

How to Stop Turkey's Aggression and Provide Alternatives to Turkey's Occupation and Turkification of Northern Syria

To stop Turkey's aggression against Syrian Kurds, and to provide alternatives to Turkey's occupation and Turkification of northern Aleppo, Kurdish Lobby Australia calls on the international community, including the Australian Government, to use all available bilateral and multilateral diplomatic means, and consider other measures to:

- Establish a demilitarised zone along the Turkey-Syria border and deploy a [multinational peacekeeping force](#) to secure the zone;
- Establish a no-fly zone in northern Syria;
- Enable international observers and international humanitarian aid organisations to enter Turkey-occupied Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle (Azaz-Jarablus-al-Bab) to provide aid to IDPs and an impartial assessment of what is happening, particularly in regards to Turkey-backed militias;
- Guarantee all stabilisation and reconstruction in Syria comes under an internationally agreed framework based on respecting the Syrian people's human, cultural, political and economic rights, making it clear that Turkification, Arabisation, extreme Islamisation, war crimes and crimes against humanity fall outside this framework;
- Ensure representatives of the [Democratic Federation of Northern Syria](#) and Manbij, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Tabqa councils participate in political negotiations, so they have an opportunity to propose a (con) federation of Syria; and meanwhile,
- Formally recognise these administrations.

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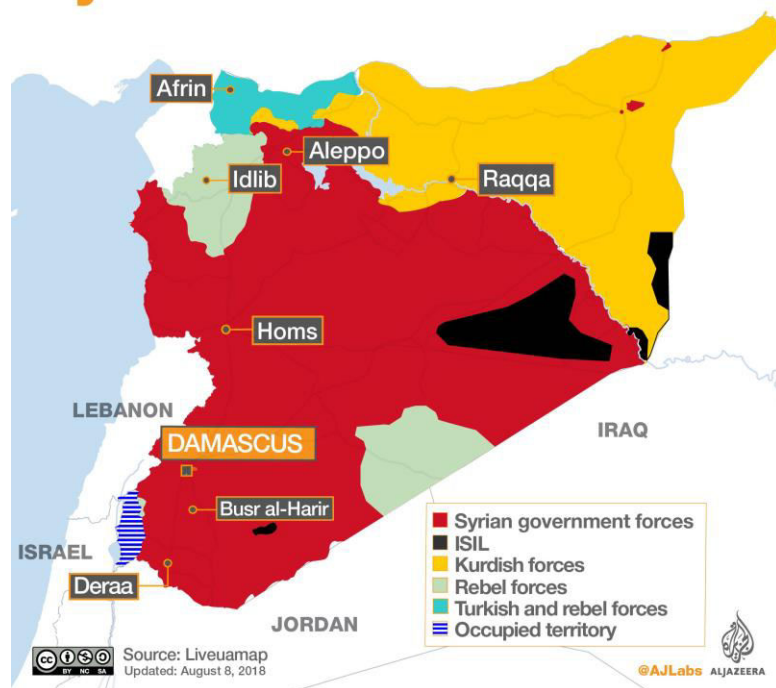
OVERVIEW OF SYRIA

- War, [international sanctions](#) and Syria having lost its biggest pre-war trading partners (Saudi Arabia, France and [Turkey](#)) have impacted the Syrian economy. In 2018, Syria has an unemployment rate of 55 percent. More than 80 percent of the population live below the poverty line. Pre – 2011, 80 percent of Syria’s economy was supported by small and medium-sized businesses. In 2018, the business elite controls 75 percent of the economy. Devaluation of the Syrian pound has meant prices have increased [ten fold](#).
- War in Syria has killed over [500,000 people](#) and permanently injured 1.5 million people, with 86,000 of these people having [lost limbs](#). Unknown numbers suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Between January and June 2018, of 14 million displaced Syrians, 745,000 IDPs and 136,000 refugees returned [home](#).
- UN, Astana and Sochi political negotiations are deadlocked because the Assad regime refuses to compromise on a constitutional committee, a constitution, or a political transition. The regime classifies all opposition militants, opposition sympathisers and Kurds as terrorists.
- It is commonly said that Assad has won the civil war, having taken nominal control of 60 percent of the country, but the wars in Syria will only end when Assad is removed from power. Even if the Sunni Arab opposition and the Kurds and their allies admitted defeat and disarmed, Assad would be left with a weakened state beholden to Russia and Iran, ruled by a corrupt elite and secured by various [non-state militias](#). The regime would further inflame tensions by dispossessing up to half the population of their property (with amended Law No. 10), and by arresting or killing all those considered [disloyal](#). Syria would remain a hotbed of Sunni and Shia extremists whose activities could destabilise Syria, the region, and [beyond](#).
- The estimated cost for rebuilding Syria is \$400 billion. It is unclear whether this includes the cost for [institutional reform](#), justice for those who have committed war crimes, and for Syrians to be reconciled, [reintegrated](#) and/or compensated. Investment in stabilisation and reconstruction will be wasted by corruption, mismanagement and war if not carried out within a strategic framework linked to an internationally supported political transition.

ACRONYMS

KNC	Kurdish National Congress
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Turkey)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Mixed ethnic, Kurdish led)
YPG	People’s Protection Units (Syrian Kurdish)
HTS	Hayat Tahir al-Sham (coalition led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham/al-Nusra)
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces

Syria: Who controls what?



