established by the PYD and joined by their Arab, Christian and Turkmen allies, their grass roots democratic federalism that promotes women and environmental sustainability, and their US-trained security forces (the YPG and SDF) as a national security threat. The Turkish mantra is that there is no difference between these structures and PKK. In reality, the relationship is nuanced. Yes, the PYD has adopted Abdullah Ocalan's ideology of democratic federalism and HPG fight alongside YPG and SDF against ISIS. The quietly spoken and very capable commander-in-chief of the SDF, Mazlum Kobane,¹⁴ openly admits that he received training from PKK in Syria before 1999. However, a primary condition for receiving US-led coalition support to fight ISIS was that these forces do not become a military threat to Turkey, and the YPG and SDF have abided by this condition. Contrary to what Turkey claims, former US envoy to Syria and Iraq [Brett McGurk](#) maintains there is no evidence that YPG or SDF have attacked TSK except in self defence, or that they have conducted military operations inside Turkey, or that PKK has operational control over them, or that US-supplied weapons have been transferred to Turkey. Rather, the aggressor has been Turkey, which frequently launches artillery and sniper attacks on Syrian Kurdish forces, has invaded and occupied Afrin, and repeatedly threatens to 'bury' or 'neutralise' all those who support PYD, YPG, YPJ (Women's Protection Units) and the SDF.

Turkey's threat perception has been exacerbated by the US' ongoing support of these forces, with former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [announcing in January 2018](#) that the US was training a 30,000 strong 'border protection' force in east Syria, and the Pentagon announcing in March 2019 that its [2020 budget](#) allocates \$300 million to

¹⁴ Mazlum Kobane's real name is Ferhat Abdi Şahin. He is also known as Şahin Cilo.



train and equip a force of up to 65,000 in eastern Syria, divided into a internal security force and a combat [force](#). At the end of April, Turkey's fears must have reached fever pitch, when the SDF not only formed an [Armenian brigade](#) but the Defence and Protection Commission of East Syria announced their plan to build security forces to 200,000 strong by attracting people with better pay and conditions and raising conscription from one year to [1.5 years](#).

In reality, the Syrian Kurds are more a political threat to Turkey, as long as the Turkish State continues to marginalise and oppress its own Kurds and other minorities. This political threat comes from the increased political status of Syrian Kurds, albeit coupled with their increased military status, that has and will inspire Turkey's own large Kurdish population to demand more cultural and political rights. Turkey knows this and consequently, since the US-coalition helped the YPG defeat ISIS in Kobani in 2015, Turkey has intensified its threats to invade, occupy and change the demographics of northern Syria from Afrin to the Fysh Khabor border crossing into the [KRI](#). Turkey has already changed the demographics of Afrin by allowing wave upon wave of IDPs and Islamist militants and their families to take over the houses of displaced Kurds. In the east, Turkey proposes to build houses for 3.5 million Syrian refugees now living in [Turkey](#), and allow HTS and other militias to populate the area, thus Arabising and Islamising the region.

Turkey's ultimate aim is to establish a militarised zone north and south of the arbitrarily defined border of 1923 that cuts towns and families in half. This zone includes Afrin and Manbij west of the Euphrates and east of the river, the Syrian Kurdish-majority town of Kobani (called Ayn al-Arab by the Assad Regime) and the adjacent Kurdish-majority town of Suruç in Turkey; the Sunni-Arab majority town of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) and its extension in Turkey called Akçakale; Ras al-Ayn in Syria and its pair in Turkey, the Kurdish-majority town of Ceylanpınar, and the Syrian town of Qamishli and its extension in Turkey, the Kurdish-majority town of Nusaybin, as well as the Sunni-Arab majority town of Ayn Isa, south of the M4 highway.



[Map](#) showing towns on either side of the Turkey-Syria border. Ayn al-Arab is Kobani.



Turkey has not wavered from this plan – it is part of Erdogan’s Ottoman dream that extends to Turkey taking ‘back’ Nineveh and Kirkuk in Iraq, despite all the high level political and military meetings between the US and Turkey, the Manbij road map and talk of Turkey being involved in a buffer zone south of the border. For Turkey to change its plan, its leaders and many of its citizens would have to adopt a totally different mindset and reassess all the propaganda that has self perpetuated and escalated Turkey’s fear of Kurds in and outside Turkey, with Turkey’s worst case scenario being the disintegration of Turkey itself.

Developments in the US – Kurd – Turkey Triangle

Although the US and Turkey began co-ordinated patrols either side of the Manbij frontline on November 1, due to Turkey’s artillery and sniper attacks on northeast Syria, joint US – SDF patrols began along the border east of the Euphrates the next day. Helicopters from Turkey were making regular flights over Tel Abyad, and Turkey was building up its military north of the border. In response, on November 21 the then US Secretary of Defence James Mattis announced that the US was establishing observation posts along the border to ensure no terrorists crossed the border, claiming this had been worked out in consultation with Ankara. Mattis framed the announcement as protecting [Turkey](#) saying any intelligence on terrorist movements would be passed to the TSK, with Colonel Sean J. Ryan, spokesman for the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, clarifying that the reference to ‘terrorists’ meant ISIS.

The response from Erdogan and the Turkish media was that it was another smokescreen that legitimised YPG ‘terrorists’. Erdogan demanded the US cut all ties with [YPG](#), and the US not proceed with setting up [observation posts](#). Apparently ISIS and the YPG were not that much of a threat. On November 22, Turkey attacked positions near [Tel Abyad and Qamishli](#) and on November 27, Colonel Sean J. Ryan claimed there had been 100 small strikes into northern Syria in the previous week, refusing to clarify who was responsible.

Late November, [Yeni Safak](#) reported that the US had deployed 3,000 SDF fighters and 500 US soldiers from al-Tanf and Iraq to the Syrian-Turkish border, joined by [UAE](#) and Saudi troops, and by the end of the month the US had established five observation posts. This did not stop Turkey pounding several areas in northeast [Syria](#), even where there were US troops. On December 12, Erdogan threatened a military offensive into eastern Syria ‘within days’. Turkey deployed drones, helicopters, tanks and howitzers to the [border](#) near Tel Abyad and a Turkey-backed militia commander announced that 15,000 militants were ready for a multi-pronged attack. Pentagon spokesman, Commander Sean Robertson, responded ‘[Unilateral military action](#) into northeast Syria by any party ... is ... [unacceptable](#).’ Letters were written to the Turkey-backed ‘National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces’ and ‘Syrian Free Army’ saying that any participation in such an offensive would be considered a direct attack on the [US](#) and [Coalition forces](#).



Phone calls between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Joseph Dunford and their Turkish counterparts to [stave off the threatened offensive](#) were followed by a phone call between Trump and Erdogan on December 14. After agreeing on the need for 'greater co-ordination in Syria,' Erdogan proposed that Turkey finish off [ISIS](#). Trump famously replied, ['Okay – it's all yours. We're done'](#).

Within days of the Trump-Erdogan impromptu 'agreement' the [Pentagon](#) announced that the US State Department had approved the sale to Turkey of the \$3.5 billion Patriot missile defence system (i.e. 80 guidance-enhanced missiles, 60 additional missiles and related equipment), although the sale had to be approved by Congress. Erdogan's response was to say that Turkey would purchase both the [Patriot](#) and the [cheaper](#) S-400 system.

The TSK pounded SDF positions around Kobani on December 15; Russia moved S-300 missiles into Deir Ezzor; the Assad Regime moved weapons into Qamishli; and more pro-Assad forces were deployed to [Deir Ezzor](#). Trump's closest advisors (Pompeo, Bolton, Mattis, and Jeffrey) failed to convince Trump to change his mind about US troops withdrawing from Syria and on December 19, Trump resolved the US presence in Syria being unconstitutional, as it was not authorised by [Congress](#), and it being against international law as it was not approved by the UN in a single Tweet at 6.30 am, declaring ['We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency'](#). Trump ordered a 'full and immediate' withdrawal of US troops from Syria, the next day Tweeting that Russia and 'others' would now be responsible for defeating ISIS, and then: 'I am building by far the most powerful military in the world. ISIS hits us - they are [doomed!](#)'

Erdogan had been the first to know of Trump's decision. Netanyahu was warned, but other allies and Russia had not. Trump's order caused a storm on both sides of Congress and internationally, all expressing varying degrees of [outrage](#), saying that the US would lose credibility and political leverage, and the military capacity to combat ISIS, curb Iran and Turkey. The withdrawal would create a dangerous power vacuum for ISIS, Assad, Russia, Iran and Turkey to exploit and reduce the capacity of being able to use proxies in the [future](#). Unprecedented was the international anger that Trump's decision betrayed the US' staunchest allies in Syria: the Kurds and their allies who fought ISIS on the ground, and whose administrations contributed to stabilisation (far more than Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo were doing).

