



September 11, 2019

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**Turkey's geopolitical position means its policies and actions can impact the stability and prosperity of the Middle East, Europe and beyond. It is therefore a matter of urgency that governments and international organisations respond to the Turkish State's political and military aggression towards Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, and support lasting peace processes.**

Turkey held municipal elections on 31 March 2019. In April, the AKP<sup>1</sup> - MHP<sup>2</sup> coalition government ordered a rerun of the election for Istanbul city mayor and disallowed six newly elected Kurdish mayors belonging to HDP<sup>3</sup> and 56 HDP municipal officials from taking their posts, despite them having been approved as candidates. In August 2019, the Ministry of the Interior dismissed another five Kurdish mayors, including the mayors of the three largest Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The AKP appointed governor of the relevant province was assigned to act as a trustee until the next municipal elections in 2024. On the day the last three mayors were dismissed (August 19), another 418 politicians from HDP and allied parties were taken into [custody](#). All are being investigated for being members of a terrorist organisation and spreading terrorist propaganda based on allegations they gave jobs to relatives of PKK<sup>5</sup> members and attended funerals of PKK members. Afterwards, the dismissed mayors accused the government of trying to cover up the corrupt and extravagant practices of previous trustees; the Van governor dismissed the whole HDP-majority metropolitan municipal [assembly](#); President Erdogan called CHP<sup>6</sup> mayors and officials who spoke against the dismissals 'terrorists' and 'terrorist sympathisers'; in 21 days of demonstrations against the dismissals demonstrators were met with tear gas, high pressure hoses, beatings and [arrest](#); and a number of Kurdish mothers came forth accusing HDP of recruiting their children for PKK, thus providing 'evidence' for Erdogan's allegation that HDP is a terrorist organisation. The timing was perfect. It could drive a wedge between CHP and HDP, and also served to distract from top level meetings between HDP and Iraqi Kurdish leaders to discuss unity and support for a peace [process](#) between Kurds and the Turkish state.

Kurdish Lobby Australia argues that these anti-democratic actions of the state are the result of Erdogan being emboldened by the international community's weak responses to his past actions, particularly after the AKP failed to win a majority in the June 2015 parliamentary election. The AKP loss was attributed to HDP winning 80 parliamentary seats. A pro-Kurdish party being represented in the Turkish parliament was unprecedented and led to the parliament lifting parliamentarians' immunity from prosecution in 2016. This resulted in 16 HDP parliamentarians and two CHP parliamentarians going to prison. [Nine former or current HDP parliamentarians](#) remain in [prison](#), including HDP presidential candidate, [Selahattin Demirtas](#). In 2016 and 2017, the AKP – MHP government also dismissed and replaced 100 elected pro-Kurdish mayors in 94 of the [102](#) Kurdish-run municipalities,

<sup>1</sup> Justice and Development Party

<sup>2</sup> Nationalist Movement Party

<sup>3</sup> People's Democratic Party

<sup>4</sup> The five dismissed mayors are Faruk Demir, co-mayor of the district of Caldiran, and Medeni Ozer, co-mayor of the district of Edremit, both in the province of [Van](#); veteran politician and mayor of Mardin city, Ahmet Turk; mayor of Diyarbakir city, Adnan Mızraklı; and mayor of Van city, Bedia Özgökçe.

<sup>5</sup> Kurdistan Workers' Party

<sup>6</sup> Republican People's Party



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with [93 of these mayors spending time in prison](#). Forty one remain in prison; others await [trial](#). Such state actions sideline those advocating democracy and peaceful negotiations, and allow others to justify a Kurdish armed struggle. That these actions have had no serious repercussions on Turkey signals the international community's lack of commitment to justice and democracy. This lack of commitment has huge implications for the future. Is this the sort of future we want for our children?

These attacks on democratic processes and outcomes prove that many past and present Turkish leaders see Kurds as a political threat. These political attacks also correspond with the Turkish government's escalation of military offensives against Kurds in three countries. In July 2015, after two policemen linked to the [Suruc](#) massacre were murdered by Kurdish youths, Erdogan called an end to the first bilateral ceasefire with the PKK and re-ignited a civil war with Kurds in south-east Turkey. Since then, Turkish security forces have been initiating curfews, sieges and offensives that have killed at least 4,397 people, destroyed city centres, burnt forests and farms, caused [350,000 people](#) to be displaced, and many thousands to be imprisoned – in total impacting 1.8 million Kurds in Turkey. Ostensibly these actions are to 'neutralise' alleged PKK militants, but when considered in combination with the political disenfranchisement of elected Kurdish officials, and the state's offensives in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and northern Syria (as outlined below), it appears the Turkish state has an existential fear of Kurds. If not addressed, this fear can only lead to more war.

