

## RECENT EVENTS IN TURKEY AND SYRIA FROM THE KURDISH PERSPECTIVE

### PROPOSALS TO ADDRESS TURKEY'S ACTIONS

As a matter of urgency, we request that the Australian Government, other governments, and international organisations:

- **Reject Turkey's propaganda** that labels all individuals and organisations that identify as Kurdish as terrorists.
- **Delist the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)** after an independent investigation and legal review, especially considering how easily Hayat Tahir Al-Sham (HTS) was delisted, and after the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire while facing military and political attacks; and
- **Tie all relations with Turkey to policies and actions so that Turkey:**

### IN TURKEY

- Immediately stops removing and imprisoning elected pro-Kurdish parliamentarians and mayors, and others who verbally criticise the state.
- Engages in sincere negotiations with Kurds, including international observers and, ideally, mediators, as well as Turkey's parliamentarians, constitutional lawyers, and Kurdish representatives both within and outside the PKK.
- Implements a step-by-step approach to peace, including the:
  - Release of all political prisoners;
  - Legal recognition of the history and the cultural, political, economic, and religious rights of Turkey's ethnic groups, including the acknowledgment of language rights in schools, media, and publications, as well as the restoration of Kurdish names for cities, towns, and streets;
  - Allow the election of provincial governors;
  - Implement constitutional reform in support of these changes, but not Erdogan's wish to enable an extension of his presidency;
  - Establish a truth and reconciliation commission and an independent judiciary; and

- Introduces compensation for thousands of political prisoners tortured and detained without a fair trial; the millions displaced from thousands of Kurdish villages, as well as houses in city centres that were destroyed, due to Turkey's military aggression since the 1990s.

#### **IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ AND DISPUTED TERRITORIES, FOR TURKEY TO:**

- Cease all military aggression, adhere to international law, and comply with requests from Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to withdraw all military bases, armed forces, and weaponry.
- Stop restricting access to regions that include hundreds of villages, and ensure the freedom of movement for civilians, officials and Peshmerga.

#### **IN SYRIA, FOR TURKEY TO:**

- Cease all military aggression.
- Disarm and dismantle the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkey's other mercenaries.
- Withdraw all of Turkey's armed forces, Military Intelligence Officers (MIT) and government officials.
- Compensate for the destruction of infrastructure, farms, livelihoods and displacement of Kurds in Afrin, Tel Rifaat, Manbij and east of the Euphrates.
- Respect Syria's sovereignty.
- Stop hindering the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) from participating in negotiation about Syria.
- Support inclusive consultations on all viable options for governing Syria, especially those that prevent the emergence of another authoritarian government that does not respect all individuals and communities' political, cultural, and economic rights.

## **THE OVERTHROW OF ASSAD AND ITS IMPACT ON KURDS, DRUZE AND ALAWI**

After 13 years of civil war, on December 7, 2024, former al-Qaida and Islamic State (IS) operative Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, now rebranded as Ahmed al-Sharaa, along with his Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia and Turkey's mainly Islamist mercenaries in the Syrian 'National' Army (SNA), seized control of Damascus and toppled the Assad regime. Their rapid nine-day advance from Idlib and Aleppo encountered minimal resistance en route to Damascus. This was overtly facilitated by Turkey, but multiple indications suggest that the US, Israel, and Russia conspired to ensure a smooth transition, despite HTS and SNA umbrella organisations having histories of terrorism, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and repressive rule.

Suddenly, the Iran-backed, Alawi (Shia)-controlled Syria was replaced by a Turkey-backed Sunni Islamist 'interim' government. Russia granted asylum to Assad and his family, while Israel promptly established a buffer zone in southern Syria and commenced operations to dismantle the country's military capabilities. The US and Europe removed HTS from their lists of proscribed terrorists and converged on Damascus to engage with the new rulers, with Europeans also lifting some sanctions, once again illustrating that politics influences who is considered a terrorist organisation. The folly of these moves was soon highlighted when, despite Al-Sharaa's rhetoric about forming an inclusive interim government, within the first week of Assad's fall, Alawi and Christians were being killed, kidnapped, and raped, while the SNA escalated its daily military assaults on Kurds, bolstered by Turkey's air power.