On December 20, Defence Secretary James Mattis resigned after failing to convince Trump to reverse his decision. His pre-written resignation letter in part said:

My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors are strongly held and informed by over four decades of immersion in these issues. We must do everything possible to advance an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values, and we are strengthened in this effort by the solidarity of our alliances. Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defence



whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position.

A day later, US envoy to the US-led coalition, Brett McGurk, resigned for the same reasons. In early January, [James Jeffrey](#), a former ambassador to both Syria and Iraq, replaced McGurk and Trump announced there was no set timeline for the withdrawal.

Back on December 16, the US-led coalition mediated a meeting in Derik between the SDF, YPG and PYD and 100 Rojava Peshmerga (allied with Barzani and the KRG) in an effort to convince the different parties to co-ordinate along the Turkey – Syria border to prevent a Turkish offensive. According to some reports the SDF resisted the offer because it feared problems arising from two forces with different political affiliations operating in the one area. On December 17 James Jeffrey claimed that 100 Rojava Peshmerga had been deployed to the Syria – Turkey border as a result of US [mediation](#), but a Turkish official claimed that the Rojava Peshmerga would be treated as terrorists like the [YPG](#).

On December 20 - 21, France's Minister of Defence said that about [1000](#) French troops would stay in Syria; a German Government spokesperson claimed that Germany would continue to fulfil its [mandate to fight ISIS](#); and UK announced it would continue airstrikes and on-the-ground co-ordination with the SDF. The co-chairs of the Kurd-led Syrian Democratic Council met with President Macron's advisors in Paris to ask if France would fill the US vacuum. They received no commitment but were told France would investigate the possibility of a no-fly zone with its [European and US allies](#). Reports conflicted as to whether US troops had started to [withdraw](#). After another Trump-Erdogan phone call on December 21, Trump announced a slower more co-ordinated withdrawal, and Erdogan said Turkey's offensive would be [delayed](#) until after US troops [withdrew](#). With Kurds fearing the consequences of a Turkish invasion, the Syrian Democratic Council and SDF held a series of meetings with the Assad Regime and Russian officials in Damascus, at [Khmeimim airbase](#) and in Moscow. The SDF offered to co-ordinate with the Syrian Army to defend Manbij and the [border](#), handing the border to the Syrian regime in return for a Russian guaranteed recognition of their administrations and security forces. The Assad Regime already has a presence in the cities of [Qamishli and Hasaka](#). The SDF deployed more forces to the border and for some months had been digging trenches for a defence of the towns. By early January it was alleged that Egypt, Saudi and UAE were offering troops for a [buffer zone](#).

In the days leading up to Christmas, [Egypt](#) offered to mediate between the Kurds and the Assad Regime to prevent an invasion by Turkey and Israel called on the international community to protect the Kurds. A meeting between Mossad chief Yossi Cohen and Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian intelligence officials discussed ways of counteracting Turkey and Iran's regional expansion. Cohen allegedly said Turkey was more of a threat than Iran. He not only advocated that the Syrian Kurds be protected, but that Sunni Arab relations with the KRG should be strengthened so that the KRG was not so reliant on [Turkey](#).



Russian and pro-Assad commentators had mixed reactions to Trump's announcements, doubting the US would actually withdraw and there was speculation about whether Syria, Iran and Russia had the resources to fill the vacuum left by the US. Many observers saw the US retreat as increasing the potential for war. Others assessed it would speed up a [solution](#), albeit on Russia's terms. Russian officials repeatedly claimed it was the right of the Syrian Government to take control of east Syria. Iran remained largely silent, possibly concerned that the US withdrawal was a ploy to gain greater Gulf State involvement in east Syria and to cause a rift between the [Astana troika](#).

Turkish leaders registered the international backlash to their plan to invade and 'neutralise' all those associated with the PYD and YPG within a 30-kilometre buffer zone south of the border. Turkey would have preferred that the US break away from the YPG, YPJ, SDF, and the PYD-led administrations and co-ordinate with Turkey to establish new administrative and security arrangements, allowing Turkey to extract more concessions by playing off Russia and the US. Turkish leaders were also nervous that TSK and its unruly Syrian proxies would have to traverse 'enemy' territory to fight ISIS 360 kilometres from the border, and that the Islamists among its proxies would not be prepared to fight ISIS. Instead, their focus would be on the secular 'separatist' terrorist' and 'infidel' Kurds. Perhaps Turkish leaders were also aware that killing Kurds would help ISIS and empower their Islamist proxies, thus increasing Turkey's insecurity on multiple [fronts](#). Suddenly Turkey was faced with dealing with ISIS, Russia and Iran on its own. Turkey took no action.

On December 23 the US had a change of plan: the US would delay its withdrawal to help Turkey prepare. To 'help' co-ordinate, Trump brought forward the departure of James Mattis to December 31, replacing him with an Acting Defence Secretary and former Boeing defence contractor [Patrick Shanahan](#), who had no military experience. Trump then announced that Saudi Arabia would fund reconstruction, ignoring that (1) Saudi had not committed to this (only promising stabilisation funds), and (2) Erdogan and Saudi leaders were rivals. [On a three-hour trip to Iraq on Christmas day](#), Trump did not meet with a single Iraqi political leader (Abdul-Mahdi declined to meet at the US [Ain al-Asad Military Base](#) for political reasons), and without giving the Government of Iraq prior warning, announced that the US would build a larger base in Anbar and deploy commandoes along the Iraq-Syrian border to pounce on ISIS. Trump's imperialist [visit](#) prompted numerous Iraqi parliamentarians to reiterate the need to end the US 'occupation' of [Iraq](#). The year ended with [Senator Graham Lindsay](#) claiming he had received assurances that Trump would slow the US withdrawal so the US could finish ISIS, curb Iran and protect Kurds.

Basically Trump had thrown a pack of cards in the air, and no one knew how the cards would fall. In the absence of a time line commentators estimated a complete withdrawal of troops and equipment [to the KRI](#) would take up to [four-months](#). A lot could happen in the meantime.



On December 29, Turkish and Russian representatives announced they had agreed to hold meetings to 'co-ordinate' operations to fight 'terrorists' in [Syria](#) and prepare conditions for a return of refugees, reiterating their support for Syria's territorial integrity, thus ignoring Turkey's occupation of Aleppo. During the meeting in Moscow, it was alleged that Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevut Cavusoglu, and Minister of Defence, Hulusi Akar, proposed that Syrian airspace be opened for Turkish F-16s, drones and attack [helicopters](#), and that the Syrian Army take southern Idlib in return for Turkey taking Manbij city. Russia did not respond.

In early January, three Turkish generals were demoted for opposing a large scale offensive [east of the Euphrates](#). They were Metin Temel, who had led the Euphrates and Afrin offensives, Mustafa Barut, involved in the Afrin offensive, and Hakan Atınç from Joint Operations. They argued that it would take a huge force of about 40,000 to conduct a large-scale urban deployment in so many towns and in an area 500 kilometres long and 30 kilometres deep, and that fighting the US trained and armed YPG would be different to fighting the Kurdish insurgency in Afrin. Then there was the issue of protecting [four million people spread over one third of Syria's territory](#). It is thought that Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Chief of General Staff Yaşar Güler were responsible for their demotions because their [policies](#) were being challenged.

On January 4, Turkey requested that the US provide air support, logistics and transport for Turkey's fight against ISIS some 360 kilometres south of its [border](#). On January 6, US National Security advisor John Bolton announced that a US withdrawal was conditioned on the defeat of ISIS, and Turkey guaranteeing the safety of their sworn enemy: Syrian Kurdish [fighters and administrators](#). In Ankara on 7 – 8 January Erdogan's advisor, [Kalin Ibrahim](#), asked Bolton, General Joseph Dunford and James Jeffrey to hand over or destroy 22 US bases in [Syria](#), take back weapons from the YPG, and let Turkey have free reign. Jeffrey allegedly told the Turks that the US cooperation with the Kurds was tactical and temporary, and that bilateral ties with Turkey were paramount. [Michael Rubin](#) called it an April Glaspie moment. (In July 1990, Glaspie told Saddam Hussein, 'We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait.') To clarify matters, Bolton demanded Turkey co-ordinate any military action with the US and guarantee the safety of allied Kurdish fighters. He then presented a map that has been described as '[Sykes-Picot on acid](#)', dividing towns that would remain under Kurdish administrations and those that would come under Turkey's control. Erdogan's response was to increase his [threats](#) to eliminate YPG and PYD with or without US permission or a US troop withdrawal. After the US officials failed to change Erdogan's mind, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a whirlwind tour of nine countries plus a surprise visit to Baghdad and Erbil to assure officials that the US was a dependable [ally](#). Five of these countries remained without a US ambassador, as did Turkey.