Turkey's response to the formation of the semi-autonomous **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)** provides further evidence that the Turkish state sees Kurds as a political threat. Between 1991 and 2009, Turkey strongly opposed the formation of the KRI and in 2017, opposed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) holding a referendum on independence. This was despite the intervening years demonstrating that Kurds who enjoy a measure of self-governance are no military or political threat and, in fact, go out of their way to foster beneficial relations with Turkey, even when Turkey's air and ground offensives inside the KRI are in violation of all relevant international [laws](#). Since April 2018, Turkey's offensives in the KRI have intensified, causing the evacuation of more than 350 villages. Airstrikes are hitting civilians, farmland and mountain areas nowhere near PKK [locations](#). Between January 2017 and January 2019 at least [20 Iraqi Kurd civilians](#) were killed by airstrikes, and in August 2019, two airstrikes killed [seven civilians](#). Turkey's airstrikes have also targeted a refugee camp in Makhmour in [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#), killing and injuring camp residents, the adults among them having fled military offensives in eastern Turkey in 1994. The refugee camp is located 170 kilometres from the border. It is likely Turkey needed US permission for its fighter jets to fly this distance.

Turkey has also established tens of military and intelligence bases in the provinces of Nineveh (outside the KRI) and Dohuk (in the KRI). The map shows some of the known bases in Dohuk. For example, [Bamarni base](#) is 24 kilometres from the border, and home to between 1,200 and 2,000 soldiers, and 40 to 60 tanks.





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Turkey has not sought and does not have permission from the Government of Iraq or the KRG for its bases or offensives. In 2003, the Kurdistan Parliament passed Law Number 37 that stipulates all Turkish military bases and personnel must leave the [KRI](#). Over the years, the Government of Iraq, the [Kurdistan Parliament](#) and [Kurdish leaders](#) have repeatedly asked [Turkey](#) or the [UN Security Council](#) for Turkey to stop its [airstrikes](#) and withdraw its bases and military personnel from northern Iraq, but the UN Security Council and others in the international community have not acted to curb Turkey's flagrant disregard for Iraq's sovereignty. This is despite Iraq having come through years of hardship fighting ISIS, and the KRI hosting more than two million people fleeing ISIS and the Syrian civil war whilst being subject to Baghdad withholding revenue, and despite the PKK using indirect channels to repeatedly ask the US to mediate a bilateral [ceasefire](#) with Turkey. The inaction of the international community is in direct contrast to PKK fighting ISIS, and saving thousands of Yezidi from an ISIS-perpetuated genocide of Yezidis in Sinjar in 2014.

Turkey's merciless hunting down of PKK militants in the KRI causes huge dilemmas for the KRG. The government and economy rely on the export of oil through Turkey and the importation of food and construction materials from Turkey. This reliance has increased since the US re-implemented sanctions on Iran in 2018. But as the only internationally recognised government of a Kurdistan region, the KRG also feels it has a duty to host persecuted political and humanitarian organisations from other Kurdistan regions, many of which Turkey and Iran consider terrorist organisations.

There is a real danger that Turkey intends to make permanent its bases in northern Iraq, and occupy the region step-by-step, as it has done in Cyprus since 1974. This would increase pressure on the KRG to do Turkey's bidding at a time when the KRG and the Government of Iraq face an ISIS resurgence, and urgently need to work on reconciliation and the rule of law, and build transparent representative governance and more vibrant economies. It is also a time when it is critical that the Kurdistan regions in Syria (Rojava) and Iraq (Bashur) come to some agreement on matters related to political representation, security, humanitarian aid and trade. If relations cannot be built between the KRG and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) one third of Syrian territory will be vulnerable to destabilization, if not aggression, from Turkey, ISIS, the Assad regime and Iran.<sup>7</sup>

