



September 11, 2019

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Kurdish Lobby Australia asks the Australian Government to urge the Turkish State to stop its political and military aggression towards Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, and to support any processes for peace, given that Turkey's actions have multiple implications for relations between Australia and Turkey, Australia and other countries in the Middle East, and the stability and prosperity of the Middle East, Europe and beyond.

Turkey held municipal elections on 31 March 2019. In April, the AKP¹ - MHP² coalition government ordered a rerun of the election for Istanbul city mayor and disallowed six newly elected Kurdish HDP³ mayors 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.⁴ The government appointed the governor of the relevant province 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 people in PKK⁵ 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 CHP⁶ mayors and officials who spoke against the dismissals 'terrorists' or 'terrorist sympathisers'; 21 days of demonstrations against the dismissals resulted in demonstrators being met with tear gas, high pressure hoses, beatings and [arrest](#), and a number of Kurdish women came forth accusing HDP of recruiting their children for PKK, thus providing 'evidence' that HDP is a terrorist organisation, and a wedge to divide CHP and HDP. The timing was perfect, given a top level HDP delegation was in Iraqi Kurdistan discussing unity and KRG support for a peace [process](#).

KLA argues that all these state actions are the result of Erdogan and the state being emboldened by the international community's weak responses to Erdogan's 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. Their win caused Turkey's parliament to lift parliamentarians' immunity from prosecution in 2016. This led to 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 addition, the AKP – MHP government dismissed and replaced 100 elected pro-Kurdish mayors in 94 of the [102](#) Kurdish-run municipalities, with [93 of these mayors spending time in prison](#). Forty one remain in prison; for others their cases are

¹ Justice and Development Party

² Nationalist Movement Party

³ Peoples' Democratic Party

⁴ 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.

⁵ Kurdistan Workers' Party

⁶ Republican People's Party



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pending. These actions sideline those advocating peaceful negotiations and allow PKK to justify an armed struggle. That such 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 since June 2015 prove that many Turkish leaders see Kurds as a political threat, but these political attacks also correspond with the Turkish government's escalation of military operations against Kurds. In July 2015, Erdogan 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 and instability.

Turkey's response to the formation of the semi-autonomous **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)** is another indication that the state sees Kurds as a political more than a military threat. Between 1991 and 2009, Turkey strongly opposed the formation of the KRI and similarly opposed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) holding a referendum on independence in 2017, 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, these offensives have intensified. With airstrikes often targeting civilians, farmland and mountain areas nowhere near PKK locations, between January 2017 and January 2019 at least 20 Iraqi Kurd civilians were killed, and on the 27 August 2019, two airstrikes killed seven civilians. Turkey's offensives have caused the evacuation of more than 350 villages, while Turkey's airstrikes have targeted a refugee camp in Makhmour in December 2017, December 2018 and July 2019. These airstrikes killed and injured 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 with Turkey. 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 (inside the KRI). The map shows some of the known bases in Dohuk. For example, Bamarni base is 24 kilometres from the border with Turkey 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 and 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](#), the KRG 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. It appears the international community turns a blind eye to Turkey's actions despite the KRI having come through years of hardship fighting ISIS, hosting more than two million people fleeing ISIS and the Syrian civil war, and being subject to Baghdad withholding revenue, and despite the PKK using indirect channels to repeatedly ask the US to mediate a bilateral [ceasefire](#). 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 alleged 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 implementation of US sanctions on Iran in 2018. Yet, as the only internationally recognised government of a Kurdistan region, the KRG also feels the necessity to host persecuted political and humanitarian organisations from other Kurdistan regions, many of which Turkey (and Iran) consider terrorist organisations.