Map of who controls what territory in Syria August 2018

TURKEY IN SYRIA

Turkey's Military Aggression against Syrian Kurds

Since 2014, Turkish military (TSK) has regularly shelled Kurd-secured areas in northern Syria. In August 2016, Turkey invaded and occupied the Euphrates Shield Triangle (Azaz – Jarablus – al Bab). As part of the Astana process Turkey co-ordinated with HTS to enter Idlib in October 2017. Then Turkey invaded the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in January 2018. In June 2018, Turkey and the US came to a 'conditional' agreement on the security and administration of Manbij, which was liberated from ISIS in August 2016 by the YPG, SDF and Manbij Military Council. Since late October 2018, Turkey has renewed its unprovoked attacks on Kurds east of the Euphrates.

In Idlib and the two territories occupied by Turkey in northern Aleppo, Turkey has established two Syrian militia armies. Components of these armies are Islamist extremists, including [former ISIS fighters](#). In return for Turkey training these militias, and supplying them salaries, weapons and ammunition, also allowing them to establish separate militia training camps and to tax traffic at checkpoints and border crossings, Turkey demands a monopoly on the trade in oil, and agricultural and industrial products from Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle. However, Turkey is unable or unwilling to stop these militias harassing, kidnapping, arresting and killing

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civilians, plundering property, and fighting between themselves over stolen goods and property, and the right to smuggle goods and tax civilians. It is these militias that Turkey wants to use to supplement TSK in expanding its occupation of Syria.

In the four years of war against ISIS, [12,000 Syrian Kurdish fighters](#) have been killed in liberating one third of Syrian territory. In early September, Turkey's Minister of Defence, Hulusi Akar, told the US envoy for Syria, James Jeffrey, that all Syrian Kurdish fighters must leave Syrian [territory](#). Erdogan repeated his threats to launch offensives on Manbij and east of the Euphrates and in mid September, Turkey-backed militants launched mortars into the section of Tel Rifaat city secured by the SDF, injuring three civilians. In October, Turkey said it would bypass Manbij and launch an offensive in the east, where US-led coalition forces are based. Since then, Turkey has deployed tanks, TSK and 1,200 Turkey-backed Syrian militants to its [eastern](#) border with Syria, with another [6,500 Turkey-backed militants](#) on standby. On October 28, the Turkish army used tanks, mortars and machine guns to strike YPG positions and four villages near [Kobani](#). On October 30 and 31, the TSK struck targets near [Tel Abyad](#) (Gire Spi), injuring [two journalists](#) (Gulistan Mohammed and Ibrahim Ahmed Marto) and causing material [damage](#). After a hiatus of attacks, on November 6 and November 7, Turkish forces shelled three villages near Gire Spi (Tel Abyad) and Kobani. According to [SOHR](#), four SDF fighters and one civilian were killed in these attacks. In response, the SDF froze offensive operations to liberate Hajin in Deir Ezzor province between October 31 and November 11.

The SDF considered Turkey's attacks were about Turkey pressuring the US to cease its support of the current security and administrative arrangements in Manbij and east of the Euphrates, and to alleviate pressure on ISIS in Hajin. On November 1 and November 8, joint Turkish-US patrols took place along the Sajur River, which divides Manbij from the Euphrates Shield Triangle. In contrast, east of the Euphrates, joint SDF-US patrols began on November 2 to prevent further TSK [attacks](#). On November 3, the US and Turkey announced the lifting of [tariffs](#) on each other's imports implemented in August, and Presidents Trump and Erdogan discussed the option of the US not fining Halkbank's (a Turkey state bank) flouting of US sanctions on Iran in 2012 – 2013, and the possible extradition of Fethullah Gulen (although talk of the latter was quickly quashed). On November 5, the US announced a 180-day waiver for Turkey to comply with US sanctions on Iran, and the next day, the US announced a \$3 to \$5 million bounty for information on the whereabouts of three PKK leaders based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

By November 7, the US and Turkey had allegedly come to an agreement for Turkey to stop shelling east of the Euphrates. Five days later, [Basnews](#) reported that representatives from France, the US and the SDF met in Ain Issa (Raqqqa province) and agreed for US-led Coalition jets to fly along the border, and to further secure the border, for YPG to be replaced by 5,000 SDF troops. But on November 18, Turkey-backed militants engaged in heavy clashes with Manbij Military Council near Manbij city, and on November [17](#) – 18, TSK opened heavy machine gun fire on Kurdish positions east of [Tel Abyad](#).

Turkification of North West Syria

Turkey illegally forces Syrian refugees to return to Syria after they sign a document rescinding their rights to seek [asylum](#). If they return to areas occupied by Turkey they would find that the Turkey-established local administrations answer to governors in Turkey. All street names, traffic and shop signs are written in Turkish and Arabic. The Turkish flag hangs on all public buildings and in streets. In schools children must learn the Turkish language, with [Turkish teachers](#) using [Turkish language educational materials](#) and other teachers using [Arabic textbooks written and published in Turkey](#), all [following a Turkish curriculum](#).

All civil servants and militias in Turkey-occupied Syria are paid in Turkish Lira. Turkey has banned the use of Syrian identity cards, demanding all people carry [Turkey-issued identity cards](#). Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate ([Diyanet](#)) is repairing and building mosques and Quran schools, and appoints all religious officials. Turkey has established [a postal service and](#) telecommunication service and has built roads to facilitate Turkey's monopoly on cross border trade. For instance, all farmers must export their produce through [Turkish Agricultural Credit Co-operatives](#).