On December 30, 2024, SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi Kobani met with Al-Sharaa in Damascus to discuss integrating the SDF into the Syrian Army. Mazloum Abdi's conditions for integration were that the SDF operated as independent units and continued to oversee security operations in AANES-controlled territory. Facing pressure from Turkey, Al-Sharaa rejected this proposal, insisting that SDF fighters disarm, dissolve, and merge into the new Syrian Army. This would require them to serve alongside poorly trained fighters who have waged war against Kurds since 2015.

Under Turkey's command and aerial support, the SNA continued to attack the SDF, civilians, and infrastructure in Aleppo, Manbij, the Tishreen Dam, and bridges along the Euphrates River, as well as Kurd-majority areas east of the Euphrates. Despite Turkey and its Syrian mercenaries repeatedly destroying electric and water pumping stations, medical services, and schools that serve four million people, the international community remains silent.

The SDF secures prison camps housing at least 10,000 hardcore IS fighters, along with 40,000 IS wives and children. These camps are occasionally attacked by Turkey and the SNA, leading to prisoner escapes. The SDF and SDC have repeatedly requested the repatriation of IS citizens from foreign countries, but Western nations have been reluctant to comply. In December and January, Turkey demanded that HTS take control of these prison camps or that all prisoners be relocated to HTS-controlled facilities in and around Damascus. Given that Turkey's SNA includes former IS fighters and many individuals sympathetic to IS, both options pose significant dangers, especially since HTS is short on security forces and may recruit from among them. After all, securing a country is entirely different from securing a province.

In February, HTS announced that ALL militias outside the new army must disarm and dissolve by March 1 (in accordance with MIT's demand). On February 27, Turkey 'allowed' imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to issue a statement calling 'all groups' of PKK to disarm and dissolve. While Turkey meant 'all groups' to mean the SDF and the Kurdish protection units YPG and YPJ to dissolve, Mazloum Abdi immediately responded that the SDF is not PKK and Ocalan is not their commander.

The Kurdish-led forces did not disarm or dissolve, nor have the Druze, Alawites, Christians, the SNA, and other Sunni Islamist militias. Therefore, in late February, after HTS made several unsuccessful attempts to enter Druze territory south of Damascus, Israel announced it would protect the Druze from HTS attacks. In the first week of March, Druze groups clashed with HTS near Damascus. Afterwards, the Druze successfully negotiated to remain in control of local security, fly the Druze flag, and have HTS vacate designated checkpoints.

On March 6, Alawite militias launched a co-ordinated ambushing and attack on HTS and SNA militant convoys trying to enter the Alawi area of Jableh, Tartus, Baniyas and Latakia along the [west coast](#). In response, the SNA and HTS went on a four-day killing and looting spree. By March 10, [at least 1,068 civilians](#) had been killed, as had at least 148 Alawi militants and 125 HTS/SNA interim government [forces](#). Whole families, including women and children, were murdered by mostly SNA militants randomly shooting into houses or at people in the street. People were also lined up and executed in the street on mass. Social media on March 6 -10 shows graphic videos of all the above, taken by the people doing the killing! All will need to be authenticated for justice to be done.

The escalation prompted HTS and SNA reinforcements to be brought in from Idlib and Aleppo. Turkey even imported terrorists from other countries while also sending military equipment and troop convoys to ensure an HTS victory. Additional convoys were dispatched east to secure the front with the SDF. With electricity and water cut off, perpetrators also engaged in a massive [looting spree](#). Many hundreds of civilians sought refuge in the Russian Khmeimim airbase southeast of Latakia. Al-Sharaa sent food to these people, and on March 9, announced that government forces had performed well, that Alawite militants must [surrender](#), and that anyone who had unnecessarily killed civilians would be brought to justice. Yet, the attacks continued into the following day, while justice remains to be seen. The perpetrators of attacks on Syria's Druze, Alawi, Christian and Kurdish civilians since early December have yet to be held to account.

It had become clear that Al-Sharaa had no control over the powder keg of Islam extremist anarchy, especially among Turkey's SNA, and that he needed to pay more than lip service in addressing the aspirations of Syria's diverse communities. It was therefore unsurprising that the US and France succeeded in bringing Al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi together on March 10 to sign an agreement on implementing a nation-wide ceasefire, the **integration** of the Kurd-led SDF into the [Syrian Army](#), and the Kurd-led administrations, borders, airports and oil and gas fields into the Syrian government, all by the end of 2025. Note the word 'integration' rather than 'dissolution' or 'assimilation'.