**Turkey's actions in Syria** require even more urgent attention. Turkey allegedly went to war against ISIS in July 2015. Within days it became apparent that Turkey's war was not with [ISIS](#), but rather with [Kurds](#) – not just the PKK as is often claimed. Turkey targeted Kurds in Syria as well as Turkey because Erdogan

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<sup>7</sup> No less critical is the KRI's vulnerability to Iran's aggression. The military and intelligence wings of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) have numerous bases in the KRI. In September 2018, the IRGC killed 17 people and injured another 49 with seven surface-to-surface missiles that hit an Iranian Kurdish refugee camp and the headquarters of two Kurdish political organisations in Koya, 150 kilometres from the border with [Iran](#). Eleven months earlier, the IRGC supported the Government of Iraq and *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilisation Units or PMUs) in a military offensive to take control of Kirkuk and other disputed territories that Peshmerga had defended from ISIS since 2014. If it were not for belated but intense US diplomacy, the aggressors would have taken control of the [KRI](#).



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and the AKP – MHP government make no distinction between them, or between PKK and Syrian Kurdish groups, namely the PYD<sup>8</sup>, YPG<sup>9</sup>, YPJ<sup>10</sup> and the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian Democratic Council, the last overseeing the autonomous administrations of each town or village. Turkey's two major offensives in Syria, which followed the SDF liberating Manbij from ISIS, were designed to prevent Syrian Kurds and their allies making the territories they controlled contiguous. Operation Euphrates Shield between August 2016 and May 2017, and Operation Olive Branch between January 2018 and March 2018 led Turkey to occupy, Turkify and Islamise the multi-ethnic Jarablus – Azaz – al-Bab triangle and the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in northern Aleppo, and to establish (and intermittently pay) two unruly Syrian militia armies. The majority of militants in these armies belong to fascist Islamist militias. 'Thousands' are former [ISIS fighters](#). Under the 2017 Astana Accord, Turkey also agreed to establish 12 observation posts in Idlib, theoretically to reduce the territory and power of Al-Qaeda offshoots. Under Turkey's watch, these militias have expanded the territory they [control](#). Instead of fighting these militant extremists, Turkey has incorporated those who are willing into its armies, and collaborated with those who choose to remain separate, meanwhile threatening offensives against Kurdish-controlled areas of Tel Rifaat, Manbij and east of the [Euphrates](#).

The very groups and people Turkey wants to 'neutralise' (i.e. kill or imprison) – YPG, YPJ, SDF and PYD, their allies and supporters – continue to play vital roles in the enduring defeat of ISIS in Syria. In fighting ISIS their forces protect Turkey from ISIS infiltration and attack, and in establishing relatively stable administrations the administrators protect Turkey from more waves of asylum seekers. Not one of these groups has launched a military attack on Turkey. Consequently, in December 2018, people around the world were shocked, and voiced strong opposition to US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw US forces and comply with President Erdogan's proposal to use Turkish forces to invade north-east Syria, ostensibly to fight ISIS 400 kilometres south of the border. Given the ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afrin and Erdogan's oft repeated intention to 'neutralise' all 'terrorists' and 'terrorist sympathisers' (i.e. all Syrian Kurds and their allies), Erdogan's ploy did not fool anyone but Trump. Trump's [advisors](#), the [US Congress](#), [members](#) of the US-led coalition and [other countries](#) argued that a US withdrawal would create a power vacuum for others to exploit; a Turkish invasion would result in a massacre; and such a betrayal would make it difficult to find local allies to fight in any [future](#) war. The success in delaying a US withdrawal and Turkish invasion demonstrates the power of multilateral diplomacy.

Nine months later, multilateral diplomacy is again required to stop Turkey's political and military aggression in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, of which the most urgent is Turkey's actions in Syria. In early August, Erdogan repeated his threat to invade north-east Syria, having amassed the means to do so at the border. He had an additional motivation this time: Turkish forces, their proxies and [Al-Qaeda](#) allies were being cornered in Idlib by a Russian-backed Syrian advance. Erdogan did not want more Syrians to enter [Turkey](#), so the logical place to dump refugees residing in Turkey and those escaping conflict in Idlib was north-east Syria. Erdogan's renewed threat came only a month after Turkey defied the US in

<sup>8</sup> Democratic Union Party (Syria)

<sup>9</sup> Peoples' Protection Units

<sup>10</sup> Women's Protection Units



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taking delivery of the first consignment of Russia's S-400 missile defence system, but instead of sanctioning Turkey, and drawing a red line to prevent a unilateral invasion of north-east Syria, the US fast tracked preparations with Turkey for a 'safe' zone without having arrived at any [agreement](#) on the [details](#), thus endangering millions of people in the numerous Kurdish-majority towns and villages within the US-proposed zone extending five to 15 kilometres south of the border.