Despite the enormous number of IDPs living in large tent camps along the border, in which conditions are described as woeful, [Turkey continues to ban the International Red Cross and other international aid agencies from entering Afrin](#) and the [Euphrates Shield Triangle](#). With winter fast approaching this is a major concern.

Afrin

Afrin continues to suffer from instability caused by an escalation of fighting between Turkey-backed militias, and increased war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by these militias, Turkish state's policies encouraging malpractice, and a YPG insurgency. This has led to half of Afrin's original residents remaining IDPs, and others continue to leave the district. With Turkey not allowing non-Turkish journalists and humanitarian organisations into Afrin, the main news about what is happening comes from Farsnews and Kurdish outlets.

Between January 20 and September 2018, the [SOHR](#) collected evidence that the invasion and occupation of Afrin caused 364 civilian deaths, including 55 children and 36 women, and the deaths of 1,578 YPG fighters, 83 Turkish soldiers, 545 Turkey-backed militants and 91 pro-regime militants. These figures are an underestimation, and do not reflect on-going civilian, militant and YPG deaths.

After occupying Afrin, Turkey-backed militias distributed districts between militias. A militia controls their allocated [district](#), and its businesses and houses, and has free reign to demand taxes, confiscate property and arrest civilians. Members of the Turkey-established Afrin City Council and other local councils, and the newly formed [police](#) force (mostly recruited from an eastern Ghouta militia) have [no authority](#) over

these [militias](#), who regularly interfere with the affairs of the local councils. Although Afrin is now considered a district of Hatay, Turkish authorities have done little to stop the [abuses](#). Turkey's policies actually encourage abuses, while in some instances, MIT or Turkish soldiers collude with militias. Because of the powerlessness of the councils and the ongoing abuses, the [Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council \(KNC\)](#) has refused to play a role in the local administrations, despite remaining in the Turkey-backed National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, claiming this is the only way to be a voice for Syrian Kurds. The KNC has made several appeals to Turkey to stop the abuses but was told that Turkey does not have enough manpower. Finally, on November 18, when more [militia infighting](#) left 11 dead and 27 wounded, a curfew was declared on all human and vehicle traffic. [TSK special operations teams](#) equipped with tanks, artillery and snipers, as well as [Turkey-backed militias](#) launched attacks on at least [200](#) to 300 militants from several unruly militias, including [Ahrar al-Sharqiya](#), ([Deir Ezzor](#) militants earmarked for use east of the Euphrates), in Afrin city and surrounds, claiming these militants were responsible for all the plundering,¹ although abuses have been committed by all the warring parties. In the first day of fighting, 25 were killed, 'tens' were [wounded](#) and 'hundreds' [arrested](#).

As well as cultural misappropriation, ongoing abuses conducted mainly by Turkey-backed militias include:

- [Daily infighting](#) between [militias](#), and even between [factions](#) in one militia, in [Afrin city](#) and the countryside, incurring [deaths and injury on both sides](#). These clashes are over who has control of smuggling (overseen by the TSK) and who gets [loot](#), houses, farms, and [olive harvests](#). Since September, the infighting has escalated in [frequency](#), scale and [casualties](#), causing shops and businesses to close, and people to [fear](#) leaving their homes.
- [Kidnapping](#) civilians, including [children](#), which increased in [late September](#) and October. For example, *Firqa al-Hamza* and *Ahrar al-Sham* arrested [60 people](#) in the village of Karzileh after looting their assets. In the last week of September and first week of October, 75 people were kidnapped for [ransom](#). Militias who kidnap children are asking for up to [\\$20,000 in ransom](#).
- Kidnapping at least 200 women and girls, with some being returned after their families paid a ransom, and others having been [raped](#), forced into prostitution, or sexual [slavery](#). The militia whose militant raped a woman can demand the woman marry the rapist, forcing families to flee.
- [Persecution of Yezidi](#), who are forced to leave their homes, and/or convert to Islam, and who have been arbitrarily killed;
- Between March and October, the arbitrary arrest of 2,350 civilians with at least 835 remaining in detention, often in unknown [locations](#);
- The arrest and [torture](#) of [journalists](#) and activists;
- Death in captivity due to torture and other [extrajudicial killings](#);

¹ The pro-Erdogan news outlet, [Yeni Safak](#), claimed *Ahrar al-Sharqiya* were being targeted because they sided with 'PKK terrorists' when *Ahrar al-Sharqiya* was part of Operation Olive Branch.

