



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Syria: US withdrawal and Turkish incursion

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# Summary

## Events in October 2019

On 6 October 2019, President Trump announced that he would immediately withdraw the US troops in Kurdish-controlled areas of north eastern Syria.

Three days later, the Turkish military launched a major military offensive into the area, aiming to create a 30km-deep safe zone along the border, where the Turkish government aims to send Syrian refugees presently in Turkey.

Prisoners associated with ISIS have escaped from secure camps.

The US, although it knew about the plans, imposed sanctions on the Turkish government, while the US Vice President Mike Pence travelled to Turkey to try to organise a ceasefire.

The UK expressed [serious concerns](#) about the military action.

## Arms sales

The US reportedly [offered to re-instate sales of the F35](#) fast jet in exchange for restraint in Syria. The deal had been stopped when the US learned that Turkey was to buy an air defence system from Russia.

European countries, including the UK, have suspended arms sales to Turkey, particularly of items that could be used in the incursion. There has not been an EU-wide policy, however.

## ISIS prisoners

There are about 100,000 ISIS-affiliated prisoners in camps controlled by Kurdish fighters. Some 800 are already reported to have escaped. The [Red Cross has called for countries to take back their own nationals](#) in such circumstances. UK ministers say there are legal complications and that they want to see people given [justice in the region](#), although they will look again at the situation of children.

## Reaction

Many commentators have argued that the withdrawal is a [strategic mistake](#), handing advantage in the region to the Assad government, Russia and Iran.

For others, the [withdrawal makes sense](#) for the US, even though the abandonment of the Kurds is a problem.

## The Kurds' record against ISIS

Many have said the decision to withdraw is a betrayal of the Kurdish forces that were crucial in defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

The battle for Kobane, largely fought by Kurds with US air backup, was the first defeat for ISIS.

Syrian Kurds became the West's main ground troop allies and the SDF, a Kurdish-led force, was the main force that, again with US and coalition airstrikes, drove ISIS from its capital al-Raqqah. The SDF took full control of Raqqah in October 2017.

## Kurdish groups

Turkey claims that the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish militia, is the same as the PKK, the Kurdish group based in Turkey that is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU. It is widely agreed that the two groups are closely linked. Turkey's attitude extends to the Syrian Democratic Forces – the Kurdish-led but multi-ethnic force that was assembled to lead the fight against ISIS in non-Kurdish parts of Syria such as al-Raqqah.

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There is a myriad of Kurdish groups and militias, some legal and some not, spread across the four countries where Kurds have a significant population: Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria.

# 1. US withdrawal and Turkish incursion

## 1.1 Timeline

**August 2019:** US and Turkey agree a buffer zone with joint patrols to ease Turkey's security concerns about the Kurdish YPG force being in control of the Syrian side of the border.

**10 September 2019:** [US Secretary of State eulogises the SDF/US campaign against ISIS in Syria](#):

The success that we had moving down the Euphrates River Valley that our Department of Defense led with the SDF forces was truly remarkable. We will not take our eye off the ball, ensuring that whether it's ISIS or other radical Islamic extremist groups continue to be under pressure from the United States of America.

**6 October 2019:** After a phone call between Donald Trump and President Erdogan, White House announces that the US will withdraw its troops from the area of Syria near the Turkish border, knowing about Turkish intentions. [The statement said](#):

Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation, and United States forces, having defeated the ISIS territorial 'Caliphate,' will no longer be in the immediate area.

**7 October:** US troops get an urgent call to pull back from the border area. President Trump says UK is "[very thrilled](#)" about the move.

US Department of Defence says in a statement that the [US does not endorse the operation](#).

### *Operation Peace Spring*

**9 October:** Turkey and its [Syrian rebel allies](#) launch a military incursion into northeast Syria, aiming to drive back Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and create a 30-km deep 'safe zone', in which the Turkish government plans to relocate Syrian refugees.

The air and land offensive prompts criticism in several countries, who say it could harm the campaign against ISIS, worsen Syria's humanitarian crisis and further complicate the eight-year conflict.

Shelling and air strikes hit towns along the Turkey/Syria border, security and intelligence headquarters of the YPG, [wheat silos and residential areas](#).

President Trump dismisses concerns about the possible escape of ISIS prisoners, saying "[They're going to be escaping to Europe](#)".

[Trump also writes to the Turkish president](#) urging Erdoğan to strike a deal with the commander of the SDF, General Mazlum:

Let's work out a good deal! You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy - and I will.

