



Registration Incorporation No:
INC1600698

Email: kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com
Website: www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com

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Kurdish Lobby Australia

KURDISTAN'S ACHIEVEMENTS ARE UNDER ATTACK

RECOMMENDATIONS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND FACTORS UNDERMINING ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE KURDISTAN REGIONS OF IRAQ, TURKEY, SYRIA AND IRAN.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been 95 years since the borders of four nation states were finalized and divided Kurdistan. On 1 March 2021 it will be 30 years since a US-led coalition established a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan to protect people from Saddam Hussein's Baath regime. This report assesses the achievements of people in the Kurdistan regions of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran in the last 30 years, and what is threatening these achievements. The report begins with recommendations for leveraging desired outcomes involving collaboration and capacity building over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA) suggests that it is time for governments and relevant organisations to develop location-specific, national and international policies for the Kurdistan regions because:

1. The Kurdish question will not disappear based on demographics alone. For example, some predict Kurds will be in the majority in Turkey by [2038](#);
2. Kurdish issues involve state and non-state actors on each level;
3. Kurdistani¹ achievements and threats to these achievements 'leak' across borders, one of the four impacted states being a NATO member that shares a border with Europe;
4. Resolving questions around the status of the Kurdistan regions in non-military ways is beneficial for all stakeholders, because:
 - a. Military responses have failed to resolve Kurdistani national movements since the nineteenth century, the latest on-going for 37 years;
 - b. Kurd-led military forces (including Peshmerga, the People's Protection Units (YPG), Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)) stand against militant Islamism and other forms of fascism, with or without US-led coalition support. When fighting alongside an international coalition, Kurds have proved a reliable ally;
 - c. Kurd-led political and civil organisations enhance the status of women, are inclusive of different ethnicities and religions, and aspire to upholding human rights, democracy and sustainable ecosystems;
 - d. The Middle East needs to adopt the aforementioned principles if it is to develop peace, justice and prosperity to counteract trends in autocracy, patriarchy and militant extremism.
5. It is critical that the international community prioritises international law, including human rights law and the collective right for self-determination over short term self interests. The alternative is continued conflict in the Middle East, north Africa, the Caucasus and Europe, via the aggression of

¹ Kurdistani is increasingly used to refer to all people who live in the Kurdistan regions, not just Kurds.

Turkey or Iran, or instability inside Turkey, Syria, Iran and/or Iraq. Any such scenario would act as a magnet, spreading chaos and suffering.

KLA recommends that governments and international organisations:

- 1. Analyse the transnational, national and local components of the Kurdish question and generate and advocate solutions, privately and publicly;**
- 2. Negotiate short and long term goals, ensuring milestones are reached by using levers, these being diplomatic, economic and military incentives and disincentives such as those related to foreign investment, access to armaments and military assistance, and inclusion in high level meetings and projects (e.g. reconstruction in Iraq, Syria and other war torn countries);**
- 3. Develop intergovernmental and civil society relations with all major Kurdistani political organisations (including the PKK) and non-government organisations (e.g. the Kurdish Red Crescent);**
- 4. Support local organisations and businesses that work for education, health, sustainable economic development, governance and citizens' legal rights;**
- 5. Facilitate a census in each country to establish the proportion of people speaking a mother tongue, following a particular faith, their employment, educational and economic status, etc., to determine population needs;**
- 6. Support the establishment of independent commissions in each country for the protection of ethnic, religious, economic, legal and political rights;**
- 7. Set a time frame for reform. If governments continue to undermine the regions of Kurdistan, support referendums on whether people want the status quo, self-government in a con/federal system, or an independent state. Based on referendum outcome/s, support negotiations involving diverse stakeholders, including women, youth, and constitutional experts – not only political and military leaders.**

Apart from these recommendations there are country specific recommendations. In **Iraq** there is an urgent need to ensure the Government of Iraq (GoI):

1. Implements ALL articles in the [2005 federal constitution of Iraq](#) with a priority given to Article 48 and Article 65 (establishing a Federal Council); Article 119 (giving provinces the right to form autonomous regions); Articles 19, 20, 22, 23, 30, 37-46 (ensuring an independent judiciary); Article 140 (to determine the status of disputed territories), and multiple articles related to resource and revenue sharing;
2. And the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) comply with deadlines to conduct transparent negotiations and enact binding agreements on contentious matters related to the status of the disputed territories, oil, water, security, jobs, borders and [revenue distribution](#);
3. Disbands militias that do not answer to a government, offering alternative employment for those not implicated in war crimes; and
4. Establish co-ordination between Peshmerga, *Asayish* (police), Iraqi Federal Forces and local government forces in the disputed territories until the status of each territory is resolved in accordance with Article 140.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) needs incentives to:

1. Finalise a constitution that provides power sharing and other guarantees for women and communities;
2. Be transparent and accountable in all negotiations, agreements, income, expenditure and debt;
3. Train and appoint high quality investigators, lawyers and judges to ensure an independent judiciary, especially to investigate corruption;
4. Unite all Peshmerga forces within the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (equivalent to a country's Ministry of Defence), and other security forces in the Ministry of Interior;
5. Ensure a free and diverse media;
6. Ensure a functioning Parliament that holds the Executive to account;
7. Diversify Kurdistan's economic base by encouraging small to medium businesses that maximise employment and trade (e.g. in agriculture, food processing, conservation, renewable power generation, transport, communications, community services and tourism) as opposed to mainly investing in big projects based on contracts between a Kurdish elite and foreign interest; and
8. Legislate that all appointments and promotions be based on election or merit, rather than descent or political connections.

