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The most pressing challenges facing the Kurdistan Regions of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq and Options for the Australian Government to Respond

Introduction and Universal Options

The Kurdistan people (i.e., people of all ethnicities who live in the Kurdistan regions of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq) are tired of the international community's silence and empty rhetoric in response to the multiple challenges they face, even when these challenges have international implications. Given the stakes, it is imperative that issues raised in this document and suggested courses of action be considered by the Australian Government, other governments, and international institutions.

Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA) suggests that the Australian Government consider:

- Offering asylum to individuals and their families that are in danger of persecution and imprisonment because of their valid political views;
- Speaking in parliament, with ambassadors from Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq, in bilateral talks, and at international forums about the need to support those who, because of their ethnicity, religion or contrary political views, are being militarily attacked, assassinated, persecuted, imprisoned, or otherwise disenfranchised by governments and security forces of these states;
- Demanding all political prisoners in all four countries be released;
- Providing resources for diverse ethnic diasporas from each country now living in Australia to network and discuss ways forward for Australia and themselves to help their country of origin;
- Conditioning trade and investment, especially when it involves a municipal, provincial, regional, or national government, on criteria that promote beneficial outcomes for the people;
- Collaborating with local communities and Non-Government Organisations;
- Advocating for and helping:
 - Establish international incentive and disincentive programs to shape a repressive government's policies, with disincentives including *actual* financial asset freezing and the introduction of visa bans on perpetrators of persecution. For example, why have Kazem Gharib Abadi, a Deputy in Iran's judiciary, this judiciary having imprisoned over 12,000 protesters since mid-September, and Zohreh Elahian, one of 227 MPs asking that imprisoned protesters receive the death penalty, received visas to visit the USA?;
 - Facilitate international investigative mechanisms into state and non-state actor allegations of terrorism and war crimes leading to evidence being presented to an international tribunal, court, or committee, so, for example, PKK's proscription as a terrorist organization is based on legalities rather than a political decision; and
 - **Establish ways for non-state actors to hold a nation-state government to account.**
- Review standing orders that prevent Australian Parliamentary Friendship Groups being formed for non-state actors, even those who are proven allies and who face challenges of international import. It is unacceptable that Parliamentary Friendship Groups for Kurds are not allowed in Australia when they have been established in the UK, European Parliament, USA, and Canada.



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Kurdish Lobby Australia

TURKEY

Background

President Erdogan succeeded in having alterations to the constitution passed that give him unchecked powers. Turkey is no longer a parliamentary democracy. Erdogan is taking Turkey down a dangerous path, driven by [Neo-Ottoman ambitions](#) and paranoia about Kurds, who comprise an estimated 25 percent of Turkey's population, and about 10 percent or more of the populations of Iraq, Syria and Iran. Erdogan's political ambitions could crescendo during and after the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023, which is the 100 year anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne that established the current borders of Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Although many world leaders might hope that Erdogan is voted out of office, Erdogan will do anything to avoid this outcome. Even if Erdogan fails to retain power, his mindset is shared by too many of Turkey's political and military leaders, and this has profound security implications for the region, Europe, and beyond. This means that Australia and its allies must face the reality of an increasingly belligerent non-aligned Turkey, willing to use all kinds of blackmail to aggressively pursue territorial expansion, and domination of energy transit routes.

Given Turkey is in such a critical geopolitical position, priority issues in urgent need of redress are:

- Turkey's broad definition of terrorism, which is applied to anyone critical of Turkish state policies and actions. This has led to censorship, arrest and indefinite imprisonment of elected Kurdish parliamentarians and municipal mayors, journalists, lawyers, academics, teachers, students, humanitarian workers and activists. The two most renowned political prisoners in Turkey are Kurdish - the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who has spent 24 years in solitary confinement, and the former HDP presidential candidate and co-chair, Selahattin Demirtas, who has been in prison since November 2016.
- Turkey's militarisation of eastern Turkey, including military attacks by air and land;
- Turkey establishing more than 40 military bases and escalating military attacks and assassinations on Kurdish civilians, PKK fighters, political leaders and sympathisers in Iraq.
- Turkey's use of chemical weapons in northeast Syria in October 2019, also allegedly targeting PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since April 2022. ([Appendix A](#)).
- Turkey's invasion and occupation of four discrete regions in northern Syria on the pretext of creating 'safe zones' for the return of Syrian refugees. Instead, Turkey's National Intelligence and Armed Forces, aided by their extremist Syrian militia proxies, that include former ISIS and al-Qaida fighters, have displaced half a million Kurds, while the civilians who remain are subject to all manner of war crimes, and being caught between militias constantly fighting each other over loot and territory. Perhaps frustrated by this well documented behaviour, in October Turkey allowed Hayat Tahir Al-Sham (HTS), which controls Idlib, to expand west to Afrin and Azaz. Thus, Turkey is creating an Islamic State in northern Syria.
- Erdogan is using Islam as a political tool and turning Turkey into a religious-based military State on the doorstep of Europe. He has increased the powers and funding of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and exponentially expanded state-funded [Imam Hatip](#) schools 'to raise a [pious generation](#)'. Critically, Turkey has become a haven for ISIS, al-Qaida and other extremists.
- Turkey not allowing *any* independent investigations into individuals or organisations it claims to be terrorist, with Turkey consistently accusing PKK of committing terrorist acts in Turkey, Syria,



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and Iraq. One example is the killing of 13 long term prisoners of war held by PKK in the Qandil mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. They were killed during a Turkish raid on the PKK. Turkey claimed that PKK killed these prisoners. The limited public evidence suggests it was the Turkish Armed Forces that killed them.