**12 October:** US forces come under Turkish artillery fire, although no US personnel are hurt. US troops have remained in the town of Kobane; the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had said hours earlier that Turkey knew exactly where US forces were. Turkey denied targeting US forces, saying the action was in response to mortar and machine gun fire in the hills about 1km away from the US position.

**13 October:** 'Nearly 800' relatives of foreign ISIS fighters [break out of a camp near Ain Issa](#). The UN says that 130 people have fled their homes. [More than 130,000 refugees](#) have fled their homes, according to the UN.

**14 October:** the YPG strikes a deal with the Syrian government for support against Turkish forces. Syrian forces head north, planning to deploy along the Turkish border.

**15 October:** the [US imposes sanctions on Turkey over Syria](#), designating several Turkish defence, energy and interior ministers, as well as some departments. The UK restricts arms sales to Turkey (see below).

**17 October:** US Vice President Mike Pence travels to Ankara to argue for a ceasefire. The Turkish government let it be known that President Erdoğan had thrown Trump's letter "[in the bin](#)".

## UK government position

Responding to an Urgent Question in the Commons on 8 October, Middle East Minister Andrew Murrison said:

We are consulting the US on its response to the proposed Turkish military action in north-east Syria. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries both spoke to their US counterparts yesterday. The US position, including any movement of US troops, is of course a matter for the US Government. However, the US Department of Defence said in a statement yesterday that the US does not endorse a Turkish operation in north-east Syria. We have been consistently clear with Turkey that unilateral military action must be avoided, as it would destabilise the region and threaten efforts to secure the lasting defeat of Daesh. As members of the global coalition, our focus remains on securing the enduring defeat of Daesh. We will continue to work with the US and other international partners to that end.<sup>1</sup>

On 9 October, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement expressing [serious concerns](#):

I have serious concerns about the unilateral military action that Turkey has taken. This risks destabilising the region, exacerbating humanitarian suffering, and undermining the progress made against Daesh which should be our collective focus.

Turkey has shown considerable generosity in hosting so many Syrian refugees. But we will not support plans for returns until the conditions are in place for a voluntary and safe return home.

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<sup>1</sup> HC Deb 8 October 2019, 664 cc1609-1648

## 1.2 Arms sales

Reports suggest that President Trump [offered to resume sales of the F35](#) in exchange for restraint in Syria, in the phone call on 6 October. He is said to have offered a “really good package” to Turkey, including resuming F35 sales and an official visit to Washington.

Donald Trump had previously excluded Turkey from the F35 programme on learning that Turkey was to buy Russia’s S400 air defence missile system. The White House said: “The [F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities.](#)”

[France and Germany](#) announced on 12 October that they would suspend sales to Turkey of arms that could be used in the Syria incursion.

On 15 October [Spain suspended sales](#) of items that could be used in the incursion.

There was no decision to impose an embargo at EU level, however.

### UK arms sales

Before the incursion started, Andrew Murrison answered a point in a debate on what leverage the government has, including arms export licensing:

**Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC):** It seems to me that the British Government have two points of leverage against Turkey: first, the licensing of arms exports to Turkey, and secondly, a review of Turkey’s NATO membership. If there is a ground offensive against the Kurds in northern Syria, will the British Government explore both avenues?

**Dr Murrison:** With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think I would put it in the terms in which he put it. That is not where we are at the moment. He invites me to speculate; he would expect me to resist speculation. Clearly, we keep matters under review, but what he has suggested is a very severe penalty, either to threaten or to carry out in respect of Turkey. Let us be clear: Turkey is a long-standing and very close ally of this country. With that comes diplomatic leverage that we can exert, and we will continue to do that with our friends and allies the Turks. We have made clear that we think that any incursion into Syria would be wrong. It would be wrong in principle, and in practice I think it would be disastrous in relation to the fight against Daesh.

On 15 October, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab announced that the UK was suspending sales of items that might be used in the Syria incursion:

I can tell the House that no further export licences to Turkey for items that might be used in military operations in Syria will be granted while we conduct that review.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [HC Deb 15 October 2019, c1472](#)

### 1.3 ISIS prisoners

There are about 100,000 ISIS-affiliated prisoners in camps controlled by the Syrian Kurds, according to the Red Cross.<sup>3</sup> Some 68,000 of these are at al-Hawl camp.