There is real danger that Turkey intends to make permanent its bases in northern Iraq, as it has done in Cyprus since 1974, and occupy the region step-by-step. 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, a need to work on reconciliation and the rule of law, and build decentralised representative systems of 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 an agreement on matters related to political representation, security, humanitarian aid and trade. If relations cannot be built between the KRG and the Autonomous Administration/s of North and East Syria (AANES) one third of Syrian territory will be vulnerable to destabilisation and aggression from Turkey, ISIS, the Assad regime and Iran.⁷

Then there are the urgent matters related to **Turkey's actions in Syria**. 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 \(not just PKK\)](#). Turkey targeted Kurds in Syria as well as Turkey because Erdogan and

⁷ No less critical is the KRI's vulnerability to Iranian aggression. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) military and intelligence wings having numerous bases in the KRI. In September 2018, the IRGC killed 17 people and injured another 49 when they fired 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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the AKP – MHP government make no distinction between them, or between PKK and Syrian Kurdish groups, namely the PYD⁸, YPG⁹, YPJ¹⁰ and the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian Democratic Council, the last overseeing the autonomous administrations of each district. Turkey's two major offensives in Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield between August 2016 to May 2017 and Operation Olive Branch between January 2018 to March 2018) were designed to prevent Kurds and their allies forming a contiguous autonomous region south of the border with Turkey, after the SDF liberated Manbij from ISIS. Turkey's offensives 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 Syrian militia armies. The majority of militants in these armies belong to fascist Islamist militias, 'thousands' being 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](#), Turkey having incorporated those who are willing into its armies, whilst continuing to collaborate with those who choose to remain separate. Instead of fighting these Islamist extremists, Turkey repeatedly threatens offensives on the Kurdish-controlled areas of Tel Rifaat, Manbij and east of the [Euphrates](#).

The very groups Turkey wants to 'neutralise' (i.e. kill or imprison) play vital roles in the enduring defeat of ISIS in Syria. Not one of these groups (YPG, YPJ and the SDF) has militarily attacked Turkey. In fighting ISIS they have protected Turkey from ISIS infiltration and attack. Consequently, in December 2018 it was a shock that US President Donald Trump agreed to withdraw US forces and comply with President Erdogan's proposal of using Turkish forces to invade north-east Syria, ostensibly to fight ISIS 400 kilometres south of the border. Given what was happening in Afrin and Erdogan's oft repeated intention to 'neutralise' all 'terrorists' and 'terrorist sympathisers' (i.e. 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](#) strongly opposed the imminent US withdrawal and invasion by Turkey. These stakeholders argued that a US withdrawal would create a power vacuum for others to exploit, and a Turkish invasion would result in a mass slaughter of civilians, and 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 threat to north-east Syria. In early August, Erdogan repeated his threat to invade, having amassed the means to do so at the border. He had an additional motivation this time: Turkish forces, their proxies and [Al-Qaeda](#) colleagues 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 Turkey and those escaping the war in Idlib (including Al-Qaeda and other Islamist militants) was north-east Syria. Erdogan's renewed threat came only a month after Turkey defied the US by taking delivery of the first consignment of Russia's S-400

⁸ Democratic Union Party (Syria)

⁹ Peoples' Protection Units

¹⁰ Women's Protection Units



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missile defence system. To avoid a unilateral invasion, the US fast tracked preparations with Turkey for a 'safe' zone without any [agreement](#) on important [details](#), thus endangering people in the numerous Kurdish-majority towns and villages within the US proposed zone of 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 with members of a local military [council](#) and [Turkey](#). These measures have not satisfied Erdogan, who has repeated his threaten of unilateral military action at the end of [August](#) and thereafter unless Turkey has total control of the zone and is able resettle one million refugees and displaced people in 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 given an arrangement reliant mainly on Turkey and the US jeopardises the precarious stability of north-east Syria. This is because there is no guarantee that Erdogan will comply with a [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. Already ISIS is taking advantage of the situation. In the north, a military confrontation will mean more 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 in north-east Syria, the only other safe haven being the KRI. Another possible scenario would be Kurds reluctantly negotiating with the current Syrian regime outside any international framework. This is not in US', Turkey's or the Kurds' best [interests](#). Hence multilateral diplomacy could offer many good reasons to Turkey why unilateral military action will not benefit anyone but ISIS and the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

The problem is, since at least 2014, 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. Hence, if Erdogan has his way northern Syria could well become the new centre of operations for Al-Qaeda. An alternative scenario is indicated by events currently unfolding in Idlib, whereby Turkey is forced to betray its Syrian militia armies and Al-Qaeda colleagues. In either scenario, Turkey has provided fascist Islamist militants sufficient training and arms for them to become an international security risk.