In the meantime, Iraq got Assad's approval to undertake actions against ISIS in Syria without prior approval, and US military commanders recommended that the SDF be allowed to keep US-supplied anti-tank missiles, armoured vehicles and other [weapons](#). This proposal was contradicted by Senator Lindsay Graham mid-January. Graham had staunchly opposed a hasty US withdrawal, but after meeting Erdogan and other



Turkish officials in Ankara he claimed that before the US withdrew the Kurds had to be disarmed of their weapons, armoured vehicles and engineering equipment. It is unclear whether he had been persuaded by Erdogan and did not realise this would leave Kurds utterly defenceless against ISIS, the Assad Regime, Turkey and Iran, or whether this was a [tactic](#) to delay Turkey taking action.

On January 9, the Pentagon announced the US withdrawal was 'officially' underway, and that it would be completed within 90 to 120 days. The first day involved 10 US armoured vehicles and some trucks transporting [equipment](#) and [150 US troops](#) from Rmeilan military base in Hasaka into the [KRI](#). Less publicised was a US convoy of 150 trucks carrying armoured vehicles, equipment and troops in the opposite [direction](#), as well as 12 US Naval vessels, a F-35 squadron and another 4,500 Marines gathering in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf – the biggest build-up of US Naval power in recent history. The US was also busy reinforcing its bases in Jordan, Iraq and [Kuwait](#), and US troops were deployed to Kirkuk's K1 Military Base, where the *Hashd al-Shaabi* were told to [leave](#). Ten days [later](#), US troops took over several bases near Mosul while Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson, Colonel Sean Ryan, refused to disclose timelines, locations or [movements](#) related to the withdrawal.

That the US appeared to be staying reassured France and on January 10, France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian pledged that French troops would stay in Syria until there was a political [solution](#). On January 13 Trump ambiguously tweeted 'Will devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds. Create 20 mile safe zone....'. As an afterthought, he tweeted 'Kurds shouldn't provoke [Turkey](#)'. Turkish media reported that 80,000 Turkish soldiers had amassed at the border in preparation for the biggest cross-border operation in Turkey's modern history and on January 14, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the recently empowered leader of HTS, claimed HTS would help Turkey eliminate [Kurdish militants](#). That day Erdogan claimed that Trump had agreed to a Turkey-[controlled](#) buffer zone extending 30 kilometres south of the border.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeatedly asserted that the best solution was for the Syrian Government to take control of [east Syria](#), an anathema for the US as this would enable Iran to expand. But Russia also had other options, including the use of Russian military police, Egyptian and Gulf State troops, the recruitment of Sunni Arabs, Iraq increasing its cross-border operations and the deployment of the 6,000 Barzani-backed Rojava [Peshmerga](#), also being proposed by the [US](#).

From the beginning the Kurds made it clear that if they were forced to choose, they would choose Assad over Turkey. While initially they reported '[positive](#)' discussions with Assad and Russian officials about handing the defence of the border to the Assad Regime in return for Kurdish [autonomy](#), their optimism was premature. It soon became apparent that the Assad Regime had no intention of accepting any form of [autonomy](#), and that if the regime was to protect the border, Syrian Kurds had to forgo all manifestations of statehood and surrender their heavy arms, although they would be allowed to negotiate the use of the Kurdish language, keep their light arms and run



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for [local council](#) elections. As long as there was confusion about US intentions, the [Kurds](#) were not going to accept these conditions.

In late December and early January James Jeffrey and John Bolton asked the Syrian Kurds to put off making a deal with the regime until the US sorted out a deal with [Turkey](#) that would prohibit Turkey [entering](#) demarcated territories. In mid February, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Votel said the US would keep arming the SDF as long as they continued fighting [ISIS](#), but Coalition commander Lt. Gen. Paul LaCamera warned that the US would sever its military support if the SDF partnered with the Assad Regime. The problem for the US is that if the Assad Regime returned to east Syria, the US would no longer be able to rely on the SDF for protection, or have airspace and access to bases, unless such matters could be negotiated. If negotiations were successful, then there was the danger of inadvertently hitting Syrian and Russian forces. Kurdish leaders reassured the US that such a partnership was a long way off. It would require a political solution for the whole of Syria, as well as the Assad Regime agreeing to their conditions.

The SDF commander-in-chief, Mazlum Kobani, made it clear that Syrian Kurds and their allies would accept a safe zone and were willing to disarm inside the zone if the US [stayed](#) and the zone was controlled by the UN, the US-led coalition or other disinterested parties, but not the [aggressor](#). The US continued to try and [convince](#) the [French, British, Germans, Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians and Egyptians](#) to field a multinational [force](#) of up to [1500 troops](#) to oversee the [zone](#), which would include a limited number of Turkish troops and exclude YPG/J forces. France and the UK said they would agree to participate if the US remained in Syria. The US proposed that 6,000 Rojava Peshmerga patrol the towns, while French, British and Turkish forces conducted joint patrols in the countryside and the US or US-led coalition maintained the de facto no-fly [zone](#). Turkey and the Syrian Kurds rejected this solution. Turkey wanted airspace and Kurds feared any presence of Turkish troops and Turkey-backed militias. At the end of January, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said Turkey would prefer to manage the buffer zone alone would not exclude co-operating with the US, Russia and [others](#), while the Turkish military preferred the legitimacy of operating within a coalition.

On January 31, the [US Senate](#) voted 68 to 23 to advance an amendment that opposed US troops leaving Syria and Afghanistan. Trump ridiculed the vote. In February there was another change of plan. The US would leave at least 200 combat ready troops in the north and about the same number at al-Tanf. A few days later this was increased to 1,000 troops although the Pentagon denied the claim.

Erdogan and Putin met in Moscow on January 23. Russia has many levers on Turkey, but most would be at an economic cost to Russia. Instead Russia and Iran insisted that Turkey come to an agreement with the Assad Regime about [northeast Syria](#). After the meeting, Putin called for a political agreement between the Assad Regime and the Kurds, with Kurds being granted some autonomy, observing of east Syria, 'This region is currently in the hands of the Kurds. Damascus must talk to their representatives ... This dialogue will not only contribute to reconciliation in Syria, but also be to the



advantage of Syria's [neighbours](#).' Then Putin invoked the 1998 Adana Agreement, thereby signalling that negotiations had to take place between Turkey and Syria, as this agreement requires their coordination in hunting down PKK 'terrorists', with Turkey only having the right to go after PKK in Syria if Syria fails to do so.

Putin had opened a hornet's nest. In the following days, Turkey accused Syria of breaking the Adana Agreement by not cracking down on Kurd-led administrations and security forces, thus justifying a Turkish invasion. Syria accused Turkey of breaking the Adana Agreement by invading and occupying northern [Aleppo](#) and training and supporting terrorists to wage war on the Syrian Government. Syria said it would only consider reviving the Adana Agreement if Turkey withdrew from Syria. Putin had [outsmarted](#) Erdogan, but had simultaneously legitimised (by referring to negotiations) and undermined (by referring to the Adana Agreement) the status of Syrian Kurds.

On February 14, Presidents Putin, Erdogan and Rouhani met in Sochi. Afterwards, Erdogan said he expected his Astana partners would assist in ensuring there was no 'terrorist' corridor in northern Syria but Rouhani spoke of the rights of [Syrian Kurds](#)!

While one fiasco followed another, the [SDF](#), backed by US-led coalition airstrikes and ground support, continued to fight ISIS. After a massive ISIS counter offensive at the end of November that [killed](#) 92 SDF fighters, 61 ISIS fighters and 51 civilians (including 19 children) over three days, in December it was street to [street fighting in Hajin](#), until finally Hajin was liberated on December 25. Between September 10 and December 14, fighting had killed 539 SDF and 922 ISIS fighters (including 16 close aids to [Baghdadi](#)), airstrikes had killed 324 civilians and ISIS had [executed 700 prisoners](#). The SDF commander-in-chief estimated 5,000 ISIS fighters remained in the area contrary to Trump's declaration on December 18 that the ISIS caliphate was [defeated](#).

The SDF and US-led coalition then focused on the nearby towns of al-Shaafa and Sousa, enabling [25,000 people](#) to escape, taking Kashmah on January 2, meanwhile coping with ISIS suicide attacks in [Raqqqa](#) that killed 23 SDF [fighters](#) on January 8. Back in the Hajin area, the SDF accepted the surrender of 470 ISIS fighters, and organised 25 buses to evacuate 600 ISIS women and children, among them 'several' dozen men, before the last areas around Hajin were [cleared](#). That left ISIS and their families in Baghouz and in scattered [farmhouses](#).

On January 9 an offensive on Baghouz began but was regularly stopped to allow civilians to escape. By the end of January, some 23,000 IDPs had arrived in Al-Hol (Al-Hawl) Camp in the north. Despite a limited [UNHCR presence](#), thousands suffered from exposure to winter conditions without blankets, tents or heating. From early December to the third week in March, 138 died of [hyperthermia](#) or shrapnel wounds, many of them children under the age of [five](#) whilst travelling to or soon after arriving at the camp. The camp was built for 20,000 people but by the end of March sheltered [72,000](#).