Around 750 family members of ISIS fighters broke out of the Ain Issa camp on 13 October.

Al-Hawl holds over 40,000 children whose parents were either killed or wounded in the battle against ISIS. Concerns have been expressed about the conditions in which these children are held, but also about what their treatment now might mean for the future:

Apart from the obvious humanitarian, mental health, and public health concerns this raises, the long-term security risks of failing to meet their needs could be significant — in the Middle East, the West, or elsewhere. This is particularly true given that some, though by no means all, who have been victimized could go on to choose violent action.<sup>4</sup>

The Red Cross called for countries to [take their nationals back](#) from Northern Syria.

Asked about the UK re-patriating the prisoners with UK nationality, Defence Secretary said that it was legally complicated:

People say 'bring them back, put them on trial'. If I bring someone back against their will, I'm guilty of rendition. Under international law, I can't just swoop into a country and grab someone ... unless they come under extradition. We don't have an extradition treaty with the Syrian regime, not surprisingly.

The UK has used powers to deprive individuals of their citizenship on grounds of engaging in terrorism.<sup>5</sup>

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab's comments on 15 October used a different tone, at least in regard to children:

We certainly want to see those responsible for atrocities and crimes given justice in the region, so far as that is practical.

[...]

In relation to the question of returns, we do not want to see foreign fighters returning to this country, but as I made clear in an earlier answer, we are looking at whether orphans and unaccompanied minors who bear UK nationality can be given safe passage to return to the UK, because, as he said, it is utterly unfair that such innocents should be caught in the crossfire.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ['Red Cross urges states to take back fighters, families in northeast Syria'](#), *Reuters*, 8 October 2019

<sup>4</sup> Eric Rosand and Stevan Weine, ['The fallout from President Trump's Syria withdrawal: Don't forget the children'](#), *Brookings*, 16 October 2019

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Returning terrorist fighters](#), March 2019

<sup>6</sup> [HC Deb 15 October 2019, c133](#)

## 2. Reaction

On 9 October the EU Council expressed its opposition to the operation:

Military action will indeed undermine the security of the Coalition's local partners and risk protracted instability in north-east Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence of Da'esh which remains a significant threat to regional, international and European security. The secure detention of terrorist fighters is imperative in order to prevent them from joining the ranks of terrorist groups.<sup>7</sup>

The BBC's Jeremy Bowen said on 14 October that the US withdrawal "opened a [cornucopia of opportunities](#) for Turkey, the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, its backers, Russia and Iran, and the jihadist extremists of Islamic State (IS)". Bowen argued that:

- The Kurdish invitation to the Syrian armed forces to enter a zone they haven't controlled since 2012 is a victory for the Syrian government.
- The fact that Kurdish forces are now busy fighting the Turks is a gift to ISIS, which could take the opportunity to break its affiliates out of Kurdish jails and re-group in Syria. ISIS has announced a new campaign of violence.
- The US presence, alongside battle-hardened Kurdish allies holding almost a third of Syrian territory gave the US influence over events. With US withdrawal, that leverage was relinquished, to the advantage not only of the Damascus government but also its backers Iran and Russia
- US "[betrayal](#)" of its allies would weaken US influence in the region.

On the same day, Simon Jenkins argued that President Trump was right to pull US forces out:

American troops have no strategic reason to be in that country. If they stayed any longer they would only be sucked in deeper – if they tried to impose a sort of peace, they would be attacked by all sides. The outside world has no dog in the Turkish-Kurd fight.<sup>8</sup>

He went on to argue that the US could not bring peace to northern Syria:

Were there a way in which a US army could swiftly bring peace and concord to northern Syria it might be different. There is none. Nothing in the modern history of the Middle East – not the Taliban or the Saddam or Assad regimes – has equalled the horror unleashed by the US's "wars of 9/11". They have come to seem as interminable as they are unspeakable.

On 16 October Ann Clwyd MP tabled an [Early Day Motion](#) expressing concern at the "negative humanitarian consequences" of the

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<sup>7</sup> '[Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on recent developments in north-east Syria](#)', European Council/Council of the EU press releases, 9 October 2019

<sup>8</sup> '[Trump is right to take troops out of Syria. Now they must leave Iraq and Afghanistan](#)', *Guardian*, 14 October 2019

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“invasion” and noting the “crucial role played by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces” in the fight against ISIS.<sup>9</sup>

Also on 16 October, the US president described the situation as “[strategically brilliant](#)” for the US.