- Refusing to allow Afrin residents to return to Afrin city and other places, and refusing those who do return to reclaim their [homes](#);
- Turkish authorities encouraging Arab IDPs, including Islamist extremist militants such as those from HTS, from eastern Ghouta, Hama, Homs, the southwest de-escalation zone and [Idlib](#) to settle in [Afrin](#);
- Turkish authorities encouraging the militant IDPs to [join the National Liberation Front](#), one of the militia armies formed by Turkey.
- Evicting Afrin residents and IDPs (e.g. from eastern Ghouta), even if the IDPs have a rental contract with the original owners, in view of profiting from renting the [houses](#) at an increased rent to new IDPs.
- Looting public infrastructure like [railway lines](#) and [power lines](#);
- Stealing [archaeological artefacts](#) and destroying iconic [statues](#), with Kawa Square having been renamed Olive Branch.
- Demanding 'taxes' at each [checkpoint](#) along all roads, demanding businesses pay a [\\$3,000 monthly tax](#), and [kidnapping](#) those who fail to pay;
- Threatening to burn houses of Afrin Kurds if they do not accept the new Turkey-issued [identity cards](#).
- Burning 5,000 hectares of [forest](#) and cutting down forests to [sell the timber](#) in Syria or Turkey;
- [Looting and confiscating](#) property, land and olive harvests. For instance, 75 to 80 percent of Afrin's olive farms have been confiscated and distributed among Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants. These soldiers and militants [lease the farms](#) out, and profit from the olive [harvest](#).
- Subject the Afrin olive harvest of 2018 and 2019, with the option to extend, to a September agreement between the Turkey-backed local councils, MIT and the National Liberation Front, stipulating that everyone must hand over the olive harvest to local councils so the olives can be transported to Hatay, refined, and the olive oil sold to Spain. The agreement stipulates that revenue from olive oil sales will be held by the Turkey postal service and a bank, and will be used to pay for security (i.e. the salaries of Turkey-backed militias).² In return for complying with this agreement, militias will receive a share of revenues collected at the border crossing into [Hatay](#). However, some militants prefer to sell the olive harvest on the black market, arresting farmers who do not sell their olive harvest for a cheap [price](#), which is sometimes [half the normal price](#).
- Burning or bulldozing olive trees that remain in the hands of a Kurdish farmer if the farmer refuses to pay a 15 to 20 percent olive harvest '[tax](#)' to a militia, in addition to a [10 to 20 percent 'tax'](#) levied by the local council.

By building roads and a new border crossing between Afrin and Hatay (which Turkey claims was opened to speed up [aid delivery](#)), by establishing a free trade zone on the Turkish side of the border, and formalising an agreement regarding the sale of the

² The pro-Erdogan Turkish newspaper, Yeni Sanak, contradicted this claim, saying that revenues collected from the sale of olive oil would be returned to the 'owners' of the olive harvest.

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olive harvest that gives Turkey a monopoly on the trade, and by not paying militias for months at a time, Turkey encourages militants to steal or tax harvests from farmers in [Afrin](#).

In response to Turkey's occupation, the YPG conducts IED, car bomb and sniper attacks. YPG claims that 18 attacks in August killed 50 militants and seven Turkish [soldiers](#). On September 3, the YPG launched three [attacks](#) that killed [four Turkish soldiers](#) and [15 militants](#), including a commander of the 23rd Division. This prompted Abo Hussen, head of the Emergency Department of the 23rd Division to call for a [complete removal of Kurds](#) between the ages of 15 and fifty from Afrin. The SDF claimed that 10 operations in and outside Afrin in the first week of September killed at least 100 and wounded [200](#). In the wake of so many attacks, some members of Turkey-backed *Jabhat al-Shamiya* stationed in Afrin sold their weapons and fled to Turkey. [YPG attacks](#) continued [throughout September](#) and [October](#) and into November.

Two other groups have taken military action against Turkey's occupation of Afrin, but claim they have no links with the YPG. One is the [Wrath of the Olives](#), who has killed at least four Kurdish collaborators and threatened [others](#). The other group is the [Revenge Hawks](#), or Falcons of Revenge, who claimed responsibility for a [bomb explosion](#) in the centre of Afrin city on August 29 that killed three Turkish soldiers and six Turkey-backed militants and severely injured twelve others. Since September, there has been no news of these groups.

The problem is that after any YPG operation, Turkey-backed militias arbitrarily arrest Kurds they consider to be linked to an attack. If the attack occurs outside Afrin city, Turkey launches airstrikes or the Turkish army shells the area, including villages. Whether civilians are arrested or escape, their houses are looted, while those arrested are often tortured.

Manbij

For months, Turkey has accused the US of not complying with the Manbij agreement made on June 4. At the end of August, [US General Gen. Joseph Dunford](#), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the future 'governance in Manbij' will be 'provided by people who are from Manbij,' regardless of their ethnicity, and that Turkish patrols will not enter the city, and that 'before any joint patrols begin ... we need a command and control construct set up. ... We need joint training to be done in Turkey. And we need an agreement on rules of engagement and other details of the patrolling.' On October 1, US Defence Secretary, Jim Mattis, said training for joint patrols had [begun](#). On November 1 and November 8, joint US-Turkish patrols were conducted along the Sajur River, but the US and Turkey continue to disagree on the nature of future patrols, with Turkey demanding entry to Manbij city, and the US wanting joint patrols to remain along the front line of the Sajur [River](#).

Inside Manbij city there have been [increased](#) incidents of IEDs [killing members](#) of the Manbij Military Council (e.g. Abdul Rahman Mahmoud Jafar), and SDF commanders (e.g. Ahmad Oweis), and increased incidences of explosions. For instance, in the first 15 days of September, four explosions killed several civilians, including a child, and a number of [military police](#) and injured more than eight people. One explosion targeted a hospital. The unknown perpetrators could have been ISIS, Turkey-backed militants or the Assad regime, each with their own reasons for [destabilising Manbij](#).