The US' and Europe's appeasement of **Turkey** emboldens President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AKP-MHP² government's Islamist, ultranationalist authoritarian path. Turkey no longer acts as a NATO ally or buffer state. To change Turkey's long-standing internal dynamics and use of blackmail, and recent external aggression, the [European Union](#), international organisations and individual countries can:

1. Delist the PKK as a terrorist organisation, given the PKK struggle is about cultural, political and economic self-determination, and developing a decentralised democracy in Turkey, and the terrorist classification justifies the state labelling anyone advocating human rights a 'terrorist' and conducting military operations against them, in or outside Turkey;
2. Support the HDP by giving HDP parliamentarians and members access to high level international leaders, given HDP is the only [real opposition](#) to the Islamism and/or ultra-nationalism in Turkey;
3. Facilitate the expansion of education, business and civic opportunities in eastern Turkey to increase employment and living standards;
4. Facilitate economic, cultural, social and religious exchanges between eastern and western Turkey, the different ethnicities and faiths, to open up non-military interpersonal ways of resolving differences;
5. Plan alternative oil and gas supply routes to Europe outside Turkey; and
6. If all else fails, cease investing in, trading with, and exporting armaments to Turkey, freeze the European bank accounts of top officials, delay talks of a customs union, visa free travel and accession to the European Union and downgrade Turkey's role in NATO and other international coalitions.

² Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)

The Turkish state needs incentives to support Points 3 and 4, and to:

7. Release tens of thousands of political prisoners, including elected parliamentarians like Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, mayors, journalists, lawyers, academics, teachers, students, artists and activists;
8. Review anti-terror laws and undertake judicial reform to match international best practice in investigating a crime and the quality of evidence required to convict a person, especially of political offences;
9. Ensure an independent judiciary that can provide fair trials and checks and balances on the Executive;
10. Cease using intelligence agents, deep state organisations like JTEM, and private contractors like SADAT for nefarious activities such as assassinating alleged 'terrorists', framing PKK for committing terrorist acts, or training Syrian proxies to fight in other countries;
11. Cease using Islamist proxies that include former ISIS fighters in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Azerbaijan;
12. Allow detailed independent investigations into who is responsible for past and recent massacres, assassinations and acts of terror, including some [20,000 political assassinations and murders of civilians](#) in Turkey in the 1990s and terrorist acts in northern Syria since 2016;
13. Enter into internationally monitored negotiations with the PKK and other organisations that can speak for Kurds in Turkey, tying incentives to milestones reached along negotiated pathways to end civil war and grant cultural, economic and political rights to Kurds and other groups;
14. De-militarise south east Turkey;
15. End all ground and air offensives against Kurds and withdraw all Turkish military forces from Syria and Iraq;
16. Allow the voluntary return of Kurds compelled to abandon their villages in eastern Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s;
17. Amend the constitution of the Republic of Turkey to:
 - a. Redefine citizenship to reflect the multiethnic population (Article 66);
 - b. Ensure a parliamentary democracy and non-executive presidency;
 - c. Remove or lower the parliament electoral threshold of 10 percent;
 - d. Hold elections for provincial governors;
 - e. Make it illegal for any elected mayor to be replaced by a state trustee;
 - f. Decentralise powers to the provincial and municipal governments;
 - g. Allow freedom of religion, language, speech and assembly;
 - h. Redefine terrorism to ensure freedom of speech and assembly;
 - i. Allow education in one's mother tongue in any ethnic-majority community (e.g. Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, Kurd), and the teaching of local languages in multi-ethnic communities;
 - j. Recognise the Kurdish language as an official language; and
 - k. Ultimately, redefine Turkey as a bi-nation federal republic (similar to Canada, Belgium and Switzerland).

For the benefit of all people in **Syria**, in particular, Kurds, Christians and others:

1. Continue to tie investment, capacity building, reconstruction and the return of displaced people to UN Resolution 2254, by convincing Russia, Bashar al-Assad and the Baath Regime of the need for an interim government that facilitates the writing of a new constitution;
2. Insist that Turkey disband its Islamist mercenaries and withdraws its military and administrative occupation of northern Syria;
3. Insist representatives of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), Autonomous Region of North and East Syria (AANES), TEV-DEM (a collection of labour and civil society organisations) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which represent, administer, serve and defend one third of Syrian territory and 25 percent of Syria's population, take part in negotiations on the future of Syria;
4. Politically recognise and economically support the SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF on condition they respect political, ethnic and religious plurality, hold elections, uphold the rule of law and use reconstruction to employ locals;
5. Provide protection from Turkey and ISIS for people living in AANES areas;
6. Facilitate negotiations between the SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF and their counterparts among Syrians outside these structures, rather than limiting negotiations to those between the two political umbrellas, the Kurdish National Unity Parties (KNUP), representing 26 parties, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) representing 15 opposition parties; and
7. Ensure the military and social-political gains in north and east Syria are sustained, including a unified multi-ethnic defence force, male and female co-chairs and committees comprising at least 40 percent women.

In the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, the parallel institutions of government (the Guardian Council and the Iranian Consultative Assembly or *Majlis*), judiciary (Revolutionary Courts and Civil Courts), military (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Armed Forces of Iran) and business monopolies (run by clerics and/or the IRGC) are major hurdles to political, economic and social development. In addition to Recommendations 1 to 5 on page 3, Iran needs incentives to:

1. De-militarise the Kurdistan Region;
2. Establish a unified, independent judiciary;
3. Stop the arbitrary detention and arrest of people;
4. Release all political prisoners;
5. Remove the death penalty;
6. Cease assassinating political activists in and outside Iran;
7. Remove policies of assimilation by allowing:
 - a. Freedom of religion, language, speech and assembly;
 - b. Education in one's mother tongue in ethnic-majority communities, and the teaching of local languages in mixed communities;
 - c. Non-violent political, cultural, humanitarian, environmental, professional and religious organisations not tied to the government, Shia religion or IRGC; and
8. Facilitate business, trade and employment opportunities in the Kurdistan region by building essential infrastructure and providing small business loans.