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<sup>9</sup> [EDM 38 2019-20](#), 16 October 2019

### 3. Kurdish record against ISIS

The YPG took hundreds of deaths in Kobane, while the SDF is reported to have taken some [11,000 casualties](#) in the fight to defeat ISIS.

#### Battle for Kobane

In 2012 Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters replaced Syrian government security forces in Kobane near the Turkish border and other areas of north eastern Syria. Syrian official forces then concentrated their efforts against largely Arab rebel groups in other parts of the country.

In 2014 US forces collaborated with the Syrian Kurdish YPG (the People's Protection Units) in the battle to drive ISIS from Kobane. Their success was the first victory against ISIS, which had steadily been gaining ground until then.

A PKK official issued an appeal on 19 September for Kurds in Turkey to join the fight in Kobane. The statement said: "Kobane is also the symbol of the Rojava Revolution, and in reality it is a part of North Kurdistan".<sup>10</sup>

On 27 September, reports suggested that PKK and YPG fighters had already been collaborating in Syria:

Militants from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have been fighting alongside Syrian People's Protection Units (YPG) against IS militants for over a year. In fact, in July 2014, a joint YPG-PKK force successfully repelled a smaller IS assault on Kobane which included several tanks and trucks retrofitted with heavy artillery shells.<sup>11</sup>

ISIS had been advancing in northern Syria for months when, in September 2014, the attempt to take control of Kobane began, with ISIS artillery fire reaching close to Kobane on 20 September.

On 4 October there were reports that the [Turkish police were preventing Turkish Kurds](#) and [military supplies](#) from crossing over into Kobane.

On 20 October Turkey, under international and domestic pressure, gave clearance for Iraqi Peshmerga fighters to travel through Turkish territory and join the fight.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the US started air drops of arms to Kurds in Kobane, in what was probably a deal with the Turks.

On 29 October 2014, when Syrian Kurdish YPG militants had withstood the siege for several weeks, around 150 Iraqi Peshmerga crossed the Turkish border.<sup>13</sup> Fighters from the Free Syrian Army group of mainstream rebels were also involved in the fight against ISIS.

A US general said that the Turkish decision to open the border to Iraqi Peshmerga, along with US air drops to Kurdish fighters, were decisive in

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<sup>10</sup> ['PKK Appeals to Kurds in Turkey to Fight for Kobane'](#), *Rudaw*, 19 September 2014

<sup>11</sup> ['US Airstrikes May Benefit Syrian Kurdistan Most'](#), *Rudaw*, 27 September 2014

<sup>12</sup> ['Turkey to allow Kurdish peshmerga across its territory to fight in Kobani'](#), *Guardian*, 20 October 2014; ['Turkey to let Iraqi Kurds join Kobane battle'](#), *al-Jazeera*, 21 October 2014

<sup>13</sup> ['Syrian rebels join battle to protect Kobane'](#), *al-Jazeera*, 29 October 2014

pushing ISIS back: “Had we not done those two things, Kobani would’ve been gone, and you would’ve seen another massacre”.<sup>14</sup>

### Which Kurdish groups defended Kobane?

Most indications point to PKK fighters being in Kobane before Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, whose official presence depended on clearance from the Turkish authorities – something they didn’t get until 20 October 2014. Unofficially, Kurds from Iraq, Europe and elsewhere probably joined the fight in northern Syria as and when they could.

Kobane is traditionally a predominantly Kurdish town. YPG units took over control of the town from Syrian government forces in July 2012. It seems likely that the biggest group of its defenders were Syrian nationals.

### UK

The US led the airstrikes in support of the Kurds in Kobane. UK forces did not participate because the Commons vote to approve “[military action, specifically airstrikes, exclusively against ISIL in Syria](#)” did not take place until 2 December 2015. UK military action against ISIS was limited to Iraq, therefore, in 2014 and most of 2015.

### Al-Raqqah

#### YPG and SDF

The YPG created the SDF in 2015. The YPG is the People’s Protection Units, the military wing of the political group that has taken control of ‘Rojava’, the Kurdish majority area of northern Syria, since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

Having been an essential component of the forces fighting ISIS in Kurdish areas of Syria, YPG/SDF took over other, non-Kurdish majority areas, where it had driven ISIS out.