Manbij Military Council and the US-led coalition has fortified the city against an attack by Turkey or its proxies. On October 15, during a joint US-Manbij Military Council patrol, US forces received fire from suspected Turkey-backed militants, and returned [fire](#). Joint patrols have not stopped Turkey-backed militants intermittently opening fire and injuring civilians or causing civilians to flee. Examples include a woman being injured while working on her [olive trees](#) on about November 2, and Turkey-backed militants firing at Manbij Military Council positions and civilians working on their olive trees on [November 10](#). [ISIS](#) claimed responsibility for an attack on a checkpoint that killed four Manbij internal security forces on November 13, and heavy clashes between Turkey-backed militants and the Manbij Military Council occurred on [November 18](#). Meanwhile, Turkey holds meetings of Arab tribal leaders from Manbij in the Euphrates Shield Triangle to encourage them to resist the current security and administrative [arrangements](#).

Euphrates Shield Triangle

Turkey is consolidating its occupation of the Euphrates Shield Triangle by requiring local councils to answer to governors in Turkey, when they used to answer to the Turkey-eestablished Syrian Interim Government. In addition to the measures already mentioned regarding ID cards, school curricula and signage, Turkey is opening or rebuilding courts, mosques, hospitals, and [schools](#), and insisting [all vehicles be registered with the Turkish-backed administration](#) and have new licence plates with Arabic and Turkish writing. Other projects designed to expand Turkey's influence, if not occupation, include Turkey building a new public bus station in Jarablus for 100 buses, complete with a restaurant, coffee shops, a mosque, rest rooms and accommodation to service towns within the Euphrates Shield Triangle, Afrin and [Manbij](#), while [Turkish companies](#) freelyt operate inside the territory.

Despite all this expense and effort, Turkey has been unable to curb insecurity. For instance, in September alone, a [car bomb explosion in Azaz](#) city centre killed several civilians and injured others; [Turkey-backed militants clashed with civilians in al-Bab](#) after civilians tried to arrest *Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh* militants who had opened fire on civilians at a checkpoint; heavy clashes continued between *Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh* and its splinter group, *Ahrar al-Hasaka* in al-Bab, causing casualties on both sides; other clashes erupted between Turkey-backed *al-Shaitat* and [civilians](#); and the Turkish army and the Turkey-backed militia *Jabhat al-Shamiya* engaged in heavy fighting after the Turkish army sacked the commander of the police and general security in

Azaz for involvement in multiple bribery cases in Afrin. In early October, an explosion in Azaz killed five people and injured more than twenty and there were clashes between Turkey-backed militias in al-Bab and [Azaz](#). In early November, there were more clashes in Azaz between 'police' and *Liwa al-Shamal*, both backed by the [TSK](#), causing casualties on all sides, and a border crossing into Turkey was closed when 100 militants from the Turkey-backed Sultan Murad Brigade stormed rival 'police' and seized control of the crossing.

EAST OF THE EUPHRATES

Raqqa

In mid-June 2018, the UN estimated that [138,000 people](#) out of a pre-war population of up to 300,000 had returned to Raqqa city. By August, returnees had reached [150,000](#). Some International aid agencies provide humanitarian relief but according to a [Refugees International](#) report, published in June 2018, most have stayed away because of so many IEDs and other dangers. The US provides some support for demining and stabilisation, but the Raqqa Civil Council is severely under-resourced, what [Michael Jansen](#) calls US 'neglect' and 'the pauperisation of a quarter of Syria', in contrast to what Turkey is investing in northern Aleppo. For instance, a private US company ([Tetra Tech](#)) has trained 120 SDF members to demine the city but this is not nearly enough given the scale of the task, especially when they have no [machinery](#). Meanwhile, between January and November 2018, 37 'first responders' recovered more than [2,600](#) bodies from under the rubble, most of this rubble being created by US-led coalition airstrikes.

With [US funding of \\$13.7 million](#), the [Raqqa Civilian Council](#) has formed a reconstruction committee of specialists to identify reconstruction priorities. Work has begun to rebuild 50 bridges, 33 new water-pumping stations for drinking water have been installed, damaged pipes replaced, and people are being trained to operate the stations. Some irrigation pipes and power lines have been installed or replaced, and 66 bakeries have opened in Raqqa city; the Kurdish Red Crescent has established mobile and stationary health clinics, and work has commenced on repairing two main hospitals, 400 schools, and gas, sugar, cotton and biscuit production facilities. Otherwise, the US has built a [prison](#) for foreign ISIS fighters in Ain Issa, which receives many new inmates each day. Only Americans work in the prison.

A lack of funding for security and reconstruction exacerbates ongoing tensions, as identified in KLA's Report '[What is happening in territory secured by the Syrian Democratic Forces](#)', 20 July 2018. A primary source of tension remains the SDF recruitment drive. In August, the SDF announced a new brigade of three battalions sourced from people in Raqqa city and surrounds to be trained to deal with [civilians](#). The need for security is urgent. Bombs exploding in the centre of Raqqa city threaten US personnel, and have killed and wounded SDF fighters. In the first week of

November, an ISIS sleeper cell assassinated a prominent Arab member of Raqqa Civilian Council, Sheikh Bashir Faisal al-Huwaidi, and two [explosions](#) in Raqqa city killed one civilian and injured seven.

Other sources of low-level tensions include the Raqqa Civilian Council prioritising essential projects, when some [civil society groups resent being over scrutinised](#), and the Assad regime and Iran stirring up the local population. For instance, in late September, tens of people in Raqqa city chanted pro-Assad [slogans](#) leading to a number of arrests.