ACHIEVEMENTS

These recommendations are critical given that the advances Kurds have made in the last 30 years are being undermined with the exception of three major achievements. The first is that a stateless nation of some 50 million people has survived and thrived. The second is that since 1991, this nation has gained international recognition and respect, especially since their fight against ISIS. A third achievement is the result of their homeland being arbitrarily divided by empires and nation states, and them having been subject to discrimination (e.g. being made non-citizens in Syria), persecution and massacres, including those occurring in Iraq (1987 – 1988), Turkey since the 1920s, and Iran in 1945 – 1947 and 1979 – 1984. This has led to Kurds establishing increasingly well-educated Diasporas that make significant contributions to their adopted countries, professions and the dissemination of Kurdistanian issues.

Other major achievements are being severely undermined because they are seen as threats. One is that Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan militarily united and allied with Christian, Arab and Turkmen communities and a US-led international coalition between 2014 – 2019 to successfully defeat the ISIS caliphate - but not its ideology – in Iraq and Syria, thus making Kurds international players. The second is that Kurds have used power vacuums in northern Iraq and Syria to establish autonomous administrations, and in 2015, attempted to do the same in Turkey. Other achievements being undermined are those peculiar to each nation state.

From the 1920s until 1991, Kurds in **Iraq** fought an armed struggle for the right to form an autonomous region. This struggle led to the formation of well-organised secular political parties. Since 1991, Iraqi Kurds:

- Rose up against Saddam Hussein in February – March 1991, taking control of all major cities and towns in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq;
- Quickly established an autonomous region under the safety of the US-led coalition enforced no-fly zone, and in May 1992, democratically elected the first Kurdistan National Assembly;
- Have avoided military conflict to resolve inter-Kurd political, military and economic differences, despite extreme provocations, since the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) ended a three year civil war in 1997 and intermittently fought PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the 1990s;
- Contributed to the international coalition that removed Saddam Hussein's Baath Regime from power in 2003;
- Made significant contributions to the writing of the 2005 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq; and
- Established a constitutionally and internationally recognized Kurd-majority multi-ethnic autonomous region in northern Iraq known as the KRI with the right to oversee its own security forces in 2005.

Since 2005, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has:

- Made efforts to improve relations with Iraq, Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States, Europe, north America and Asia;
- Hosted at least 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDP) from Iraq and refugees from Syria after ISIS expanded its territory in 2014 and Turkey invaded Syria in 2016. This means that during the ISIS years, one in four people in the KRI was either an IDP or [refugee](#);
- Accepted other refugees escaping persecution in Iran and Turkey;
- Been strategic in creating an oil and gas industry, negotiating agreements with oil companies around the world (e.g. ExxonMobil, Chevron, Total, Gazprom Neft, Genel Energy and [others](#)), and since 2012, building an oil and a gas pipeline to the port of Ceyhan in Turkey after the GoI prevented the KRG from exporting oil through Iraqi pipelines. After the referendum in 2017, many criticised the KRG for 'selling' the pipelines to Rosneft, but the sale raised revenue and stopped Iraq, Iran or Turkey from bombing the pipelines;
- Entered agreements with Turkey regarding oil exports and major construction projects, although critics contend that the political elite have benefitted more than the people they serve;
- Allowed children to be educated in their mother tongues such as Kurdish, Syriac, Arabic and Turkish, and has taught English in schools;
- Allowed minority representation in the Kurdistan Parliament;
- Improved infrastructure by building two international airports, major roads, bridges, shopping malls, bridges, schools and hotels, and improved services such as communications, health, education, electricity and water, and also encouraging tourism and foreign investment, thus raising the living standards of the population until early 2014;
- Survived the Maliki, Abadi and Kadhimi government's budget cuts to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) between 2014 – 2018 and in 2020 because of unresolved issues over Kurdistan's constitutional right to develop new oil and gas fields and disagreements on how oil and revenue should be shared (See 'Threats to Achievements' for the consequences);
- Coordinated with the GoI in the disputed territories, supplying security, education, energy, administration etc., from 2003 until October 2017;
- Protected the KRI, Kirkuk and other disputed territories from ISIS expansion and terrorist acts (with the exception of the ISIS genocide of the Yezidi people in Sinjar/Shingal in August 2014, when ISIS was also advancing on Erbil), despite Peshmerga and *Asayish* (police) often being unpaid, under-equipped and overstretched, with many having to buy their own weapons;
- Negotiated with Turkey to cross southeast Turkey to join other Kurdish militants from all four Kurdistan regions to successfully break ISIS' siege of the Kurd-majority town of Kobani in northeast Syria between September 2014 and January 2015, with help from US-led coalition airstrikes. This battle was ISIS' first military defeat;
- Conducted a non-binding referendum on independence in September 2017 in the KRI and disputed territories despite international opposition (except for Israel), although a proportion of Kurds see this referendum as one of the

gravest mistakes the KRG has made, at least in its timing, given the punitive responses of Iraq, Iran and Turkey to be covered later; and

- Continued to support political negotiations with a coalition of political parties in Syria, and allow humanitarian aid, food, medicine and US-led coalition forces and equipment into Syria, despite extreme antagonism from Turkey.