Back in Deir Ezzor, by February 20, the SDF had surrounded Baghouz. ISIS released ten SDF fighters, probably in exchange for the SDF trucking in food, but refused to surrender, instead holding civilians hostage and demanding a corridor to [Idlib](#). Between December and March 23, [66,000 people evacuated from Baghouz](#). They included 5,000 ISIS fighters and 24,600 ISIS family members who surrendered to the SDF.

In late April and early May, MIT allegedly met with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Kobane several times in an effort to reach a deal between Turkey and the SDF. Apparently US Envoy to Syria and Iraq, James Jeffrey, encouraged these [meetings](#). Mazlum Kobane, repeated that Turkey had to withdraw from [Afrin](#) before the SDF could have faith in any negotiations, although one report suggested the restructuring of the local council of Tel Abyad was raised as a possible [compromise](#). Otherwise, Kurds were no clearer on US intentions and blamed Russia for having frozen talks with the regime, but Russia may not have been able to extract any concessions.

The unprecedented overwhelming international backlash to Turkey's threat to invade east Syria within days and bury all those associated with the administrations and security forces has led to a five-month hiatus. It is unlikely that Turkey will take unilateral action, but Turkey can push boundaries and use proxies, which [MIT](#) is training in assassinations and bomb attacks, and the TSK is training in air drop operations, urban warfare and storming enemy [positions](#). If allowed to enter east Syria, TSK could escalate actions and blame it on their victims, proxies, ISIS, Assad or Iran, in all probability causing the SDF to retaliate. Without US-led coalition support the SDF would be outgunned and another population would be forced to flee a war zone. The only escape route is through the border shared with the KRI. A KRG humanitarian contingency plan and KRG counterterrorism would become critical and require military and political coordination between the YPG/YPJ and Peshmerga, and between the KRG and the PYD-led administrations.

Scenarios to prevent such a human catastrophe if negotiations breakdown invariably ask Kurds to take risks or make concessions without offering concessions in [return](#). Examples include Kurds allowing a limited number of Turkish troops into northern Syria; Turks and Americans jointly deciding which of Turkey's Syrian proxies should 'protect' the zone; the YPG, SDF and PYD, and presumably others who support the current administrations melt into the population, or flee to Sinjar and the [KRI](#) before starting an insurgency; or [PKK](#) calling a ceasefire in Turkey and Turkey being allowed to control Syrian Arab towns in return for Syrian Kurdish towns being given autonomy! A more rationale suggestion came from a former NATO commander: build a physical buffer between Syria and Turkey policed by the UN, Russia and the US, or policed by Turkey in Turkey, and Syrians in Syria.

No one wants perpetual war but arguments in favour of the US withdrawal before a political transition in Syria are disingenuous. These arguments include: (1) What is left of ISIS cannot be eliminated by military means alone; (2) Israel can take care of itself; (3) Relations with Kurds have always been tactical; (4) Syria is not vital to US interests



(in disregard of its geopolitical position); (5) Russia and Iran will struggle to reconstitute a state; (6) US credibility will not be destroyed because the US has always maintained it was only in Syria to defeat [ISIS](#); (7) A US withdrawal does not stop the US working on reconciliations between the Turkish State and Kurds, Gulf States and the Kurds, Syria Kurds and Iraqi Kurds and doesn't stop the supply of the SDF through the [KRI](#) and (8) the Kurds will have to negotiate with the Syrian Government sooner or later.

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

Since 2015, the US has outsourced the stabilisation of territory liberated from ISIS east of the Euphrates to PYD-led multiethnic local administrations and the SDF. Overseeing 30 percent of Syria and an estimated four million people and the administrative and security structures is the Syrian Democratic Council, or what has become known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, sometimes called the Democratic Federation of North and East Syria.

Representatives of this territory have proposed to the Assad Regime that autonomous administrations across Syria be represented in a national parliament, that they be responsible for internal security, with the SDF being integrated into the Syrian Army, that people be educated in their mother tongue as well as Arabic, which would remain the official language, that all resources be distributed across Syria in a [fair manner](#), all in accordance with a new Syrian constitution. Their intermittent discussions, facilitated by Russia, have not budged the Assad Regime from wanting absolute centralised control. Nor have these proposals been represented at Astana or UN-auspiced negotiations because Turkey has opposed these representatives participating in any negotiations.

With few resources, the administrations have been relatively successful in rebuilding infrastructure and society compared to the Turkey-backed administrations in [northern Aleppo](#). But there are multiple challenges. In the Kurdish-majority areas one challenge is PYD's lack of trust and difficulty in accepting the presence of Kurdistan Democratic Party – Syria (KDP-S) and other parties that come under the umbrella of Barzani-backed ENKS, because these parties are seen to be affiliated with KDP in Iraq and Turkey, having joined the Turkey-backed Syrian National Coalition, which enables ENKS members to participate in political negotiations, at which it is unclear how they represent the administrations in east Syria. ENKS has an office in [Qamishli](#) but in other areas members have been arrested for spying and other activities. On January 5, representatives from PYD, the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), an umbrella group for PKK-affiliated organisations, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) announced non-licensed political parties could open offices in northern Syria. ENKS representatives claimed they would only believe the announcement if hundreds of ENKS members were released from [prison](#). Since January, more ENKS members have been [arrested](#), and meetings have been held between Kurdish political parties but ENKS has not [attended](#).



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To counteract the political dominance of PYD and undermine ENKS, in late 2018 Turkey established another political group called the Independent Kurdish Coalition of Syria, made up of politicians, lawyers, writers, academics and religious figures. By April they had held three meetings in Afrin and one in Mersin. Its 300 members support Turkey and its position that Assad must be removed from [power](#).

Another major challenge is coping with IDPs and ISIS prisoners. There are at least [1.3 million IDPs in northern Syria](#), with some reports claiming the figure to be two million. Conditions at al-Hol camp have already been described. The SDF holds at least 2,622 foreign nationals who are ISIS members, including 584 women and 1,248 children from 46 nationalities. Some children are unaccompanied. They are among the [9,000 ISIS and ISIS family members](#) detained by the SDF at the end of March. The SDF has repeatedly called on all countries to take their nationals back. In late January Belgium and Dutch courts ruled for the immediate removal of nationals who were female members of ISIS, and their children, in case Turkey invades and releases them, or Assad takes over and imprisons [them](#). With most countries refusing to take responsibility for their citizens who joined ISIS, the SDF is calling for an international tribunal to try foreign ISIS detainees in Syria, similar to what was established for Rwanda or former [Yugoslavia](#). The international community has yet to respond.

Local councils in Sunni Arab majority areas face additional challenges, which were outlined in detail by KLA in [July 2018](#). Members of the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF hold meetings with local leaders about negotiating with the Assad Regime, but Sunni Arabs are divided between those for and against negotiating, and between those who support Islamism and its values (e.g. women's place in society) and those who don't. There is resistance against the SDF's conscription campaign, their arrests and control of oil fields, with many Sunni Arabs objecting to the oil being sold to the Assad Regime. The SDF can be heavy-handed but have also shown flexibility in resolving tensions, for instance in Hasaka in [November](#). Yet protests have increased in over time. For instance, in January 'hundreds' attacked the SDF with stones, protesting the arrest of 70 people in the towns of Hunaideh and al-Mansoureh, and in al-Mansoureh people set fire to SDF [checkpoints](#). In [April](#), small protests in Deir-Ezzor became a daily occurrence. Syria, Iran, ISIS and Turkey inflame protests that are basically a rejection of Kurds' increased status, fanned by propaganda. For instance, [articles](#) talk about oil revenue being used to enrich individuals in the administrations when oil revenue is needed to provide services that are made possible by many working as volunteers.

Some argue that in areas where there is a Sunni Arab majority, alternative administrations based on traditional tribal structures should be developed, but this suggestion and many media reports do not take into account that the SDF is not a Kurdish nationalist force, it is a multiethnic force that has incorporated locals into local security forces; traditional structures are broken; and Sunni Arabs are divided. Hence, replacing rather than transforming existing structures could result in the chaos now witnessed in northern Aleppo and Idlib.



It takes time and resources for reconciliation, stabilisation and reconstruction to build strong structures with true power-sharing arrangements that allow diverse points of view and that can withstand infiltration. On May 3, the Syrian Democratic Council held another meeting in Ain Assa attended by 5,000 people including Kurds and representatives of 70 Arab tribes to discuss a way forward in negotiating with the Assad Regime and demanding Turkey leave Syria. Russia criticised the exercise as being [separatist](#) despite knowing that the Syrian Democratic Council wants autonomy within a united Syria. Otherwise, the [Syria Recovery Trust Fund](#), funded by Germany, the UAE, US, some European States, Japan, Kuwait, Jordan and Turkey, and working through local councils and public service providers has recently embarked on projects supporting health and agriculture in the north east in partnership with USAID and the US State Department. With very little resources, local councils and people are rebuilding in places like Kobani and Raqqa, with 150,000 Raqqans out of a pre-ISIS population of 200,000 having returned to the [city](#) by December 2018.