Deir Ezzor

In Deir Ezzor, the SDF and US-led coalition east of the Euphrates and the Assad regime, Russia and Iran west of the Euphrates continue to confront ISIS, these often being hard-core veterans, including top commanders. A major issue is that in battles around Abu Kamal and al-Tanf, both on the Iraq – Syria border, there is very little distance between these different forces combating ISIS, and clashes have occurred.³

SDF War against ISIS

After an ‘operational pause’ as a result of Turkey’s offensive and occupation of Afrin, the SDF resumed their fight against ISIS in Deir Ezzor province on May 1. By May 10, the [SDF](#) were within 6 kilometres of the town of Hajin where Al-Baghdadi and about [65 top level ISIS commanders](#) were thought to be hiding, along with 800 detainees, and another [1,500 to 2,000 battle-hardened ISIS fighters](#), most being non-Syrian. The SDF and Iraqi forces co-ordinated to [besiege Hajin](#), capture five top ISIS commanders on the Iraqi side of the border, and secure this section of the border, with the SDF and [Iraqi security forces](#) establishing [joint watchtowers](#). On June 23, [Iraqi warplanes](#) killed 45 ISIS fighters inside Hajin including some senior figures, and in June, after ISIS and al-Qaida sleeper cells launched IED and motorcycle bombs causing civilian deaths, the SDF-established [Deir Ezzor Military Council](#) began clearing villages of arms and mines and arresting those they suspected were linked to the attacks. However, on July 13, US-led coalition airstrikes targeting ISIS near Hajin struck a Syrian army military position and killed [at least 40 Syrian soldiers](#).

In August, the Kurd-established, Arab-majority [Deir Ezzor Civil Council](#) estimated 70 percent of people had returned home to SDF-secured territory. A priority of the council was to help farmers re-establish their farms, abandoned under ISIS. This they did by reopening roads, offering subsidised diesel and fertilisers, and setting up agricultural associations. Yet ISIS continues to be a threat. On the night of August 17,

³ Syrian media claimed that a drone of US origin targeted a regime position southeast of Abu Kamal on [June 18](#), killing at least [52 mainly Iraqi and Iranian fighters](#), including [22](#) from the Iran-linked Iraqi *Hashd al-Shaabi*, *Kata’ib Hezbollah*, led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The [Pentagon](#) denied the US was [responsible](#). In another incident, the US admitted their Arab partners were fired upon by a hostile force [20 kilometres](#) from al-Tanf on June 21, and in self-defence may have killed a Syrian army officer.

[ISIS attacked a US-led coalition and SDF](#) base at Omar oil field. In the ensuing defence of the base, seven ISIS fighters were killed.

On September 10, the SDF announced the start of an offensive on Hajin, knowing the battle would be long and hard. ISIS fighters had booby-trapped the area with IEDs, and were making use of underground [tunnels](#), where they had stockpiled food, weapons and ammunition. The foreigners among them had nowhere to go, so were predicted to fight to the end. In the first five days, 53 ISIS fighters and 37 SDF fighters were killed, including 20 SDF fighters in one ambush. The SDF took control of some settlements but on October 10, ISIS launched a counteroffensive, taking advantage of a sandstorm. The SOHR claimed ISIS killed 10 SDF fighters and took 35 hostages. The SDF claimed no fighters were taken hostage. SOHR and Russian sources reported that on October 13, ISIS broke into a SDF-run IDP camp and kidnapped 130 families, about 700 people,⁴ with an unspecified number of SDF fighters dying trying to defend the [camp](#). On the same day, ISIS broke into a second camp capturing tens of people. These people were taken to either al-Shaafah or Hajin. ISIS threatened to execute 10 civilians a day if their demands for [food and medical aid](#) were not met, and on October 14, ISIS executed 10 civilians in Hajin.

Between September 10 and October 20, the SOHR claims [414 ISIS and 227 SDF fighters](#) were killed in battle or as a result of IEDs and assassinations in and around Hajin. In the middle of a sandstorm on the night of October 26, In a wave of suicide bombings that occurred on seven fronts in [Soussa and Baghouz, both towns having been recently captured by the SDF](#), the SOHR claimed ISIS killed 68 to 72 SDF fighters and wounded another hundred. The SDF denied these figures, claiming that [14 SDF fighters](#) were killed, and vowed to reclaim lost [territory](#). During on-going sandstorms, a SDF withdrawal allowed ISIS to advance east to the border, uncomfortably close to the town of [Qaim](#) in Iraq. Then came the unprovoked attacks by Turkey on Kobani and Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) at the end of October, and the SDF halting their offensive on ISIS for as long as Turkey continued to attack its [forces](#). This caused Iraq to deploy 10,000 soldiers and 20,000 *Hashd al-Shaabi* (PMUs) to the border with Syria to prevent ISIS crossing the [border](#).

Assad Regime war against ISIS

Concurrently, on [May 7](#), the Syrian Army, a Palestinian militia (*Liwa al-Quds*), and others launched a large assault on ISIS in the Badia region of Deir Ezzor, near the border with Homs. On May 16, at least [35 pro-regime forces](#), including [nine Russian soldiers](#) were killed in an ISIS attack near Mayadin, with ISIS continuing to advance on the town they lost at the end of 2017. On May 27, SOHR reported that in the previous 75 days, ISIS had killed more than 1,000 pro-regime forces in Homs and Deir Ezzor and between June 3 – 5, [ISIS attacks](#) killed at least another 45 pro-regime forces near Abu Kamal. [ISIS also launched an offensive](#) near Palmyra in Homs province, and on June 8, the actions of ten suicide bombers allowed ISIS to reclaim

⁴ The US questions the number of civilians captured by [ISIS](#).

neighbourhoods of Abu Kamal. The regime regained control of Abu Kamal on [June 11](#). Since then, [pro-regime forces](#) have made advances against ISIS between al-Tanf and Abu Kamal, and in early October, Iran withdrew its personnel and militia from Mayadin and [Mahkan](#) but remains in Abu Kamal.