In subsequent weeks US and Turkish military personnel flew over the proposed zone in helicopters; the Americans videoed YPG destroying defensive trenches and [berms](#); YPG withdrew from the border area of two towns; and the US began joint patrols, some with members of local military [councils](#) and others with [Turkey](#). These measures did not satisfy Erdogan, who repeated his threaten to invade at the end of [August](#) and again in September unless Turkey has complete control of the zone, and the right to settle one million refugees and displaced people inside the zone.

There are British and French troops on the ground, and the Danes have agreed to deploy [troops](#). Troops from Canada and Italy have been mentioned in past reports. Where are the Australians? A multilateral force is needed as any arrangement reliant on Turkey and the US is precarious: there is no guarantee that Erdogan will comply with any [plan](#) that prevents infiltration, slaughter, repression, Arabisation and Islamisation, or that the US will protect civilians from the aggression of a fellow NATO member. If Turkish forces act aggressively, it is highly likely YPG, YPJ and the SDF will withdraw from their security operations further south to defend civilians in the north. ISIS is already taking advantage of the situation and unrest among Arabs is growing. In the north, a military confrontation means Turkish soldiers will die and more people will seek asylum in Turkey and Europe, given Erdogan [threatens](#) to 'open the gates' if he does not get his way east of the Euphrates. Another scenario is that Kurds are forced to negotiate with the current Syrian regime outside any international framework. This is not in the US', Turkey's or the Kurds' best [interests](#). Hence there are many good arguments to be made within a multilateral diplomatic effort to convince Turkey aggression will not benefit anyone but ISIS, the Syrian regime and Iran.

The problem is, since 2011, if not before, Erdogan and his Islamist government have chosen to support Islamist militant extremists, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, in order to destroy Kurdish gains, prevent Assad retaking Syria, and ultimately to reclaim Ottoman territory in northern Syria. Given events unfolding in Idlib, one way or another Turkey has created the possibility of northern Syria becoming the new centre of operations for al-Qaeda, and an international security threat. This outcome could eventuate whether Turkey is able to resettle its Syrian militia armies and Al-Qaeda allies in north-east Syria, or is forced to betray these groups.

## Conclusion

Iraqi Kurdish security forces called Peshmerga and the YPG/YPJ and multi-ethnic SDF in Syria have been reliable allies to the US-led coalition in the war against ISIS. These forces have made huge sacrifices: more than [11,000 SDF fighters](#) and [1,600 Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga](#) have died fighting ISIS. More than [21,000 SDF fighters](#) and [9,000 Peshmerga](#) have been seriously injured. Their families have been left without a primary breadwinner. The international community must recognise this sacrifice by





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maintaining a multilateral position to protect the people of north-east Syria, and use all means to persuade Turkey to make peace with Kurds in and outside Turkey. Given that Turkey is a bridge between Europe and the Middle East it is vital that governments and international organisations hold Turkey to the standards of international law as required of a NATO member, and develop principled positions on and responses to:

- Turkey having become an elected autocracy, resulting in the state discrediting, dismissing and imprisoning elected parliamentarians and mayors, and holding tens of thousands of others as political prisoners, using blatant propaganda to discredit them;
- Turkey's lack of proper investigation, evidence gathering, and due process regarding terrorist and other acts attributed to PKK, as well as those responsible for bombing pro-Kurdish peace rallies in [Suruc](#) and [Ankara](#) and civilians in western Turkey;
- Kurds as political actors, not just military pawns;
- The Turkish state's existential and transnational fear of Kurds;
- Turkey's military and intelligence bases in northern Iraq;
- Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo and Idlib and its wish to expand its occupation of Syria;
- Turkey's well documented war crimes and crimes against humanity, especially in [Afrin](#), [Syria](#);
- A buffer zone in northern Syria;
- [Conditions](#) the SDF and ANNES should meet to gain international recognition and resources;
- Turkey's [support](#) for Islamist militant extremists, including [ISIS](#) and [Al-Qaeda](#) in Syria;
- Erdogan's neo-Ottoman ambitions, these having alienated Muslim countries and Greece; and
- Ways to address minority rights (cultural, political and economic) in Turkey, Syria, Iraq & Iran.