The details are to be negotiated by an executive committee that will need to report progress. Kurds are left to hope that questions of autonomy, Turkey's occupation of four regions and daily attacks, and who will be responsible for local security, including the security of IS camps, can successfully be resolved. In the meantime, this is the first official document recognising Kurds as citizens of Syria, let alone an *indigenous people* of Syria! Moreover, it guarantees the rights of all Syrians to participate in political processes and state institutions and assures all Syrians they will have [state protection](#). In other words, it will be a fertile ground for Turkey to sabotage, and for which Al-Sharaa will need support if he wants to back his rhetoric and signed agreements with action.

### **WESTERN POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF SUNNI ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS**

The world is witnessing a new and more complicated Great Game that involves an ongoing confrontation between capitalism and communism, and its offspring: a 21<sup>st</sup> century rivalry between Sunni and Shia Islam. Just as it was puzzling that the USA supported Islamist organisations and leaders to stave off socialism - Iran being a prime example - it is currently perplexing that the West seems to favour Sunni extremists from Afghanistan to Libya over secular political movements, or Shia Islam.

In Syria, we see Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former leader of al-Qaida, IS, and HTS, now serving as interim president. He presents a pragmatic image yet HTS continues to be an extremist organization that has enforced a repressive rule over Idlib since 2017. Meanwhile the interim government has yet to hold militants accountable for kidnapping, raping, and massacring Alawites and Christians, or militarily attacking Kurds on a daily basis.

To confirm many people's worst political fears, in early 2025, a hastily organised interim cabinet included Turks and known terrorists, but only one woman. This was followed by the 'national dialogue' conference on February 25, attended by [600 selected individuals](#). MIT vetted all attendees, of which five were Kurds, despite Kurds making up 10 to 15 percent of the population. You would also be forgiven for concluding that Syria has very few women and secular political activists.

One outcome of the conference was the selection of a seven-member committee to draft a preliminary constitution. Al-Sharaa asserts that a written constitution and elections will take four to five years to organise, providing sufficient time for his Islamists to consolidate power, or be overthrown. Notably, HTS officials have never publicly referred to the draft constitution developed by the Assad Opposition under UN oversight, which excluded input from the Kurdish-led SDC, AANES, and SDF, as demanded by Turkey.

It must be emphasised that every move of HTS is vetted by MIT. Turkey's military intelligence officers are now located in the same palace as the HTS interim government. Syria has become a vassal state of Turkey, yet the world remains silent.

### **CALLING FOR A FEDERAL SYRIA**

All Kurds and many Druze, Christians and Alawites call for a federal Syria. The people in the areas served by the mixed ethnic SDC and AANES since 2015 have experience of what this could be like, although it is very much a work in progress. After clashes with Druze, and the Alawite massacres, a federal Syria looks like a sustainable option.

After the SDF and the US-led coalition defeated the IS caliphate in Syria in 2019 (although its ideology and supporters remain) the SDC and AANES became responsible for the Arab-majority provinces of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor east of the Euphrates. Throughout the territory served by the AANES, local military and civilian councils were established by drawing members from the local population. For public services, wages and infrastructure, the SDC and AANES depend on exports from key oil and gas fields secured by the SDF (which is 60 percent Arab), as well as the Tishrin Dam, which provides water and hydroelectric power to the region and beyond. The Kurds hope these assets will serve as leverage in negotiations.

Syrian Kurdish leaders claim they do not want to separate from Syria. They propose a decentralised system of governance and security that includes a negotiated degree of autonomy for regions, provinces, and local councils.



However, under MIT supervision, the interim government in Damascus has been demanding complete centralisation of power, except for municipal councils that would be given limited authority (a proposal that even Assad was considering). This mirrors Turkey's governing structure, which denies the teaching and public use of languages other than Turkish, appoints provincial governors, and, supported by a politically compromised Supreme Court, allows for removing elected parliamentarians, mayors, and other officials if they are not sufficiently compliant. Thus, the Turkey-backed, HTS-dominated interim government aims to replace Assad's authoritarianism with one styled on Turkey.

It is noteworthy that there has been no public discussion about any checks and balances on a highly centralised authority, or how Syria's ethnic, religious, and secular diversity, and the rights of women, will be protected.