[In regime-controlled Deir Ezzor, 90 percent of the Sunni Arab population remain displaced, despite Iran implementing](#) service projects, building schools, medical centres and advocacy centres. Iran is also [buying property](#) to distribute to their foreign and Syrian militants, while IRGC Quds personnel liaise with tribal leaders and influential people requesting these people recruit young men to fight alongside (pro) regime forces in a Sunni Arab Tribal Resistance Movement, established in June. Since June, IED attacks on the SDF have increased in Deir Ezzor. Between April and June there were 12 IED attacks. In the three months following the militia's formation there were 78 IED [attacks](#). One attack by unknown assailants in Tabqa killed 20 Kurdish [SDF](#) fighters at the end of September.

Democratic Federation of Northern Syria

The administration that oversees the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the Syrian Democratic Council, argues that only by rebuilding houses, schools, hospitals, courts, agriculture, and the environment will ISIS ideology be defeated. The main source of revenue for such activities comes from the [Hasaka oil fields](#), as the Deir Ezzor oil fields are not operational. The oil is transported in convoys of up to 50 trucks to antiquated oil refineries. The refined products serve the territory and excess is sold to the Assad regime. With Trump freezing stabilisation funds in [March](#), in [mid-August](#) the US announced that Saudi Arabia had pledged \$100 million, the UAE \$50 million, and Kuwait, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Norway, the EU, Australia and Taiwan had committed another \$150 million for stabilisation efforts in SDF-held territory. These funds will be channelled through US and international agencies.

Apart from a lack of resources, an on-going challenge is that the international community does not recognise the governing structures and institutions established by the Syrian Democratic Council. For instance, in trying to [introduce the Syriac language and a new school curriculum](#) for Assyrians, the Syrian Democratic Council and allied Syriac organisations were met with protests from Arabs, the regime and the Syriac Orthodox Church at the end of August. The protesters wanted to continue using the regime's curriculum, as the new curriculum was not state-credited. This caused the closure of 14 schools and an unknown proportion of parents continue to send their children to Syrian government run [schools](#) in Qamishli and Hasaka.

After attempts to negotiate with the Assad regime broke down, the Assad Regime's 'Reconciliation' Minister Ali Haidar announced that eastern Syria would be treated like the rest of the [country](#). On [September 6](#), the Syrian Democratic Council, and representatives from the administrations of seven regions – the three autonomous

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administrations of Afrin, Euphrates (Kobani and Tel Abyad) and Jazeera/Cizre, and the four civil councils of Raqqa (including Ain Issa), Deir Ezzor, Tabqa, and Manbij – met in Ain Issa to establish an umbrella administration to unify laws across the regions and to form a united front for future political negotiations. The administration was called the Northern and Eastern Syria Autonomous Administration Executive Assembly. The KNC did not [participate](#).

Each region elected seven representatives to the assembly, with an additional 21 technocrats bringing assembly membership to seventy. From November 1, co-chairs of nine committees (Economy and Agriculture, Education, Interior Affairs, Social Works, Local Administrations, Finance, Culture and Arts, Health and Ecology and a Women's Committee) began meeting on a weekly basis.

The work of the assembly is hampered by a lack of international recognition and funding, and threats from ISIS, pro-regime cells, and Turkey. It oversees a traumatised population with divided loyalties and diverse cultural norms. Support will be needed to encourage the current administrative structures to negotiate ethnic and political differences, the latter concerning the Barzani and Syrian Opposition-linked KNC, which may prove beneficial for relations with Turkey.

With the US pledging to stay in eastern Syria to eliminate ISIS, curb Iran and [Russia](#), and effect a political transition, and with the Idlib offensive on hold while Turkey attempts to eliminate 'radical elements', it was no coincidence that in the second half of September, Erdogan escalated his threat to launch a full scale offensive on territory east of the Euphrates to create a [militarily secured 'safe' zone along the entire border](#), with the zone/s extending [50 to 60 kilometres](#) into Syrian territory. The initial target would be [Tel Abyad](#) (Gire Spi), where Arabs are in the majority. In the meantime, Turkey tested US reactions with low-level attacks between October 28 and November 7, and on November 17 – 18, and the SDF held meetings to convince Arab tribes in Hasaka, Raqqa and Aleppo to help the SDF defend Manbij and north east Syria from attacks by Turkey. However, according to [Farsnews](#), the 'majority' of Arabs asked for the Syrian army to be deployed along the border.

Allegedly, Russia rejected Turkey's plan of moving Idlib's 'radical elements' east of the Euphrates. If Russia were to approve such a move it would be to increase tensions between the US and Turkey, and bring Kurds back to the negotiating table. However, Russia is unlikely to support Turkey in an offensive on eastern Syria, having no interest in a military confrontation with the US, and knowing that if Turkey is given too much latitude, Erdogan's demands will increase, a lesson the US and EU have yet to learn. Putin also wants international legitimacy in order to facilitate political negotiations, a return of refugees, and international investment. Yet if an Idlib offensive goes ahead, and by all accounts 'radical elements' have not evacuated [themselves](#) or their heavy weapons from the demilitarised zone, and [clashes between these elements and pro-regime forces continue](#), with attacks [escalating](#) on November 16 – 17, then Turkey needs an escape route for its Islamist militia armies, and HTS. [Michael Jansen](#) surmised that Turkey-backed militias in northern Aleppo

and Idlib will ultimately have to seek 'reconciliation' with the regime, or be resettled in Turkey. The former is unlikely, given the Assad regime aims to eliminate all 'terrorists', while Turkey would prefer to avoid having to host unruly militias.