The US has the capability to channel more funds into eastern Syria but many commentators say it is critical to get Turkey onside, most likely through economic incentives such as hosting a transit pipeline for the region's oil, and becoming a supply line for reconstruction. Another route for oil and agriculture is through the KRI, but this also relies on Turkey's cooperation because the KRG relies on Turkey for food imports and oil exports. By not embarking on reconstruction in east Syria the US, the EU and others increase the likelihood of social unrest, an ISIS resurgence, and an Assad takeover without concessions.¹⁵

Commentators suggest the PYD and SDF need to moderate their requirement for others to adhere to [PKK ideology](#). But what does this mean? The basic tenants of PKK ideology – democratic confederalism; women's rights, including women being represented on all councils; and environmental sustainability are constructive, although convincing Sunni Arab and other conservatives of their value will take time. The real challenges for the administrative and military structures are accepting people who do not idolise Abdullah Ocalan, forgoing symbols like Ocalan's image, and adopting a flag that represents all people in the Autonomous Region and not just a political party or militia.

Syrian Political negotiations

After the Iranian, Turkish and Russian presidents met in Tehran on September 7 to discuss Idlib, on September 10 – 11, UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura met with representatives of the Astana troika in Geneva to discuss three lists of 50 names each that had been prepared for a constitutional committee. Two of three lists were agreed upon: the regime list and the [opposition list](#). A third list, which was prepared by de Mistura for 'independents', experts and civil society representatives, was contentious. [Russia and Iran objected to the list](#), claiming insufficient consultation, and that names they had suggested in January had been omitted. It was decided to set up a team of

¹⁵ Atlantic Council Conference on US Policy Towards Syria



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experts to refine the third list by [October](#). Despite no Syrians being present at the meetings, a statement was issued claiming this would be a 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process.'

This Geneva meeting was followed by meetings with officials from the US (represented by James Jeffrey and Joel Rayburn), UK, France, Germany, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on September 14 to discuss the process for rewriting the constitution and holding elections. The ensuing statement claimed all mechanisms and processes must include representatives from all Syrian political stakeholders, specifically mentioning representatives from northeast Syria. The outcome had to be 'a greater balance of powers' and 'Authority should be explicitly devolved and decentralized including on a regional [basis](#).' These statements were reassuring to Syrian Kurds and their allies.

At the UN General Assembly meeting on September 26, the US, UK, France, Germany, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan asked de Mistura to submit a progress report to the UN Security Council by [October 31](#). Prior to the deadline Mistura visited Damascus in an effort to have the Assad Regime agree to his third list for the constitutional committee. His list was rejected. Syria's Foreign Minister claimed Syria's constitution was a sovereign matter that Syrians must work on without outside [interference](#) and Syria strongly objected to the UN selecting a third of the committee.

On October 18, with still no agreement on the third list, [Mistura](#) announced his resignation. He left his position at the end of December. Back on October 27, the presidents of Russia, France, Turkey and Angela Merkel of Germany met in Istanbul to discuss Idlib and Syria. The meeting was a PR coup for Turkey, Russia and Iran. That France and Germany attended without the presence of the US was an indication of the level of [European concern for its security](#) if an Idlib offensive went ahead, or the Iranian regime collapsed. Afterwards, a joint statement supported a lasting ceasefire in Idlib, the territorial integrity of Syria and the [establishment of the constitutional committee](#), without reference to the lists being heavily weighted in [Assad's favour](#). No impasses were addressed, including the status of Assad and what was going to happen to 'terrorists' in Idlib and Turkish forces in Idlib and northern Aleppo, although Putin continued to demand that Turkey withdraw all its 'armed groups' from [Syria](#).

Following this meeting, the High Negotiations Committee issued their own roadmap for the development of a constitution, transitional government and elections, not mentioning mechanisms to overcome impasses, except to say all 'arrangements/rules/laws aiming at dissolving/obstructing/impeding the political activities of the opposition' must be scrapped, and a general amnesty put in place for all opposition [activities](#).

In [November](#), de Mistura announced the intention to hold the first meeting of the constitutional committee in [December](#), but doubted whether even forming the constitutional committee was possible. Astana XI was held on November 28 and included representatives from Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Assad Regime and the Opposition. A joint statement reconfirmed the need to preserve the territorial



integrity of Syria, the Idlib ceasefire and a prisoner swap (the regime and Opposition illegally hold up to [16,000 prisoners each](#)) and that the Astana guarantors 'rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism.'

Although the [Astana troika](#) want to have the final say over Syria's future, they can't even agree on what to call the country (Russia wants 'Arab Republic', Turkey wants 'Syrian Republic' and Iran wants 'Islamic Republic'), the structure of governance (Russia wants a federation, Turkey wants an Ottoman *millah* system giving some autonomy to at least 12 ethnic and religious communities, and Iran wants a centralised state), or the status of their troops in Syria (Russia wants its military installations enshrined in the constitution, Turkey wants a phased withdrawal of troops without a time line, and Iran wants a permanent presence).

On November 29 the Syrian envoy to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, criticised Turkish forces illegally entering cities in Idlib, and the Turkification of [northern Aleppo](#), and reiterated the demand that Turkey leave Syria. In early December, US Syria envoy James Jeffrey said the US and new UN envoy to Syria should pull the plug on the [Astana process](#) if it can't form a constitution committee.

In December, the UN refused the Assad Regime's request to change 17 names from the 50 UN nominated independents in the constitutional committee but agreed to change six names. [Germany, France and Britain](#) also objected to the 'independents' list approved by Syria and the Astana troika. The new UN envoy to Syria, Norwegian diplomat Geir Pederson, arrived in Geneva on January 8 with no constitutional committee having been formed, and uncertainties surrounding Arab countries reconciling with the Assad Regime, US policies, a Turkish invasion, and [so on](#). Despite Astana XII being held at the end of [April](#), there is still no agreement on the constitutional committee as of May 14.

Turkey's other Foreign Relations

Turkey's domestic and foreign policies are alienating the US, Europe, Russia, Israel, Iraq and the Gulf States, while Iran is also worried about Turkey's wish to expand its occupation of Syria and its offensives in Iraq. The extent of Turkey's isolation was highlighted at President [Erdogan's swearing in ceremony on 9 July 2018](#). No neighbouring country or European country sent a representative. The US was represented by its charge d'affaires in Ankara. Except for Qatar, no Middle East country sent a representative, and except for Venezuela, no country in the Americas sent a representative. Twenty-two heads of state and 28 prime ministers or parliament speakers attended, among them Russia's prime minister, [European Commissioner](#) Dimitris Avramopoulos, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Bulgaria's leader, Rumen Radev. Others were from the Balkans, central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, northern Cyprus, the Palestinian Authority and the KRI, all in need of Turkey's largesse, with the KRI Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani keen to normalise



relations with Turkey that have not recovered since the KRI held a referendum on independence in September 2017.

Turkey – Europe relations

Relations between Europe and Turkey revolve around trade (Europe is [Turkey's](#) biggest trading partner), energy security (with Europe looking forward to the completion of the [Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project](#) (TANAP) in 2020 from BP's Azerbaijan fields in the Caspian Sea), military security in the form of NATO and asylum seeker flows, common borders and proximity, leading to many citizens of Turkey living in Europe, and, lastly, Turkey's application to join the European Union (EU). Some observers claim that Europe contributed to the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey because Turkey was 'good enough' to join NATO but not 'good enough' to join the EU. Certainly, Europeans' support for Turkey's accession is low: between five and eight percent in France, the UK, Sweden Germany, Denmark and [Finland](#). The counterargument is that Turkey has long flouted EU institutions and [values](#). Today, Turkey is further than ever from realising its goal of joining the EU or even getting visa liberalisation or an upgraded custom union because of its one-man-rule, lack of human rights, compromised judiciary and press freedoms and Turkey's aggression in the eastern Mediterranean involving territorial disputes in and around [Cyprus](#). For instance, on 4 May 2018, a Turkish merchant vessel violated maritime rules and collided with a Greek naval vessel in the Aegean. These factors contributed to the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee telling the European Commission and EU member states on February 20, 2019, to freeze accession talks with Ankara, and in March the European Parliament passed a resolution to suspend accession talks. The resolution is only a guide, and would require member states to take [action](#), but none of this has deterred Turkey's leaders, who immediately announced that Turkey would soon start drilling for gas off [Cyprus](#) and that no other company should do so without input from Turkey. In response to Turkey's increasingly threatening [postures](#), the US is considering legislation to provide military support and training to Greece and Greek Cyprus.