Until Turkey becomes a democracy with an independent judiciary; demilitarises eastern Turkey, withdraws its spies, bases and military forces from Iraq and Syria (and other countries); stops supporting extremist militias in multiple countries; allows impartial investigations into all claims made about political prisoners; and enters sincere, internationally supported and monitored negotiations with Kurds from Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Australia should unilaterally consider:

- Raising these issues with the Turkish Ambassador to Australia, allies like the USA, and at international forums;
- Discouraging Australian tourists and war veterans from visiting Turkey; and
- Delisting the PKK as a terrorist organisation until independently substantiated evidence is tested in a court of law, given that the proscription of PKK has not been tested in this way but is used by the Turkish state to justify war and persecution of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, and in diasporas such as Sweden and Germany.

Australia should consider acting with allies on the following options:

- Applying incentives and disincentives to shape Turkey's policies and actions, including freezing Turkish state, VIP and corporate assets in Australia, banning all Turkish imports, investments and companies doing business in Australia, and ceasing all Australian exports and investments in Turkey.
- Insisting on and support international investigations into:
 - Turkey's use of chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq, and if evidence is found, support a member of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to take the case to the OPCW;
 - War crimes committed by Turkish intelligence, army and proxies; and
 - Support for ISIS in Turkey and Syria, taking cases to an appropriate institution.
- Support a resolution in the UN General Assembly that will seek the opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legal status of Turkey's occupation of Syria and military presence in Iraq.

IRAN

Background

It is interesting to note that the Mede-Persian Empire established by Cyrus the Great was the first significant multi-ethnic, multi-religious federation in history. Having aspired to an autonomous region within a democratic Federation of Iran, Kurds have protested the Islamic Republic of Iran since its inception. As a result, Kurds have always made up a disproportionate number of political prisoners and those who are executed. It is therefore not surprising that the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman whilst in the custody of the morality police ignited nation-wide protests that have become the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic in 43 years. For what the Australian Government could consider doing to



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help the people of Iran see KLA's submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee established to examine Human Rights implications of recent violence in Iran. (Appendix B). This submission excludes that:

- 227 out of 290 MPs in the Majlis are calling for imprisoned 'rioters' to be executed.
- On September 30, security forces opened fire on Baloch/Baluch protests in Zahedan, killing at least 92 and injuring dozens, violence on the Kurds and Baloch nations being the most extreme.
- As of 9 Nov., 328 protesters have been killed, including 50 children, while 14,823 persons have been detained, including 431 students, across 137 cities and 136 universities. In addition, 38 police, Basij, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) personnel have been killed.
- Since the start of the protests, at least 42 journalists have been arrested. Eight have been released. Thirty-four remain in detention. Among them are 15 women journalists.
- Authorities were enraged when a Sunni cleric suggested that Iran should hold a referendum to establish the proportion of people who would like to replace rule by clerics and the IRGC.

SYRIA

From a Kurdistani point of view, priority issues in Syria are that:

- The Kurd-led multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have been excluded from all international negotiations to an end the civil war and create a path to a more sustainable future, despite the SDF being instrumental in defeating ISIS in 2019 and continuing to combat ISIS cells with help from Operation Inherent Resolve, and despite the AANES administering a third of Syria's territory.
- SDF and AANES officials, SDF-secured ISIS prison camps, and civilians are frequently being assassinated or militarily attacked by Turkey, ISIS, and others.¹
- Kurdish forces are constantly being blamed for terrorist acts committed in the chaotic security environment of Turkey-occupied regions in Syria.
- If US Armed Forces leave Syria, any person who has worked for or allied with the SDF or AANES will be massacred or imprisoned (as have those who stayed in Turkey-occupied Afrin).
- Turkey has displaced up to half a million Kurds in northern Syria.
- Turkey regularly cuts off water to millions of people in northeast Syria.
- Turkey does not allow foreign aid to reach Kurd administered and secured areas.
- Turkey has Turkified and Islamised schools, administrations, the currency and trade, and Arabised the population of the regions it occupies in Syria.
- The Assad regime is uncompromising in its demands for administrative and military control.
- The AANES and Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) are limited by not being officially recognised.

¹ Turkey and ISIS operatives regularly help ISIS prisoners break out of camps. For instance, in the weekly issue of the IS al-Nabaa newspaper on Oct. 7, ISIS announced that [its cells carried out](#) 59 military operations in the AANES region in the span of 68 days, from Aug. 1. The operations caused the death of 103 members of the SDF and 19 soldiers of the Syrian government forces. ISIS sources say these operations were about taking revenge for SDF activities in the Al-Hol camp for ISIS fighters and their families.