Conclusion

The Iraqi Kurdish security forces known as Peshmerga and the YPG/YPJ and their allies in the 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 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.



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Australians may ask why all this has anything to do with them, but Australia has been involved in every war in the Middle East since 1914 and will likely be involved in any future war. These wars have incurred enormous military costs. Australia has a sizeable population from the Middle East, and prospers from trade with the Middle East. More generally, Australia has an interest in curbing Islamist-inspired terrorism given our closest neighbour is the most populated Muslim country in the world. It is therefore in Australia's interest to seriously consider our suggestions that the Australian Government, other governments and international organisations develop principled positions on:

- A geopolitically important country like Turkey becoming an elected autocracy, resulting in the state discrediting, dismissing and imprisoning elected parliamentarians and mayors, and tens of thousands of other political prisoners that include civil servants, journalists and activists, relying on blatant propaganda to support its actions;
- Turkey's lack of proper investigation, evidence gathering, and due process regarding terrorist and other acts attributed to PKK, and those that targeted peace rallies in [Suruc](#) and [Ankara](#);
- The Turkish State's perception that Kurds are a security threat based on political more than military considerations, and that Kurdish issues are international in nature;
- 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 [Afrin](#), Syria;
- A multilateral safe zone possibly on either side of the border, and a security agreement between the Turkish state and Kurds in Turkey and 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).

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;
- Support transparent internationally mediated dialogues to discuss the necessary conditions for [peace](#), and to develop a road map with realistic time lines, milestones and outcomes between the Turkish state and, separately or in co-ordination with Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, each side including all major stakeholders and no side being dominated by a single party;
- Insist that international observers, humanitarian organisations and journalists be allowed into south-east Turkey and Turkey-occupied Syria;
- Support the Government of Iraq and the KRG in applying pressure on Turkey to stop Turkey's offensives in Iraq and to withdraw its bases and forces from Iraq;
- In Syria, ensure that any 'safe' zone is a no-fly zone patrolled by aircraft from non-aggressor countries and is further secured by an ANNES-approved multilateral ground force tasked with protecting lives, livelihoods and property and for this to be structured in such a way as to



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evolve into a long term security agreement between the Turkish state and the [autonomous administration/s of north-east Syria](#). KLA recommends that all members of the US-led coalition that relied on local forces to fight ISIS, such as Australia, should be willing to defend the people of north-east Syria from an external aggressor;

- Insist representatives of the SDF and AANES participate in negotiations on the future of Syria;
- 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;
- Support independent investigations into terrorist acts and other alleged acts (e.g. recruiting children) attributed to PKK, as well as acts that target Kurds and other supporters of peace in Turkey and review classifications of organisations as 'terrorist' based on findings;
- 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. Meanwhile:
- Formulate ways to dismantle Turkey's Syrian militia armies and Al-Qaeda colleagues before they become an international security threat; and
- Negotiate a timeline for Turkey to withdraw bases and military personnel from Syria.

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 and social programs, all of which would benefit Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Europe, Australia and others. Until the Turkish state changes its trajectory there must be real costs like:

- Turkey not being selected for the location of international events such as conferences;
- Asking Australians and New Zealanders and Returned Soldiers' Leagues to cease the annual ANZAC commemoration at Gallipoli for lives sacrificed in the name of freedom and democracy;
- Asking investors, companies and tourists to boycott Turkey;
- 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 its Syrian proxies to kill or harass civilians in Turkey, Syria or Iraq.

We advocate that creating stable pockets of good governance and economic prosperity in consultation with locals and employing locals is an effective way to combat external or internal 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 eastern Turkey, Iraq and north-east Syria.