Turkey needs European investment and assistance to address its foreign debt crisis at a time when European foreign investment in Turkey is decreasing (German investment declined from \$1.9 billion in 2013 to \$295 million in 2017). In September 2018, Chancellor Angela Merkel linked financial and economic assistance to Turkey with Turkey (re)establishing the rule of law and strengthening its checks and [balances](#). The dilemma for Europe is that Europe is vulnerable to Turkey's erratic foreign policies and use of blackmail, and will become increasingly so if the [Nord Stream 2 pipeline](#) does not go ahead. Alternatives include routing gas through existing Balkan pipelines or fast tracking the Eastern Mediterranean security and energy alliance.

European vulnerabilities lead to inconsistencies regarding Turkey. The [EU budget](#) for 2021 – 2027, released on 2 May 2018, included pre-accession assistance, but omitted reference to Turkey. In September, the EU Parliament voted overwhelmingly to withhold 70 million Euros of pre-accession funding to [Turkey](#). In the intervening period Austria, Germany and the Netherlands banned Turkish politicians from campaigning in



their country before Turkey's elections in June 2018. The only European country that let Erdogan (or any other parliamentarian) hold a rally was [Bosnia – Herzegovina](#), Bosnia having been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for four centuries and Muslims making up half of its 3.5 million population. On the day of the rally in May, the [Bosnian and Turkish transport ministers](#) signed a letter of intent to build a railway between the two Balkan capitals. Germany hosts the largest population of people from Turkey. For Turkey's June 2018 elections, only half of all eligible German Turkish voters turned out. Of these, nearly two-thirds voted for Erdoğan as [president](#). Elections in Germany, the Netherlands and Austria are also affected by Erdoğan calling on dual citizens not to vote for the enemies of Turkey. Such antics have increased pressure on dual citizens to decide on a single citizenship.

Europe is also caught up in Turkey's Islamisation and purge. In June 2018, [Austria's](#) ultra-conservative government closed seven mosques run by the AKP-linked [Turkish-Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation in Austria](#), and expelled their imams, in an attempt to stop Erdogan appealing to religiously conservative Muslims. Erdogan's response was that Australia was trying to start a new war between the Cross and Crescent. (Some 250 mosques serve 600,000 people of Turkish origin living in Austria). In mid-June the [Swiss federal prosecutor's office issued arrest warrants](#) for two Turkish diplomats that were MIT operatives (Haci Mehmet Gani and Hakan Kamil Yerge) who were accused of planning to kidnap a Turkish businessman for his alleged links to the Gulen Movement. Imams in 900 German mosques run by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, have been spying on German Turks suspected of supporting Gulen or PKK 'terrorists'. As a result, the German government stopped funding the organisation in August 2018. On Erdogan's red carpet visit to Germany in September 2018, Erdogan demanded Germany hand over 69 Turkish citizens. In reply Chancellor Angela Merkel said Turkey must release political prisoners, including five German nationals. On November 29, a [British court rejected Turkey's extradition request](#) for Akin Ipek, owner of the Koza-Ipek media conglomerate, and [two others](#), who Turkey accuses of being involved in the failed coup of 2016.

Despite these political tensions, European armament companies continue to sell hardware, ammunitions, spare parts and technologies to Turkey, facilitated by their respective governments. Although Netherlands claimed its supply of equipment to 22 Turkey-backed militias would end immediately if Turkey invaded Afrin, equipment was still being supplied to some militias in Operation Olive Branch in [March 2018](#). An early 2018 YouGov opinion poll in Germany found [83 percent](#) of 2,026 participants thought Germany should not supply weapons to Turkey if these were being used against Kurds. Despite the German Government approving the sale to Turkey of military equipment worth 4.4 million Euros in 2017, following Turkey's invasion of Afrin, only 916,000 Euros of equipment was shipped. The [delay](#) impacts replacement parts for Turkey's German-made Leopard [tanks](#). However, in early May 2018 the [German Government](#) approved the sale of submarine parts to Turkey from the German steel manufacturer ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, presumably because submarines pose no threat to landlocked Kurds. Similarly, the Brexiting UK has negotiated lucrative defence



contracts with Turkey. UK arms industry licences with Turkey tripled since 2008, the value of British armament sales to Turkey increasing by a [factor of 13](#).

Turkey – US Relations

Many in Turkey think that the US was behind the failed coup in 2016 and the falling lira in [2018](#). Until February 2019 Trump had not nominated a US ambassador to Turkey. Trump nominating David Satterfield came after Wes Mitchell, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs resigned in January. Mitchell had advocated taking a firm stance with Turkey, but Washington continued to send mixed messages. With Turkey insisting on taking delivery of Russia's S-400 missile system, and militarily threatening Syrian Kurds, some predict it is too late to salvage deteriorating relations.

The list of grievances is long. Turkey fiercely resents the US' past reticence in selling the Patriot Missile Defence System to Turkey, the US' refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, the US' broken promises in continuing to support the YPG and SDF in Syria, its unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and sanctions on Iran, Trump's announcements that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and the occupied Golan Heights is Israeli territory, the conviction and prison term given former Halkbank deputy governor, Mehmet Haka Attila, for bank fraud and five counts of conspiracy on 16 [May 2018](#), and the fining of Halkbank for evading international sanctions on Iran in 2012 – 2013, the US stance on Cyprus, Congressional resolutions on the Armenian genocide and the US playing a [zero sum game](#) on all the above.

The US is likewise concerned about Turkey's closer ties with Russia, including it signing multiple energy¹⁶ and military deals, the transactional alliance of both countries in Syria, Turkey's wish to purchase the Patriot System and Russia's S-400 missile defence system with training due to start in June and the first delivery in August to build up to four batteries, each with three mobile vehicles carrying a launching pad for 36 missiles, radar and command [unit](#); Turkey's continued imprisonment of [a US citizen](#) and three US consular staff (one of whom is facing a [life sentence](#)), Turkey's intransigence regarding the YPG and SDF, and Turkey's drip feed of information on the Jamal Khashoggi murder that put the US in an awkward position with its Saudi ally.

For a long time the US administration was divided about how to handle its troublesome NATO 'ally'. The [White House, State Department](#) and Department of Defence advocated diplomacy because of Turkey's increasingly theoretical role in containing Iran and Russia, and Turkey hosting NATO's radar system, the US' B61 nuclear arsenal, and Turkey enabling US land, sea and air power projection in the Middle East, Black Sea and Caucasus. Much earlier on, the US Congress took a firmer line on Turkey taking delivery of Russia's S-400 system and imprisoning US citizens and consular staff. Back in 2017, [Congress](#) passed a sanctions bill called the Countering

¹⁶ The Russian built [Akkuyu nuclear power station](#) in Mardin will generate electricity at an average of \$12.35 per kilowatt hour – three times the world average.



America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act ([CAATSA](#)), which targets entities that do business with sanctioned Russian arms firms like the S-400 manufacturer, Almaz-Antey. As early as May 2018, three [US Congress](#) members proposed blocking the sale of Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets to Turkey because of Ankara's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defence system and plan to host a [Russian radar system](#). With the first F-35 due to be 'delivered' on June 21, on May 11, the House Armed Services Committee advanced an amendment to the National Defence Authorisation Act that would ban 'major defence equipment' sales to Turkey, including 100 F-35s, as well as F-16s, Patriot surface-to-air missile systems and helicopters, until the Pentagon submitted a report within 60 days of the bill being passed that detailed how Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile defence system would impact 'current [NATO] interoperability challenges', including intelligence and technology sharing, as well as operations at Incirlik airbase. The amendment included further sanctions on Turkey if Turkey proceeded but was actually a compromise – some committee members were seeking a permanent ban on the sale of F-35s to Turkey, as well as sanctions on individuals responsible for holding US citizens in unlawful custody. On [May 24](#), the Armed Services Committee House passed the amendment and later the House of Representatives passed its version of the amendment by [351 to 66](#). Not waiting for the Senate to vote, 44 members of the House of Representatives, from both parties, wrote to then Secretary of Defence, Jim Mattis, outlining [why the US should stop the transfer of F-35s to Turkey](#). [Congressional members](#) that argued against this pointed out that this would delay the deliveries of F-35s to other countries (it was a joint project between [nine countries](#)) and incur a huge cost to Lockheed Martin. But on June 18, the US Senate passed its version of the bill and the amendment [85 to 10](#).