After arriving at unilateral or multilateral positions, we suggest governments and organisations:

- Inform the Turkish ambassador and other representatives of these positions and task their respective representatives in Turkey to explain them and why it is in everyone's best interest for Turkey to address them;
- Ensure that any 'safe' zone in Syria is a no-fly zone patrolled by aircraft from non-aggressor countries, with multilateral forces on the ground on the Syrian side of the border tasked with protecting lives, livelihoods and property and that the formation of this zone is the basis for a long term security agreement between the Turkish state and Kurds in Turkey and Syria, ideally including the [AANES](#). KLA recommends that such a zone be on both sides of the border, that all members of the US-led coalition that relied on local forces to fight ISIS should contribute to a multilateral force, and that this force must be willing to defend the people of north-east Syria;
- Insist representatives of the SDF and AANES participate in negotiations on the future of Syria;
- Before Turkey's Syrian militia armies and Al-Qaeda become an international security threat, formulate ways to dismantle these groups, e.g. by offering gainful employment, seats at the negotiating table, and giving them a voice in Syria's future;
- Insist that international observers, humanitarian organisations, lawyers and journalists be allowed into south-east Turkey and Turkey-occupied Syria;



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- Support independent investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Turkey-occupied Syria, particularly Afrin, possibly establishing an international tribunal in north-west Syria for alleged perpetrators to be put on trial.
- Support independent investigations into terrorist acts and other alleged acts (e.g. recruiting children) attributed to PKK, as well as acts that target Kurds, other civilians and supporters of peace and use findings to review the classification of organisations as ‘terrorist’ organisations;
- Insist on the release of all political prisoners in Turkey convicted of terrorism based on criticizing the president or opposing a military operation or attending a peaceful rally etc.
- Support transparent internationally mediated dialogues to discuss the pre-conditions for [peace](#), and develop a road map with realistic time lines, milestones and outcomes between the Turkish state and Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq (separately or together, given issues are interdependent), each side including all major stakeholders and no side being dominated by a single party;
- Support the Government of Iraq and the KRG in applying pressure on Turkey to stop Turkey’s air and ground offensives in Iraq, and withdraw its bases and forces from Iraq;
- Negotiate a timeline for Turkey to withdraw bases and military personnel from Syria; and
- Establish an international tribunal in north-east Syria for ISIS members, and for countries to take responsibility for their citizens who joined ISIS, and the children of these citizens now in Al-Hol Camp and other places. ‘Taking responsibility’ means immediate repatriation of orphaned ISIS children and on a case-by-case basis, other children; and paying the cost of investigations, gathering witnesses and other evidence, lawyer/s and trials; and the post-trial repatriation of these citizens, and where appropriate, their incarceration and rehabilitation.

To encourage a change of trajectory the costs of Turkey not doing so must be greater than the costs of Turkey continuing down the same path. Possible actions include ‘rewarding’ positive changes with continued or increased investment, trade, participation in various academic, cultural, social and reconstruction programs, all of which would benefit Turkey, Syria, Iraq, US, Europe, Australia etc.. But until the Turkish state changes its current trajectory there must be real costs like:

- Sanctions and the boycott of investment, trade and travel to Turkey, including Turkey not being selected for the location of international events such as conferences;
- Ceasing any co-ordination with or acting on information supplied by Turkey’s security and intelligence personnel unless the information can be independently verified; and
- Banning the sale to Turkey of all armaments, communications and other technologies used by Turkey’s security forces or Syrian proxies to kill or harass civilians in Turkey, Syria or Iraq.

KLA advocates that creating stable pockets of good governance and economic prosperity in consultation with locals and employing locals is an effective way to combat state or non-state aggression. For this to occur, members of the US-led coalition and others need to provide resources to regions willing to develop pluralistic governance structures and the rule of law. Such support would greatly help in establishing stability in Turkey, Iraq and Syria.