In **Turkey**, Kurds achievements include:

- Keeping their culture and language alive despite the Kurdish language and the words 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan' being illegal to speak since 1930;
- The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) bringing Kurdish issues to international attention since the 1980s;
- The PKK modifying its goals, strategies and tactics between 1995 and 1999, a new goal being to form a self-governing region in a democratic federation of Turkey, rather than a separate state covering all four regions of Kurdistan (although this change of goal continues to be controversial);
- Surviving the Turkish state's policy of ethnic cleansing involving the destruction of Kurdish villages, the killing of residents and deporting others since the 1920s, but particularly in the 1990s;
- The PKK upholding numerous unilateral ceasefires culminating in the first bilateral ceasefire in 2013 – 2015;
- PKK entering secret negotiations with the Turkish state for some form of self government between 2012 and 2015;
- Establishing language schools, cultural centres, businesses, charity networks and legal associations during this period of peace;
- 101 Kurdish mayors being elected in the 2014 municipal elections, (out of 1,251) despite numerous alleged fraudulent practises by the state, including disallowing or burning votes for opposition candidates;
- Charismatic Kurdish former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtas, running for president in 2014 and 2018, despite being in pre-trial detention on fabricated charges since Nov. 2016;
- HDP winning 80 seats in the 550 seat Grand National Assembly In the June 2015 national elections, thus becoming the first pro-Kurdish party to pass the 10 percent threshold for a party to enter the Assembly;
- Kurdish activists declaring autonomous zones in majority-Kurdish cities in July 2015 (although this had devastating consequences);
- HDP winning 59 seats in the 600 seat Grand National Assembly in the November 2015 re-run of elections, despite the Turkish state declaring an end to the ceasefire with PKK and a state of emergency in mid 2015, and re-igniting a civil war against Kurdish activists, destroying Kurdish town centres, and re-militarising eastern Turkey, while also censoring media and outlawing opposition rallies across the country; and
- 65 Kurdish mayors being elected in the March 2019 municipal elections, despite huge obstacles, including all army and police being allowed to vote for the municipality in which they were stationed, rather than their home municipality.

In Syria, Kurds and their allies:

- Formed TEV-DEM – a collection of labour unions, professional and civil society organisations – in 2011;
- Established multi-ethnic autonomous administrations in Kurd-majority ‘cantons’ across northern Syria in 2012, subsequently expanding these to other Kurd, Christian and Arab districts;
- Established Kurd-led multi-ethnic, highly disciplined military forces known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in 2011 and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) in 2013;
- Were the first to defeat ISIS, with help from Kurds from other regions of Kurdistan, Syrian allies and US-led coalition airstrikes, after ISIS laid siege to the border town of Kobani between 16 September 2014 and 26 January 2015.
- Subsequently partnered with the US-led coalition to fight ISIS, with Kurd-led ground forces backed by US airstrikes, and eventually joined by US advisors and artillery on-the-ground;
- Formed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) overseeing a hierarchy of committees to run public services in January 2014;
- Established the multi-ethnic, Kurd-led, US-led coalition trained and supported SDF in October 2015 to fight ISIS and secure one third of Syria and its [five million residents](#);
- Formed the Syrian Democratic Council (a quasi-parliament) in Dec. 2015;
- Helped defeat the ISIS caliphate in Syria in March 2019;
- Insisted on a male and female co-chair for every committee and organisation, and at least 40 percent of any committee being women, and established women’s organisations to provide women’s refuges and employment, enhancing the status of [women from all ethnicities](#) in north and east Syria;
- Established rules against child marriages and polygamy but these laws were not applied in very traditional Arab tribal areas. Instead, women’s rights were taught in schools;
- Established schools that teach in the mother tongue of the community, whether Kurdish, Arabic, Syriac or Turkish, and teaching multiple languages in ethnically mixed communities;
- Initiated a reconciliation process between Kurdish political parties in Syria, mediated by France and the USA, to develop genuine political plurality inside an autonomous region in Syria and to develop better relations with the KRG;
- Established internment camps for ISIS and ISIS supporters, and called for countries to take back their citizens held in these camps, and/or establish an international tribunal in Syria to assess an individual’s guilt or innocence; and
- Established workable relations with the US, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Before victory in Kobani, negotiated with Turkey.

About half the population of **Iran** are non-Persian. They include Azeri, Kurds, Baluch and Arabs. During the Pahlavi dynasty, Kurds had a monumental but short-lived achievement in 1946, when *Qazi* (Judge) Muhammad declared a Republic of Kurdistan in the town of Mahabad. The republic was backed by the Soviet Union, and

supported militarily and politically by Kurds from other regions. After the Soviet Union withdrew from Iran in 1947, after signing an oil agreement with Iran, the Iranian Army attacked Mahabad and Qazi Muhammad was executed on the 31 March 1947. The next achievement for all Iranians was the 1978 – 79 revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty. Led by some very intelligent leaders Kurds assumed rule of many Kurd-majority towns. They asked for self-government in a federal Iran. Instead, people's hopes were dashed when Shia clerics announced an Islamic Republic. Kurds were denied a place in the new parliament and subjected to what the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini called a 'Holy War'. Ever since the revolution, people who do not follow Shia Islam are discriminated against. However, many Kurds maintain some level of underground organisation, as demonstrated in 2018, following Iran's lethal attack inside the KRI on the base and refugee camp of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran. Iranian Kurdish businesses shut down and students and workers held a massive strike in every town and city in the Kurdistan region of Iran. Another positive development is the international recognition of some Kurdish refugees from Iran who live in the Diasporas. For instance, the Kurdish mathematician, Coucher Birkar, was awarded the Moore Prize by the American Mathematical Society (AMS) in 2016 and the Fields Medal by the International Mathematical Union (IMU) in 2018. Behrouz Boochani was awarded the Victorian Premier's Literary Award in 2019 for his book *No Friend But The Mountains*, written while he was in an Australian refugee detention centre on Manus Island. Hence, given the opportunity, Iranian Kurds could spring into action.