Three days later, Turkey announced that the first two F-35s were 'delivered', although the planes would not leave US soil for another [year](#). If the US refused to fill Turkey's order, Turkey threatened to purchase its [Russian competitor, the SU-57 stealth fighter jets](#). Insistent on taking delivery of the S-400 system, in late June 2018 Turkey claimed it would demand Russia train Turks in Russia, that Russians would not step onto Turkish soil, and Turkey's purchase would enable the US to inspect the capabilities of the [S-400 system](#)! On 13 August 2018, Trump signed into law the [defence bill that delayed the delivery of 100 F-35s to Turkey](#). At the end of November, US Secretary of Defence handed Congress the long awaited [report](#), and on February 19 Trump signed a spending bill that blocked the transfer of F-35s to Turkey until the US Secretaries of State and Defence reported on Turkey's S-400 purchase. If Turkey proceeded, a Congressional bill required US departments to submit a plan for sanctions, pursuant to section 231 of the [Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017](#) (Public Law 115–44). By April 2019, Vice President Pence was claiming Turkey must choose between being part of NATO or making reckless decisions that undermine the alliance, while Pompeo threatened 'devastating consequences' if Turkey took unilateral action in north east Syria. That month the Pentagon suspended all deliveries of parts for the [F-35s to Turkey](#) and US officials said the sale and delivery of 100 F-35s to Turkey depended on Turkey not taking delivery of the S-400. Turkey continued to argue that countries like Greece have NATO and Russian systems (Greece has yet to



buy F-35s), and the S-400 would not be integrated with [NATO systems](#) and could even be positioned in another country. To date, such arguments have failed to convince the US administration to change its position.

Regarding the imprisonment of US citizens and US consular staff, back on 21 [June 2018](#), three days before the Turkish elections, the US imposed \$267 million worth of tariffs on Turkey's \$1.1 billion worth of steel and aluminium exports to the USA. In response, Turkey announced the imposition of 40 percent, 35 per cent and 32 percent additional duties on US whiskey, automotive imports, and PVC imports, and other tariffs on US coal, paper, walnuts, almonds, tobacco, unprocessed rice, machinery and equipment, etc., worth \$267 million on a trade of [\\$1.8 billion](#). In July, the matter of [two US citizens and three consular staff](#) being held in Turkish prisons came to a head, the most prominent being Pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been incarcerated since October 2016. He faced 35 years in a Turkish prison if convicted of espionage and 'acts of terrorism' (including '[Christianisation](#)'), with some charges related to the [2016 coup](#) despite Brunson not being in Turkey at the time. After a ten-hour court hearing in Izmir on May 6, in which no defence witnesses were called, the court ruled that the US Pastor must remain in prison until the next court hearing on July 18. On July 18, the court upheld the pastor's charges, but seven days later the pastor was moved to [house arrest](#). When an appeal against Brunson's house arrest [failed](#), despite the US having secured the release of a Turkish national, Ebru Ozkan, held by Israel for her connections with Hamas, President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence tweeted [threats](#) that the US would impose harsher sanctions on Turkey unless Brunson was released. On 26 [July](#), the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed a bill restricting loans to Turkey 'until the Turkish government stops the arbitrary detention of US citizens and embassy employees'. At stake are [loans from international institutions](#), Turkey being the second largest recipient of funds from the World Bank's [International Financial Corporation](#) and the largest recipient of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development loans in 2017. On August 1, the US [Treasury sanctioned Turkey's Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice](#) for their part in the on-going detention of Pastor Andrew Brunson, based on the 2016 Global Magnitsky Act that allows the US to sanction foreign officials implicated in human rights abuses. US assets of these ministers were frozen (although they claimed they did not have any) and all US-based entities were prohibited from dealing with them. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevut Cavusoglu warned that Turkey would [retaliate](#) and Erdogan announced that two nameless US officials would be sanctioned. Diplomatic channels continued to operate but in early August, a meeting over the release of Brunson failed to achieve the desired outcome. Turkey appeared to be playing hostage diplomacy, wanting to swap Brunson for Mehmet Hakan Atilla and to have all on-going investigations, charges and fines dropped against Halkbank. Not only were Turkish officials refusing to release Brunson, on [August 8](#) Turkish lawyers filed terrorist charges on [US military officers in Turkey](#) and requested Incirlik airbase to be temporarily [closed](#) and searched. Trump was personally affronted. On August 10, Trump doubled the tariffs on aluminium and steel imported from Turkey. Erdogan said the US was waging an '[economic war](#)', and 'We will give our answer, by shifting to new markets, new partnerships and new alliances ...'. Erdogan asked Turks to boycott US electronic goods. The White House and State Department said further action would be



taken if Pastor Andrew Brunson was not [released](#) by August 15. Instead, [Turkey raised tariffs](#) on US imported cars (to 120 percent), alcohol (to 140 percent) and tobacco (to 60 percent), and doubled the tariffs on US cosmetics, rice and coal, after which [Turkey lodged a complaint with the WTO](#) about US tariffs!

Between September and November 2018 US – Turkey relations improved with the US backing Turkey’s demand to halt an Idlib offensive in September and the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson on [October 12](#), despite a Turkish court upholding his convictions, resulting in the US lifting tariffs imposed on Turkey in August. In November, the US announced a bounty for information on the whereabouts of three top PKK leaders (Murat Karayilan, military commander of HPG - PKK’s military arm, and Cemil Bayik and Duran Kalkan, senior members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) executive council), and gave Turkey a 180-day waiver to comply with US sanctions on Iran. The US liaised with Turkey in an investigation into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi at a Saudi consulate, despite or because of Erdogan using the murder to discredit Erdogan’s political foe, Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia) and US – Turkey began joint patrols along the Safur River north of Manbij city. The US also gave Turkey a six-month waiver to comply with US sanctions on Iran.

But it was a short reprieve. Additional grievances included Turkey objecting to the US setting up observation posts along the border with Turkey, Turkey threatening war on Syrian Kurds, and Turkey objecting to US envoy to Syria James Jeffrey suggesting the Astana process had reached a dead end.

As tensions ratcheted up in December, again the US took a conciliatory approach, with the US State Department offering to sell Turkey the US Patriot missile defence System (although this would need Congressional approval) and US prosecutors dropping an appeal for Atilla to be given a longer [sentence](#) than the original 32 months. Trump even talked about extraditing Gulen, reducing or cutting all fines on Halkbank and handing Atilla back to Turkey, although none of these proposals had gone through the necessary approvals.

The US has looked the other way when it comes to Turkey’s passive and active support for ISIS; its recruitment, training, arming and paying of two proxy Islamist militia armies, and its invasion of Afrin and well documented war crimes and crimes against humanity in the district. Presumably the rationale is that Turkey is too important to NATO and that Turkey’s occupation was stopping the Assad Regime regaining control of northern Aleppo and Idlib. Yet US intelligence and defence must be worried about the potential consequences of Turkey training and arming Islamist extremists.

Since January 2019, US leaders have been more strident in their approach to Turkey. In January Trump threatened to ‘devastate Turkey economically’ if Turkey attacked YPG forces in Syria. In March the US excluded Turkey from its [Generalized System of Preferences](#) program that allows certain goods duty-free entry into the US. On May 2, Turkey lost its exemption from US sanctions on Iran, and faces multiple sanctions over its dealings with Russia and Venezuela. As well as affecting the Turkish economy,



sanctions will impact Turkey's rapidly expanding defence industry, which aims for self-sufficiency and has export agreements with Qatar and Pakistan, given this industry is heavily reliant on [imported technologies](#), 50 percent coming from Europe and 35 percent from the US. The industry also suffers from a brain drain and from contracts going to Erdogan's business associates.

But even in the face of compounding economic, political and military costs, Erdogan remains defiant. Some argue sanctions on Turkey will make Erdogan and the conspiracy theorists around him more hardline, and will push Turkey closer to [Russia, Iran and China](#). Others argue that [Russian and German](#) sanctions on Turkey convinced Erdogan to adopt more beneficial [policies](#), and that US enticements and Erdogan's control of the media enable him to backflip. These arguments underestimate Erdogan's change of character since becoming an autocrat, surrounding himself with sycophants and being forced to rely on ultranationalists in government.

The outstanding questions in US-Turkey relations remain: Will Erdogan take delivery of Russia's S-400s, and maintain trade with Iran and a war footing with Kurds in Turkey and Syria, despite the huge costs to Turkey? What is the US and NATO prepared to put up with to keep Turkey in NATO, and do they have [alternative courses of action](#)? Many argue that no other country is in the same geopolitical position with sufficient military capabilities. If this is the case, and it could be just old men not being able to think outside the box, the US and NATO need other levers to counteract Turkey's destabilising actions in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. These levers will need to address Turkey's energy insecurity and that about half of Turkey's population are uneasy about Turkey's current trajectory.

Turkey – NATO Relations

Back in 2015, Turkey cancelled its planned purchase of a Chinese missile defence system and Germany, the Netherlands and the US removed their Patriot missiles from Turkish [soil](#). Since then, Turkey has become even more anti-West, with many observers assessing that Turkey's interests are no longer compatible with NATO's interests. Yet NATO has no mechanism to expel a member and has taken a conciliatory path with Turkey, as expressed Air Chief Marshal Stuart Peach, head of the NATO Military Committee in [Defence Post](#) in March 2019:

Turkey's a very strong and very dependable ally. The recent Military Committee visit to Turkey made that clear, ... that unity is our great strength. Turkey makes a very significant contribution to NATO. ... through [airborne warning and control system aircraft] and other forms of NATO capability ... Right at the heart of (Turkey's contribution) is (that) Turkey sits ... at that crossroads between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Turkey's strength and dependability is vital to the alliance's solidarity and unity.