SDF stands for Syrian Defence Forces, a collection of fighting units dominated by Kurds but including Arab forces opposed to ISIS. SDF was created because of concern that a purely Kurdish force fighting ISIS might drive Arabs into the arms of ISIS.

In 2017, the SDF provided the main ground troops for the battle to regain control of al-Raqqah, ISIS ‘capital’ in Syria.

### Mosul

In 2016 Kurdish forces were integral to the battle for Mosul, in Iraq. This fight involved more Iraqi Kurds than Syrian Kurds, but militias connected to many anti-ISIS political forces, including Iraqi Shia Arabs, Yazidis and Iraqi Sunni Arab tribes, contributed to the battle.

In 2017 the YPG/SDF were crucial in the [campaign to drive ISIS from its ‘capital’](#), the town of al-Raqqah on the banks of the Euphrates in Syria. The SDF took full control of Raqqah in October 2017.

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<sup>14</sup> [‘Too soon to say ‘mission accomplished’ in Kobani: U.S. official’](#), *Reuters*, 27 January 2015

## 4. Kurdish militias/parties

### 4.1 Are PKK and YPG the same thing?

Turkey says the YPG, the main component of the US-backed SDF, is indistinguishable from the PKK, which is designated a terrorist group by the United States and European Union. It is widely accepted that they are closely linked.

In February 2018 the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee noted that the UK had helped the Kurdish YPG with airstrikes in Syria, and that the YPG is indeed linked to the proscribed PKK in Turkey although the Foreign and Commonwealth Office only describes the links as “reported”. The Committee called for the FCO to adopt a clarify its view on the relationship between the PKK and the YPG (and to plan what the UK would do “as the YPG, the SDF’s main component, comes into conflict with the UK’s NATO ally Turkey”).<sup>15</sup>

### 4.2 Kurdish groups

The following covers some of the major groups in the Kurds’ four ‘home’ countries: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. It is far from exhaustive.

#### **YPG**

The YPG, or People’s Protection Units, operate in northern Syria, having been created in 2011. The YPJ is a women-only affiliate of the YPG. Turkey considers the YPG to be indistinguishable from the banned Turkish PKK.

#### **PYD**

The Democratic Union Party is the ‘political wing’ of the YPG. It is a leading member of the Kurdish National Council, a grouping including Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. As ever with the Kurds, the [regional differences are very big](#) and the Kurdish National Council has not gained much traction.

#### **SDF**

The SDF, a cross-ethnic and cross-denominational militia led by the YPG, became the main allies of the Global Coalition against Daesh on the ground in Syria.<sup>16</sup> It reportedly has some [60,000 fighters](#).

#### **Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran**

KDPI is an armed leftist party based in the Kurdish areas of Iran and banned by the Iranian government.

#### **PJAK**

The Kurdistan Free Life party is affiliated to the PKK. It is a designated terrorist group in Iran, Turkey and the US.

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<sup>15</sup> [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK](#), Third report of 2017-19, HC 518, [Summary](#).

<sup>16</sup> For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: what now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#), July 2018

### **PAK**

Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) is active in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish areas and has associated militia fighters. It is proscribed as terrorist by Iran.

### **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Gorran Movement**

These are the main legal parties in the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq. The Peshmerga forces in Iraqi Kurdistan were traditionally affiliated to one of the large region- and clan-based parties, the KDP and the PUK. There have been moves to de-politicise the Peshmerga, putting them under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government, but the [split over Kirkuk after the independence referendum](#) showed that the Peshmerga were still under party command.

### **PKK**

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is a left-wing party engaging in armed attacks against the Turkish state. Its leader is Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned in Turkey since 1999. He advocates 'democratic federalism'. The PKK is a proscribed organisation in Turkey, the [US](#) and the EU/[UK](#).

Öcalan called for a ceasefire with the Turkish government in 2006. Negotiations were progressing towards greatly improved relations but the Syria conflict combined with President Erdoğan's increasingly nationalist line derailed the process.

The Kurdistan Freedom Hawks broke away from the PKK from 2006, opposing the PKK's peace overtures. It is listed as terrorist by various Western countries but not by Turkey, which regards it as part of the PKK.

### **People's Democratic Party (Turkey)**

The HDP is a legal pro-Kurdish and pro-minority party, represented in the Turkish parliament. It mediated with the Turkish government on behalf of the PKK. There are other Kurdish parties in Turkey, some of which failed to pass the threshold for parliamentary representation, some of which did not participate in recent elections and some which are banned.

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