THREATS TO ACHIEVEMENTS

The more Kurds achieve the more they are seen as a threat to the Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian and Iranian governments with Turkey and Iran fearing the autonomous regions established in Iraq and Syria will inspire their own Kurds to take control of the political, economic and cultural destinies. Meanwhile, the world is largely unresponsive to these four countries using military and non-military strategies and tactics to undermine what Kurds and their allies have achieved, despite all the clauses about human rights and self-determination in the UN Charter, and despite Kurds having proved reliable allies of the US-led international coalition in 1990 – 1991, 2003 – 2011 and 2014 – 2020, at great cost to lives and communities. The one exception to this international silence is the outrage following former US President Donald Trump's withdrawal of US forces in northeast Syria to allow Turkey to militarily attack, invade and occupy two towns and their surrounds in October 2019, thus betraying the SDF and the people living in the area, and creating a vacuum for ISIS, Turkey, Russia, Iran and the Assad Regime to exploit. The consequences of Trump's decision and the international reaction highlight the transnational significance of Kurdish issues, whereas the more customary silence and inaction underline the international community's complicity in the nation's on-going persecution.

IRAQ

In response to the Kurdish uprising in 1991, Saddam Hussein unleashed helicopter gunships, tanks and ground forces on the Kurdish cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, Sulaimani and Dohuk, causing more than one million people to flee across the mountains into Turkey and Iran. For the first time in modern history world attention turned to the plight of Kurds, a no-fly zone was declared, and the UN's Operation Habitat began. Since 2005, despite Kurds reluctantly agreeing to remain in a federal Iraq, the Shia Arab **Government of Iraq (GoI)** has been undermining the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region by:

- Not implementing [critical articles in the federal constitution of Iraq](#) (2005);
- Insisting that the [KRI hand over all oil and customs revenue to the federal government](#) with no guarantee Baghdad will distribute the KRG's allocated revenue in return, and meanwhile, taking Turkey to the [International Court of Arbitration](#) for \$26 billion in damages for breaking its agreement with Iraq by allowing Kurdistan to export oil and gas through Turkey;
- Instead of using the constitution and law to resolve disputes about oil, customs and revenue, refusing to send the budgeted revenue allocation to the KRG between 2014 and 2018 and since April 2020. This has led to public servants in the KRI not being paid for many months at a time. Since 2014, extreme economic hardship has eroded the previous gains in living standards. Pervasive disillusionment and anger have led to justifiable protests against the non-payment of salaries, no future job prospects, and perceived corruption and nepotism. This worsening situation seriously undermines the legitimacy of both the GoI and KRG;
- Refusing to pay Peshmerga between 2014 and 2018, despite Peshmerga defending the KRI and disputed territories from ISIS;
- After the KRG held a non-binding referendum on independence on 25 September 2017, not entering negotiations. Instead, taking punitive measures like shutting down Erbil and Sulaimani international airports and all land borders, and demanding that all oil fields and military bases in and outside the KRI be handed back to the federal government;
- After the referendum, not confirming or denying an alleged agreement with the KRG about whether the GoI was demanding [all Peshmerga withdraw from the disputed territories](#) by October 15, although Prime Minister al-Abadi publicly declared that not one Peshmerga was to remain in any disputed territory;
- Instead of addressing Article 140 (regarding the status of the disputed territories) militarily taking back Kirkuk and other disputed territories on 16 October 2017, using the Iraqi Army and Iran-linked militia, the latter using US-supplied Abrams tanks and being under the leadership of IRGC Quds force commander, General Qassem Soleimani;
- Continuing to provide inadequate security and administrative services;
- Refusing Peshmerga and *Asayish* the right of return, causing increased insecurity in the disputed territories related to ISIS, unruly non-local Shia militias and other groups kidnapping, killing, threatening and extorting

individuals and communities, despite Peshmerga, Asayish, Iraqi armed forces and police having jointly protected these territories between 2005 and 2014, and despite Peshmerga and Asayish having solely protected these territories between August 2014 and October 2017;

- Appointing a Sunni Arab governor who allowed and supported the re-Arabisation of Kirkuk, with Arabs taking over courts, other government and non-government positions, offices, farmlands and houses;
- Alternating between verbal agreements and threats, but taking no action regarding Turkey's building of new military bases and its intensification of air and ground offensives in Nineveh, Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimani in the name of fighting PKK. This is despite Turkey's offensives killing tens of Iraqi Kurdish civilians and thousands of livestock, destroying infrastructure, and causing the evacuation of some 500 villages, and loss of livelihoods; and finally,
- Coming to an agreement with KRG on security in Shingal/Sinjar without consulting or incorporating local Yezidi fighters and civil society organisations. The lack of consultation and lack of detail contained in this agreement undermines the legitimacy of the Gol and KRG.

Iran undermines the KRG and KRI by:

- [Advising](#) Iraqi Shia-based political parties, which have a majority in Parliament, to stop sending revenue to the KRG, and to [vote against any agreement](#) that benefits the KRI, including not passing the [budget](#). As a result, there are delays in decisions, and the passing of decisions designed to undermine the Kurdistan Region's autonomy;
- Supporting Iraqi Shia religious organisations and militias to pursue a Shiafication policy in Sunni territories and disputed territories.
- Taking punitive measures such as shutting down cross-border trade and supporting the military takeover of the disputed territories in October 2017;
- Putting pressure on the PUK to comply with Iran's needs at the expense of PUK – KDP relations; and
- Attacking Iranian Kurdish political activists and refugees inside the KRI.