Do you share in concerns over [the S-400 acquisition that Turkey seems to be continuing](#) to aspire to?



Acquisition is a national business. It's not for NATO to choose or advise allies on weapons systems.

By May, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was expressing concern by saying NATO had to avoid conditions that result in one NATO member – the US – sanctioning another NATO member – [Turkey](#). Underneath the diplomatic speak Turkish personnel at NATO's military headquarters are being excluded from critical meetings on air defence, reconnaissance and [intelligence](#).

Turkey – Russian Relations

Like the US, Russia has gone softly on Turkey since 2016, with Putin intent on luring Erdogan into Russia's orbit. While Turkey and Europe have more trade links than Turkey and Russia, Russia has more energy and trade links with Turkey than the US, and these are set to increase. Russia delivers gas to Turkey and Europe via the Blue Stream pipeline and the Trans-Balkan pipeline, and is due to deliver more gas via the [Turkstream pipelines](#). In November, the two countries celebrated the completion of the Black Sea section of the Turkstream gas pipelines, which will supply Turkey and southern Europe, and along with the Bluestream pipeline from [Russia](#), and the gas and oil pipelines from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, will make Turkey a major energy hub. Turkey and Russia have also expanded their political ties, having joined forces in the Astana process and both wanted the US to remain in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Despite this apparent 'harmony' of interests, historically Russia and the Ottomans were often at war, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015, and an off-duty policeman assassinated the Russian ambassador to Turkey in Ankara in December 2016. Ongoing tensions include Russia and Turkey being on opposing sides of the Syrian civil war, Turkey not complying with the Idlib agreement and threatening to invade Manbij and east of the Euphrates, Russia and Turkey having different goals for Syria, including Russia advocating some form of federation and autonomy for Kurds, and for Kurds to participate in political negotiations; Russia not classifying the PKK as a terrorist organisation, calling on all Turkish forces and Islamists to leave Syria, and strongly objecting to a Turkey invasion of east Syria, whereas after Trump announced an immediate withdrawal of all US troops, Turkey suddenly found itself scrambling for US support. Turkey definitely does not want to face a joint US-Russian position on Syrian Kurds, but now finds it is doing so in Manbij.

Other differences between Turkey and Russia include the importance Russia places on its relations with Israel, whereas Erdogan is decidedly on the side of Hamas and the Palestinians. Elsewhere Turkey and Russia are on opposing sides regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Armenia-Azerbaijan confrontation over the disputed territory Nagorno-Karabakh, with Turkey planning a military base in [Nakhichevan](#), and Russia sending arms to Armenia. In addition, Turkey's dream of being the sole energy transit to Europe is being jeopardised by [an agreement between Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan](#), signed on 12 August 2018, that could mean



the pipeline bypasses Turkey. In the near term, what could fracture relations is a Russian-backed Assad offensive on Idlib. Russia knows this and hence Russia has held back from a ground offensive in Idlib despite the HTS resurgence. Russia could have been waiting for UN-auspiced negotiations to resolve the matter, but by May possibly sees this pathway going nowhere. It is no coincidence that as Idlib heats up, Turkey is contemplating a US request to delay the delivery of the S-400 missile defence [system](#).

Turkey – Egypt/Gulf State relations

Erdogan's blatant hubris and wish to reclaim Ottoman land in Syria and Iraq and ambition to become the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, at the same time fanning nationalist sentiment in Turkey, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Spring, along with its military and economic relations with Qatar, its political and economic relations with Iran, its invasion and occupation of northern Syria, its hijacking of the Syrian Opposition to fight Kurds instead of Assad, and failure to integrate Syrian refugees in Turkey, in combination with Arab nationalism, has caused Gulf States and Egypt to isolate Turkey, reduce funding to the Syrian opposition and push back on its regional aspirations, even to the point of providing troops and stabilisation funds for eastern Syria.

Relations reached a [crisis point](#) when Turkey milked information and misinformation about the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 to undermine, if not bring down, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, who had previously labelled Turkey 'a triangle of evil'. Indicative of deteriorating relations, on November 22, Jordan imposed [customs duties](#) of between 20 to 30 percent on all imports from Turkey, after cancelling a free trade agreement with Turkey, and Saudi Arabia led a boycott on Turkish [goods](#). With the Arab League having suspended Syria from its membership in [2011](#), that the [UAE and Bahrain](#) opened diplomatic relations with Syria in December, and Jordan upgraded its embassy in [January](#), was more about their wish to curb Turkey and Iran's [expansion in Syria](#), ensure they could influence the Sunni Arab [voice](#) in any political transition and have a role in reconstruction, than an indication of their support for Assad.

Turkey – Iran relations

US support for Saudi Arabia, the subsequent isolation of Qatar, US sanctions on Iran impacting Turkey and Turkey being part of the Astana troika, has pushed Turkey towards Iran, especially as Turkey is dependent on Iranian oil and shares Iran's wish to not allow any form of autonomy for Kurds in Syria or their own countries. However, underlying cordial relations is a regional rivalry that could be operationalised in Syria. Moreover, having signed a preferential trade agreement in 2015, bilateral trade was \$9.3 billion in 2018, the lowest it has been for nine years, down from a peak of \$22 billion in 2012. The trade balance is in [Iran's favour](#).



Turkey – Iraq relations

Turkey is courting Iraq for [reconstruction contracts](#) and has offered a \$5 billion line of credit for Turkish companies to be involved. Turkey would like to reopen its consulate in Mosul and establish consulates in Basra, Kirkuk and Najaf, and double its trade with Iraq but to date there has been no agreement on Turkish dams reducing water flows into Iraq and Turkey has ignored Iraq's repeated requests to remove its bases from Iraqi soil, and to stop conducting airstrikes and ground offensives inside the [KRI](#). Talks of another oil pipeline and border crossing that avoids the KRI have not progressed.

Turkey – Israel relations

Israeli-Turkish relations were tense between 2010 and 2016. There was a re-approachment in 2016, but in July 2017 UAE inspectors on an Iran-bound ship found Israeli manufactured electronic equipment, its sale to Iran having been banned under the JCPOA-related UN Security Council Resolution 2231. It turned out that Israeli had sold the equipment to a [Turkish firm](#). The UN is now investigating the matter.

Turkey has also increased its support for Hamas and Islamic groups in east Jerusalem, and as a result, a growing number of Israeli politicians call for Israel to confront rather than appease Erdogan, suggesting that Israel should recognise the Armenian genocide and the Democratic Federation of North and East Syria, and support an independent Kurdistan.

Turkey's leaders were enraged by the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, and the US' unilateral declaration that the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights was Israeli territory in 2019. When Israeli soldiers killed 65 Palestinians and wounded another 2,700 Palestinians protesting at the border fence on 14 May 2018, Erdogan called Israel a '[terror state](#)' and [recalled its ambassadors](#) from Israel and the US. Netanyahu's response was, 'A man whose hands are [stained with the blood of countless Kurdish citizens](#) in Turkey and Syria is the last one who can preach to us about combat ethics.' Israel recalled its ambassador from Turkey, expelled the Turkish consul in east Jerusalem, and [blocked the importation of Turkey's agricultural products](#). In the second week of May 2018, Likud member, [Yoav Kisch](#), put a motion to the Knesset that 'Facing Iran's strengthening in the region, Turkey's extremism and the dissolution of Syria, Israel must lead and support the Kurdish effort to establish an independent state.' On May 22, [Turkey voiced its support](#) for a Palestinian submission to the International Court in The Hague to investigate the killing of the Palestinians, and in November, Israel announced it would not replace its ambassador to Turkey. Israel had been considering building an [under-the-sea pipeline](#) from Turkey to Israel and the EU. Now Israel is investigating a pipeline, along with Egypt and Greece, that would circumnavigate Turkey.

Turkey – China Relations

Turkey and China will both face sanctions if they continue to import oil from Iran. Turkey is interested in encouraging Chinese investment in Turkey including through China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which could have long-term impacts on Turkey’s foreign policy outlook facing East rather than West. To facilitate better relations Turkey has stopped the movement of Muslim Uighurs from Turkey to Xinjiang. In April 2018, the Turkish Economy Ministry claimed that nearly 1,000 Chinese firms operated in Turkey, and in mid-2018 Turkish Airlines secured a loan from the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) to construct facilities in the new Istanbul [airport](#).

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APPENDIX A: Map of alternatives to [Incirlik Airbase](#)