Commentators assume that Turkey will not launch a full scale offensive without US permission, but the lure of solving three problems with one move by using militias from Idlib and northern Aleppo for an offensive east of the Euphrates to supplement an overstretched TSK might be too strong for Turkey. In the event that Turkey escalates its attacks, the US response is hard to predict, given the divisions within the US administration regarding Turkey. East of the Euphrates, the US has allegedly expanded its bases to 25 and its troop presence to 5,000, and has upgraded its missile defences. This has not stopped Turkey's attacks on Manbij, Kobani and Tel Abyad, although perhaps one decisive action by the US, in defence of the Kurds and their allies, might convince Turkey not to further disturb the US giant.

What is not helping the situation is that the international community prefers to appease Turkey rather than call Turkish leaders to account for their domestic repressions and aggression in Syria and Iraq. This was highlighted in November 2018, when the European Court of Human Rights rejected Afrin residents' submission regarding Turkey's ongoing human rights abuses, on the basis that the plaintiffs did not first take their case to a Turkish court. This ruling ignores the facts that Afrin is in Syria, and that Turkey has imprisoned hundreds of its own citizens on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda for speaking up against what Turkey is doing in [Afrin](#).

CONCLUSION

In negotiating with the opposition throughout the Astana process, Turkey helped the Assad regime retake three out of four de-escalation zones. In return, Russia allowed Turkey to invade and occupy the Euphrates Shield Triangle and Afrin, and enter Idlib, and did not oppose Turkey forming two opposition militia armies. While the US may find Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo useful in withholding territory from the Assad regime, Russia and Assad see Turkey's occupation and its role in Idlib as 'temporary'. This means that ultimately Turkey needs to find an escape route for its Syrian proxies, many of whom are Islamist extremists. Despite failing to create a safe environment in Turkey-occupied Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Triangle, Turkey wants to expand its occupation of Syria to Manbij and east of the Euphrates. This will entail military action against the YPG, SDF and their political counterparts, which will prolong the war against ISIS, endanger US-led coalition forces, and increase the likelihood of the Assad regime retaking eastern Syria. Turkey's support for Islamist extremists at the negotiation table, and refusal to allow the participation of those who offer a viable political alternative to both the Assad regime and Islamist extremists' wish for a Sunni Arab caliphate, makes any political transition further out of reach. If Turkey is forced to abandon its Syrian militias, or allows them into Turkey, they could pose a security threat to Turkey, Europe and beyond. It is therefore imperative that the international community work to prevent these potential developments.

WAYS FORWARD

With the White House, State Department and Pentagon divided about how to respond to their NATO ally's antagonism towards the US alliance with the Syrian Kurds and their allies, several commentators suggest that Syrian Kurds and their allies have two options: negotiate with the Assad regime and Russia, and allow Arab-majority territory (i.e. Raqqa and Deir Ezzor) to come under the control of the Assad regime in return for a limited form of autonomy in the north, which would not be guaranteed, or negotiate with the Turkey-backed opposition. The Kurds and their allies have tried negotiating with the Assad regime, proposing a democratic secular federation of autonomous regions to avoid the tyranny of the majority or a minority, but the regime refuses to countenance any transition of power. Negotiations with Turkey and the Turkey-backed opposition (as opposed to other components of the opposition) would need mediation. Those who [advocate](#) this path suggest that if Turkey could be convinced to co-ordinate with the SDF, then Turkey could realise its dream of overthrowing the Assad regime, and benefit economically. The problem is that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has staked his political future on fighting a war against Kurds and imprisoning others (e.g. Pastor Andrew Brunson) he accuses of having links with PKK, no matter how tenuous or non-existent the links.

To overcome this problem, [Brodsky and Barabandi](#) propose that the very organisations that liberated the oil and gas fields from ISIS, and support agriculture in the east be excluded from a US and Turkey supported reintegration of the north east and north west of Syria, with the initial focus being a North Syria Economic Cooperative to trade agricultural produce, oil and gas in the east, the oil and gas being exported and refined in Turkey, with all revenue going into a joint fund to be fairly distributed. Both suggestions assume that Russia and the Assad regime would allow this to happen, and that Turkey-backed Islamist extremists would cooperate, which is not something they are known for doing, even with each other.

Another suggestion is the recognition and protection of islands of relative stability, starting with north east Syria and the south west province of Suweida, where Druze have taken an independent stance similar to the Kurds, and expand out. This option is more suitably scaled, relies on fewer preconditions, and could serve to build a [confederation of Syria](#).

To stabilise Syria and the region, the international community needs to convince Turkey it is in its political and economic interests to make peace with Kurds in Syria and Turkey, emphasising that Turkey has benefited from relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, despite fiercely opposing the formation of the semi-autonomous region. In the meantime, to provide alternatives to Turkey's military aggression, occupation and Turkification of northern Syria, the international community is requested to urgently implement the recommendations outlined on Page One of this report.