Turkey undermines the KRG and KRI by:

- Trying to establish a good relationship with Baghdad (but failing to do so because of Iran's influence on the Gol). For example, attempting to negotiate a new border crossing between Turkey and Iraq involving a new road through the Kurdistan regions of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, without consulting the KRG;
- Intermittently closing the one and only border crossing with Iraq that goes through the KRI, especially after the KRG held a non-binding referendum on independence in September 2017;
- Expanding the number of military bases and using air and ground offensives in the name of fighting the PKK in the KRI and disputed territories of Shingal and Makhmour, thus violating the sovereignty of Iraq and undermining the security and stability of the KRI;
- Ignoring the KRG's and Gol's objections to these air and ground offensives;

- Pressuring the KDP to fight the PKK (which the KDP has refused to do since the 1990s) and otherwise act against the PKK, such as establishing checkpoints around PKK bases and making pro-Turkey statements (which the KDP has done), thus undermining the legitimacy of the KRG in the eyes of many Kurds and putting the KRG in an untenable position, given that PKK are Kurds but the KRI relies on Turkey for exporting oil and importing food and construction materials, especially when the Gol blocks KRG's budget allocation, and US sanctions on Iran prevent the KRI trading with Iran; and
- Causing tensions between the KDP and PUK.

To the distress of many Kurds, the **KRG** executive is undermining the KRG's achievements by:

- Not finalizing a constitution for the Kurdistan Region;
- Not being transparent and accountable about:
 - Negotiations with the Gol over the budget, oil, customs, revenue distributions, immigration, transport and judicial [powers](#);
 - Oil and pipeline contracts, e.g. the 50 year contract with Turkey to export oil through Ceyhan, with this lack of transparency undercutting efforts to build good relations with Iraq and undermining the credibility of the KRG in the minds of people;
 - Income and expenditure from government and private sources, even to the point of not formulating a budget between 2014 – 2020, resulting in ad hoc decisions; and
 - Government and inter-party agreements, like:
 - What was agreed with the Gol (or demanded by the Gol) about Peshmerga and Asayish in Kirkuk and other disputed territories before the KRG allegedly broke the agreement resulting in Iraqi security forces militarily taking back all disputed territories in October 2017; and
 - An agreement between KDP and PUK Peshmerga commanders about staying to fight or withdrawing from Kirkuk and other disputed territories, and the reasons behind both sides allegedly withdrawing heavy armaments before October 16;
- Not publicly taking into account what could be lost by holding the referendum on independence at that time, given Iraq, Iran and Turkey were threatening retribution and Iraqi forces were stationed near every disputed territory. A counterargument is that the military takeover of the disputed territories and other retributions would have happened anyway;
- Having no Kurdistan Parliament operating between 2015 and 2017, and the Parliament passing only [five laws in 2020](#). Instead, the KRI is ruled by executive decree;
- Not uniting the KDP and PUK Peshmerga despite international pressure and support to do so (Note: non-payment of Peshmerga answering to the KDP or PUK could be used as an incentive to unite);
- Having private ownership of oil refineries and ports and not demanding these publicly account for their earnings, pay tax or stop pollution;

- Strengthening control of the two main political parties – KDP and PUK – and the family dynasties that run them, over the government, economy and media, by way of:
 - KDP and/or PUK representatives rather than a parliamentary team or bureaucrats negotiating with Turkey, Iran and Iraq;
 - KDP appeasing Turkey, and PUK appeasing Iran;
 - Censoring media and arresting journalists critical of political leaders and the government;
 - Undermining the independence of legal institutions by appointing judges and officials based on loyalty and allegedly using intimidation to manipulate outcomes, such as land being confiscated for a major infrastructure project; bribes being paid to establish a business, and well connected criminals not being held to account;
 - Having non-transparent processes in the employment and advancement of people in political parties, and in the public and private sectors, causing observers to allege nepotism;
- Not developing a modern banking system or the necessary legal protections for foreign investors, thus reducing the likelihood of attracting investment;
- Incurring [USD\\$27 billion in debt](#) by 2020, which the KRG blames on the GoI not paying the KRG's allocated revenue, although KRG critics allege corruption and suspect unfavourable terms in oil and pipeline agreements;
- Failing to protect Yezidi in the disputed territory of Sinjar/Shingal from ISIS in 2014, and then making a security agreement with the GoI for [Sinjar/Shingal](#) in 2021 without consulting local Yezidi fighters and civil society;
- Cutting public sector salaries for many months at a time, causing extreme hardship, in order to survive Baghdad's revenue cuts, while allegedly retaining private untaxed wealth generated from oil, gas, and other business;
- Harshly responding to street protests leading to [11 deaths](#), the arrest of hundreds, including journalists, and raids on media outlets;
- Not meeting international standards regarding air, water and soil pollution and water conservation (with oil companies consuming huge amounts of water), education, health, medicines, pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers;
- Not encouraging a diversified private sector by having clear and transparent rules and regulations for investment and establishing small to large businesses outside those owned by politically connected individuals; and thus
- Not providing employment opportunities for educated young people, causing a brain drain with many seeing no future, seeking a life outside Kurdistan.

TURKEY

Although the firebrand PKK became more moderate in its goals and actions, even implementing several unilateral ceasefires during the 1990s, the Turkish state:

- Continued to empty and destroy villages and kill, dislocate and deport more than two million people in the 1990s; and

- Lobby countries to list PKK as a terrorist organisation. Turkey was largely successful in this endeavour, which justified Turkey's military 'solution'.