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- The SDF, ANNES, and SDC face significant challenges in overseeing diverse cultural understandings, from radical feminism to very traditional tribal customs (See Appendix C), and
- Negotiations between the Kurdish political leaders of north and east Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have broken down.

Appropriate responses include:

- Penalising Turkey for its aggression in Syria if it does not respond to incentives to negotiate with Syrian Kurds and withdraw from all Syrian territory. This needs to be part of a political resolution to the civil war which has devastated Syria.
- Ensuring all negotiations on Syria include the participation of different ethnic leaders from all regions, including leaders in the SDF and AANES.
- Refusing to accept the government of Syria in its current form.
- Supporting international mechanisms to hold the government of Syria to account.
- Requiring all countries to assume responsibility for their citizens who are now being held in SDF-secured prisons in northeast Syria because they were linked to ISIS.
- Conditionally invest in much needed services and infrastructure in the AANES (water, sewerage, energy, sustainable agriculture, education etc) in consultation with local committees;
- Supporting pluralist, transparent, democratic processes within the AANES; and
- Supporting internationally monitored negotiations between the AANES, SDC and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), offering conditional assistance and investment to all parties on achieving incremental milestones. Both sides need to identify common interests and built trust and the capacity to compromise. This process is vital as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a critical transit route into northern Syria but is politically and economically torn given its own survival depends on a co-operative relationship with Turkey. Hence, the need for Turkey to enter negotiations with Kurds from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq for the benefit of all parties.

IRAQ

From the Kurdistan point of view, priority issues are:

- Turkey's military attacks targeting PKK leading to the deaths of more than 100 Iraqi Kurdish civilians, depriving them of livelihoods, and displacing them from an estimated 500 villages;
- At the same time being dependent on Turkey as an outlet for Kurdistan's oil and gas.
- Iran's military attacks in 2017, 2021 and 2022, because organisations illegal in Iran - Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, Kurdistan Freedom Party, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan, and Komala - reside in the KRI. Although these organizations claim they are not engaged in an active insurgency and have not interfered with the Iranian protests in 2022, Iran has bombarded their locations, killing 16 people, and threatened a ground invasion, unless the KRG expels these organisations. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) refused.
- That the KRG does not have the military or political capacity to stop Turkey and Iran's violations of KRI/ Iraqi sovereignty, especially as the KRI is not a nation-state, and is dependent on Turkey and Iran for trade and peace, and the federal government of Iraq ignores the violations, or makes feeble objections, even when Arab Iraqi tourists are collateral damage.



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- Hosting 100s of 1000s of refugees and displaced people from Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq; and
- Facing perpetual problems with the Federal government of Iraq and Supreme Court including:
 - Iraq's constitution not being implemented (see Appendix D);
 - Not allowing the Kurdistan Region to export oil and gas from new fields despite experts arguing this is allowed in the 2005 constitution (see Appendix D), meanwhile withholding the KRI's budget allocation between 2014 – 2017 and intermittently after;
 - Non-payment of Peshmerga despite them being an official force that defended territory and helped defeat ISIS;
 - Not resolving the status of the disputed territories including the heavily militarised and recently re-Arabised province of Kirkuk and Yezidi district of Shingal (Sinjar); and
 - In October 2017, immediately after ISIS was defeated in Iraq, militarily attacking the disputed territories and the KRI using Iraqi Shia militias led by Iranian QUDS general, Qasem Soleimani, the militia taking control of the disputed territories despite Peshmerga, PKK, and others having defended and secured these areas since 2014.

Appropriate responses include Australia, other countries and international institutions pushing for:

- Iraq to implement its 2005 constitution;
- A new governor in Kirkuk to replace the Baghdad appointed Rakan Saeed al-Jabouri;
- Halting the re-militarisation and renewed Arabisation of Kirkuk and Shingal;
- Joint security initiatives between federal and Kurdistan forces to secure disputed territories;
- The safe return of Yezidis to Shingal, which will require demilitarisation, a no-fly zone (to stop Turkey's attacks from the air), and rebuilding infrastructure and services;
- Internationally monitored political negotiations between:
 - The Government of Iraq and the KRG;
 - Turkey and Kurds living in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, including the PKK; and
 - The KRG and the SDC and AANES;
 - The Ministry of Peshmerga and the SDF;
 - The major parties in the KRI (for instance, making use of co-chairs to build trust);
- Various kinds of assistance for the KRI conditional on the KRI being sincere in:
 - Letting new 'blood' into family-dominated political parties;
 - Uniting Peshmerga within the Ministry of Peshmerga;
 - Allowing a free media;
 - Allowing people to peacefully protest;
 - Establishing a highly professional impartial independent judiciary; and
 - Finalising a constitution for the KRI.

Australia could collaborate with other countries, local government and communities to conditionally invest in clean water, sewerage and renewable energy, drought mitigation, land, water and biodiversity conservation, transparent governance and an impartial judiciary.

Conclusion: After all, which costs more, perpetual war or working on these options?