## **PEACE PROCESS WITH THE PKK**

A month before Assad's fall in early December, and with full knowledge of impending events along with Erdogan's need for:

- Kurdish support to extend his presidency beyond 2028;
- Ways to mitigate the economic impact of a forty-year long civil war and Turkey's occupation of four regions in Syria; and
- Progress in significant infrastructure projects envisioned by Turkey through the Kurdistan regions of Iraq, Syria and Turkey,

Turkey's ultranationalist far-right leader, Devlet Bahçeli, shocked Turkey's 17 to 21 million Kurds by raising the possibility of a new peace deal with the PKK. This was contingent on the PKK's controversial imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan, calling on the PKK to disarm and dissolve without any pre-conditions. Bahçeli and Erdogan's oft-repeated alternative was the total annihilation of PKK. For Turkey, PKK includes all individuals and organisations identifying as Kurds in all four regions of Kurdistan who are sympathetic to Abdullah Ocalan's political ideology of having male and female co-chairs for every leadership position and 'democratic confederalism'. Thus, Turkey's regular negotiation tools- coercion, manipulation, and using words like 'peace' and 'diplomacy' as



a guise for demanding total capitulation- were on full display, should international observers care to pay attention.

The hype surrounding PKK's much anticipated call for a ceasefire and dissolution, fanned by both the AKP-MHP Government and Kurds sympathetic to PKK, overlooked the failures of past unilateral and bilateral ceasefires, as detailed in the following table.

*A history of PKK's ceasefires in Turkey*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <b>1993 Ceasefire</b> – Declared following a call from Abdullah Öcalan but ended shortly after.</li><li>2. <b>1995 Ceasefire</b> – A brief period of non-conflict.</li><li>3. <b>1998 Ceasefire</b> – Declared during Öcalan's departure from Syria.</li><li>4. <b>1999 Ceasefire</b> – Announced after Öcalan was captured and brought to Turkey.</li><li>5. <b>2006 Ceasefire</b> – The group declared a temporary halt to armed activities.</li></ol>	<p>PKK's unilateral ceasefires</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6. <b>2009–2011 Peace Process</b> – Negotiations with the Turkish government began, but the process ultimately failed.</li><li>7. <b>2013–2015 Peace Process</b> – The longest officially declared ceasefire, but it ended in 2015.</li></ol>	<p>Bilateral ceasefires</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>8. <b>2025</b> – PKK announces ceasefire but reserves the right to defend</li></ol>	<p>Unilateral ceasefire</p>

What was a precedent was the anticipated call for PKK to dissolve in the absence of the state of Turkey offering vague promises. To maintain an appearance of sincerity, Turkey's political leaders allowed the pro-Kurdish DEM Party co-chairs and other officials to visit Öcalan on the prison island of Imrali three times in January - February 2025, and for them to also visit Kurdish leaders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Masoud Barzani, Nechirvan Barzani, Masrour Barzani in Erbil and Bafel Talabani and Qubud Talabani in Sulaimani,

as well as PKK leaders that have allegedly resided in the Qandil mountains for the last 30 years.

Concurrently, the SDF Commander-in-Chief, Mazloum Abdi, met with Masoud Barzani on January 16, and with the Barzani-linked ENKS – a coalition of Syrian Kurdish opposition parties- on February 25. The latter meeting took place after ENKS resigned from the Turkey-based Syrian National Coalition on February 7 to form a united front for Syrian Kurds to negotiate with Damascus.

These consultations across party lines were unprecedented, despite the AKP-MHP government's vague promises of 'leniency' for Ocalan and members of PKK, along with the suggestion that PKK could form a non-violent political organisation being met with scepticism. This was well grounded scepticism given Turkey's ongoing imprisonment of elected Kurdish mayors on the grounds they have links to the PKK. Nevertheless, Kurdish leaders were determined to seize any opportunity to halt Turkey's war on Kurds, with leaders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq offering asylum for PKK commanders and militants, like they give members of Kurdish organisations from Rojhelat (Iran) and Rojava (Syria).