Since the June 2015 elections, President Erdogan and his AKP-led government have:

- Ceased all political negotiations with PKK and other Kurdish groups;
- Re-militarised southeast Turkey;
- Used tanks, drones, jet fighters and heavy artillery to militarily attack Kurdish civilians, PKK supporters and other activists in eastern Turkey causing several thousand civilian deaths, the destruction of towns and villages, the displacement of more than one million people and loss of livelihoods, with victims having no recourse to an independent [judicial system](#);
- Established emergency rule throughout the country since the failed coup in 2016;
- Tried to co-ordinate security measures against PKK and groups Turkey alleges are PKK with the governments of Iraq, Iran, the US and Russia;
- Not accepted a significant increase in the election of pro-Kurdish parliamentarians in 2015. Instead, tens of HDP parliamentarians had their parliamentary immunity removed, after which 14 parliamentarians were imprisoned in November 2016 on fabricated charges, with eight remaining in [prison](#) five years on. These eight include HDP's former co-chairs, Figen Yuksekdag and [Selahattin Demirtas](#);
- Ignored the European Court of Human Rights (HCHR) and the [Grand Chamber of the ECHR](#) order to release Selahattin Demirtas;
- Rejected the election of pro-Kurdish mayors and municipal councillors in the 2014 and 2019 municipal elections, either disallowing their appointment or removing them from office and replacing them with government-appointed trustees, imprisoning many. In the years following the 2014 municipal elections, 94 out of 103 elected Kurdish mayors were removed from office and many were imprisoned. After the election of 65 Kurdish mayors in the March 2019 municipal elections, the AKP-MHP government refused 14 mayors the right to take office and dismissed another 45 (so far). Government-appointed trustees now run [47 municipalities](#) that voted for HDP in 2019. At least 21 dismissed mayors remain in [prison](#). Only five elected Kurdish mayors remain in office. Meanwhile, [16,000 HDP members](#) had been detained by mid February 2021, before another [720 across 40 provinces arrested in one day](#) on 15 February. All face charges of 'making terrorist propaganda' and/or 'belonging to a terrorist organisation (PKK)' et al., because they criticised Erdogan or spoke against one or more of Turkey's policies, such as Turkey's invasion and occupation Afrin and northeast Syria. Many have not had their charges tested in a court of law;
- Claiming that there is no difference between PKK and HDP, despite HDP not supporting armed struggle, with the MHP calling for HDP to be outlawed;
- Closed down Kurdish cultural and humanitarian organisations, censored the publication of Kurdish literature, and imprisoned several professional musicians for singing in Kurdish; and
- Changed Kurdish street and village names into Turkish names.

SYRIA

Turkey perceives Kurd-led initiatives in Syria to be more of a threat than ISIS. Turkey:

- Falsely labels YPG, YPJ, SDF and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as 'PKK terrorists' as an excuse to invade, occupy and ethnically cleanse districts overseen by the AANES;
- Blocks representatives of the SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF from participating in negotiations regarding the re-writing of a constitution and the future of Syria, because these organisations advocate autonomy and a secular democratic federal Syria, which Turkey does not want;
- Blocks humanitarian aid going into Kurd-administered areas;
- Invaded and occupied north Aleppo (Jarablus, Azaz and Al-Bab) in 2016, after the SDF had liberated Manbij and Al-Bab from ISIS control, and did the same in the Kurd-majority district of Afrin in 2018, and in the east, invaded and occupied the AANES and SDF served border towns of Gire Spi (Tel Abyad) and Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ain) in 2019, using indoctrinated secular and Syrian Islamist militias to create a 'buffer zone', a euphuism for ethnically cleansing the areas of Kurds, and committing other [war crimes](#) and crimes against humanity, including regularly blocking water to half a million people, and establishing a Turkey fascist Islamist occupation of the districts that provides no [security or justice](#);
- Attacks areas outside those stipulated by its agreements with the USA and Russia, including Manbij and Tel Rifaat west of the Euphrates, and the Assyrian-majority town of Tal Tamr, and the Arab-majority town of Ain Issa east of the Euphrates. Ain Issa is outside the agreed 32-kilometre 'security' belt but is highly strategic in being on the M4 highway that connects Manbij, Raqqa and Hasaka, and being the headquarters for SDC, AANES, SDF and *Asayish*; and
- Threatens to neutralise all PKK 'terrorists' from Aleppo to Hasaka, including fighters in the YPG, YPJ and SDF, administrators in the AANES, members of TEV – DEM, and any civilians who support or have relatives in these institutions.
- Trains, indoctrinates, arms and pays Islamist extremist militants, some of whom are former ISIS fighters, to fight and persecute Kurds, and to go and fight in Libya and Azerbaijan, from where some have escaped to Europe.

Meanwhile, the Assad Regime:

- Calls PYD, YPG, YPJ, SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF 'terrorists' and 'traitors';
- Threatens to militarily take back all of Syria;
- Stirs discontent among the population against these institutions;
- Goes through the motion of negotiating amendments to the constitution as a stalling tactic;
- Is supported by Russia who attempts to blackmail Kurds and their allies into accepting the return of the Assad Regime into areas controlled by the AANES, saying the alternative is another invasion and occupation by Turkey; and

- Deployed limited forces to the border and other pre-arranged sites since October 2019, which Kurds agreed to on the understanding that the Syrian Arab Army would protect the civilian population from Turkey's attacks. But the Syrian Arab Army and the National Defence Force militia that support it are under-resourced, and even under-fed. They have been ineffective in protecting civilians and infrastructure from constant low level attacks and war crimes committed by Turkey's soldiers and proxies. Even Russia finds it difficult to stop Turkey's attacks.

Another threat is Iran, its militias and institutions positioned in towns like Al-Bukamal on the border with Iraq. Iranian agents regularly stir up discontent. Then there are ISIS cells assassinating AANES-allied Sunni Arab tribal leaders and AANES employed women, and undertaking regular lethal small-scale attacks. Meanwhile, the international community turns the other way as Syrian Kurds and their allies are squeezed between Turkey, Syria, Russia, Iran, and ISIS, thus grinding down the very administrations and ground forces that, with conditional support, could establish an ISIS free, secular multiethnic democratic society for men and women. Ironically, war and occupation have united disparate peoples on north and east Syria. Peace may divide them, given Arabs may even be less united than Kurds, and are certainly more ephemeral in their allegiances! Only with the appropriate international leverage can one be optimistic about the future of Syria.

IRAN

The points below reveal just how ruthless the Islamic Republic of Iran has been in its response to the Kurdish struggle for self-determination.

- In the Holy War on Kurds between 1979 and 1984, Iranian forces attacked every Kurd-majority town where Kurds had assumed control in the vacuum created by the revolution. In excess of 10,000 people were killed, including 1,200 political prisoners.
- A frequently used strategy of the Iranian state is to decapitate the head of the snake. In 1947 Qazi Muhammad was hung. In 1989, Iranian intelligence officers assassinated the forward thinking Iranian Kurdish intellectual and Secretary-General of the Kurdistan Democratic Party –Iran (KDP-I, [Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou](#)), when he attended a meeting with Iranian officials in Vienna to talk about self-government. Three years later, in 1992, the next Secretary-General of the KDP-I, Dr Sadegh Sharafkandi, was assassinated along with his fellow activists, Fattah Abdoli and Homayoun Ardalani, and their translator Nouri Dehkordi, at the Mykonos Greek restaurant in Berlin. Some years later a German investigation traced the assassination order to Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
- Pro-Kurdish parties (including the two Kurdistan Democratic Parties of Iran and Party of Free Life of Kurdistan or PJAK), and other ethnic-based, socialist and communist parties, as well as any humanitarian, cultural and environmental organisations not linked to the government or Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corp are illegal. Their illegality has not stopped political, social and environmental activists working in secret but if caught they are given long prison sentences and even the death penalty.

- Kurds are disproportionately represented in state executions.
- It is common for political prisoners to have one or more drug convictions added to their original convictions after being imprisoned, as possession of sizeable amounts of a drug carries the death penalty.
- A Kurd who is suspected of having a link, or who has a relative with a link to an illegal organisation, cannot get a government job or stand for election.
- Extreme poverty and high unemployment are features of the Kurdistan region of Iran. In some Kurd-majority towns and cities unemployment is estimated to be 60 percent – the highest in Iran.
- Many Iranian Kurds become cross-border porters called kolbars. Kolbars can be university graduates who are unable to get a job. They suffer a high rate of death or serious injury, either by border guards shooting them, or from having an accident in the mountains.
- In the Kurdistan region there is an escalating problem of narcotics use, with the [IRGC](#) known to [traffic drugs](#) in and outside Iran.

CONCLUSION

The dream of an independent nation state called Kurdistan covering all four regions with a border extending to the Mediterranean Sea, is not about to disappear, given the rising proportion of Kurds in the populations of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran. However, current Kurdish political leaders have verbally adopted a more pragmatic but no less ambitious dream of asking for autonomous regions within a democratic federation in each country. Having four autonomous regions is arguably less disruptive and would allow different political economic systems in the different regions. It would also require the four federal nation states to democratize and give rights to other oppressed communities, thus benefiting more people. But this vision could be even harder to achieve than an independent Kurdistan. Also, Kurdistanis would remain victim to the flaws of their federal governments, and would not have a seat at the UN or other organisations based on nation states.

Kurds and non-Kurds alike recognize the biggest, most fundamental obstacle to either independence or four autonomous regions is the political rivalries between Kurdish parties and their leaders, despite political co-ordination being in their best interests. For example, a coordinated effort by KDP and PUK advanced a constitution that benefitted the Kurdistan region, and co-ordination among Kurdish militaries helped defeat ISIS. In the future, if an autonomous region of Syria had access to a seaport, this would give the KRI access to that port, thus reducing its reliance on Turkey. Other sources of hope have been outlined in the section on achievements. Then there are the few inspiring, broad-minded leaders that have come to the fore in recent years, although it remains to be seen if the old guard will accept them speaking on behalf of the Kurdish nation.

Even if Kurds develop impeccable coordination and strong international alliances to move forward based on the UN Charter and international law, veteran world leaders resist change, while finally gaining autonomy or independence is the beginning of another journey, one with immense challenges: negotiating borders, potentially being landlocked, developing functional governments, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a modern banking system, viable economies, sustainable water and other resource sharing schemes (given Kurds inhabit regions containing the major river, oil and gas systems of three countries), parameters of citizenship and the right to return, security and ways of dealing with hostile neighbours (e.g. based on mutual economic benefits), albeit these challenges already existing for all four countries in which most Kurds reside, with Kurdish communities also living in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

With Kurds' history of fighting fascism, and willingness to build beneficial relations with friends and foes, one could argue Kurds have become an international asset, at least one that others are happy to exploit. But the USA, Europe, Russia, and their coalitions cannot expect Kurds to be a military and political bastion in Middle East when Kurds are in a life and death struggle. Hence, KLA asks you to seriously consider the recommendations found in this report and take appropriate action.

ACRONYMS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkey)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (Iran)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDP-S	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Syria)
KNC	Kurdish National Council (Iraq)
KNUP	Kurdish National Unity Parties (Syria)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Turkey)
UN	United Nations
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)