Finally, on February 27, Ocalan's letter was published. After all the hype, there were no surprises. Ocalan announced, "I am making a call for ... all groups to lay down their arms and (for) the PKK to dissolve itself," and that "Democratic consensus is the fundamental way (forward)." There was no mention of what Turkey should do in return. In fact, the statement blames 'capitalist modernity' for the breakdown of 1000 years of "brotherhood between Turks and Kurds", and claims the State of Turkey had already done enough, that "The call made by Mr. Devlet Bahçeli, along with the will expressed by Mr. President, and the positive responses from the other political parties ... has created an environment in which I am making ... this call."

Within minutes of this announcement, Turkey launched airstrikes on PKK positions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and continued supporting SNA's attacks on Kurds in Syria. Despite the statement's vague reference to 'all groups', which includes YPG, YPJ and the Arab majority SDF as PKK terrorists for Erdogan and his colleagues, Mazloum Abdi's clear and immediate response

was that Ocalan's statement does not refer to Syrian Kurds because Syrian Kurds are not under PKK's command.

This contrasts with the inconsistent responses of the PKK's Qandil leaders, who claimed they 'agree' with Ocalan's call to disarm and dissolve but insist that for this to happen, Turkey must cease all military campaigns, release all political prisoners, and develop a legal, democratic framework for negotiations to begin. Tragically, these conditions are unlikely to be met. However, if PKK does disarm and dissolve, Bahçeli announced: "The Turkish nation is writing a new history. A terror-free Turkey... a superpower Turkey."

## **GEOPOLITICAL FALLOUT**

The political earthquake in Syria has triggered regional recalibrations. Druze factions in the south and Kurdish forces in the north and east are aligning with each other and will accept Israeli support. Alawites and Christians are fearful of the future. Al-Sharaa blames Iran for the Alawite resistance, and rebels outside the de-factor security forces for the massacre in March. Turkey is moving military hardware and troops further south and Israel is expanding to within 20 kilometres of Damascus. Al-Sharaa continues to advocate for national dialogue but until this point in time has excluded women and the respected representatives of Syria's diverse communities. HTS claiming that drafting a constitution will take up to five years, provides ample time for HTS to consolidate power or be overthrown. One could well ask having undermined Iran's aspirations, could those pulling the strings be laying a trap for Turkey?

## **CONCLUSION**

The collapse of Assad's regime has created new uncertainties and shifts in power dynamics. The rise of Islamists in Turkey and Syria raises significant concerns, as do potential clashes between [Israel and Turkey](#), and between Turkey and Iran.

Recent events in Syria necessitate urgent international engagement. The Kurds propose a viable political option of federalism. They have proven to be reliable military allies in the conflicts from 1990 to 1991, 2003 to 2005, and since 2014.

They have also been invaluable political allies, serving as safe havens for US-led coalition forces, NGOs, and refugees, and moderate, secular balances to the prevailing Shia and Sunni power structures in Iraq and Syria. They could do the same for Turkey and Iran.

In other words, Kurdish military and political institutions are critical for the stability of the Middle East, if their military and political institutions survive, for Kurds' current achievements are under attack. They urgently require protection and support in exchange for their services, especially if Islamist extremists intensify or expand their operations.

Australia has economic and military ties with the Middle East. As part of the US-led coalition and UN Operation Habitat, Australians have collaborated with Kurds since the 1990s, if not earlier (during World War II). Its defence force personnel, diplomats, and humanitarian workers remain in the Kurdistan region of Syria and Iraq. It is fitting that Australia, its allies, and international organisations take some responsibility for addressing the century of oppression resulting from the international decision to divide Kurdistan. Supporting a just peace for all people in Kurdistan and the four nation-states that have authority over Kurdistan will require a similar global effort.

The geopolitical landscape surrounding the Kurdish struggle for self-determination remains one of modern history's most overlooked crises. If the people of Kurdistan are not granted cultural and economic self-determination, alongside a negotiated degree of political and military autonomy in all four regions within the next ten years, an estimated 60 million Kurds, as well as millions of Christians (Assyrian, Chaldean, and Armenian), Arabs, and Turkmen will have every right to demand an independent multi-ethnic Kurdistan, should this reflect the will of the majority. It is up to the international community to determine which option would best stabilise the region and to take action.

DISCLAIMER: As Co-Chair and Public Officer of Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA), Dr. Gina Lennox wrote this report. KLA is not affiliated with any political party or organisation and relies on volunteers to raise awareness of human rights and abuses of international law with a focus on people in Greater Kurdistan.