



## DEBATE PACK

CDP 2019-0056 (2019) | 1 March 2019

# Bilateral relations with the Kurdistan region in Iraq

**Westminster Hall**

**Wednesday 6 March 2019**

**4.30pm to 5.30pm**

**Debate initiated by Jack Lopresti MP**

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### Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Press Articles</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Gov.uk</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>PQs</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Other Parliamentary material</b>	<b>14</b>
5.1	Debates	14
5.2	Statements	14
	Written Statements	14
	Committee Statement	15
5.3	Early Day Motions	18
<b>6.</b>	<b>Further reading</b>	<b>21</b>

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

The Kurdish regional Government (KRG) was formalised in the present constitution of Iraq in 2005.

In the 1990s a civil conflict broke out in Iraqi Kurdistan, largely between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), although outside forces including Turkey and Iran intervened. These two traditional parties are regionally- and clan-based.

The peace deal that ended that conflict, brokered in Washington, was the basis of stability and prosperity in the following years. Widespread corruption, clientelism and factionalism remained a problem, however.

Democratic politics ground to a halt after 2013, however, as the threat from ISIS/Daesh combined with factional infighting caused the parliament to suspend sitting for years and elections, including the presidential election, to be postponed. Relations with the Baghdad government also deteriorated sharply around this time.

2014 saw the ISIS/Daesh 'surge', when the terrorist group took control of large parts of Iraq, including Mosul, Iraq's second city. Kurdish Peshmerga troops were crucial in driving back ISIS from Iraqi territory. (Syrian Kurdish-led forces were also the most important local forces working with the international coalition against ISIS in Syria, spearheading the move to drive ISIS from its 'capital', al-Raqqah.)

In 2017 Iraqi Kurds voted overwhelmingly for independence from Iraq in a referendum, but the vote provoked the Iraqi federal government to attack Kurdish forces, re-taking control of disputed areas with Iranian backing and with the co-operation of some Kurdish factions. The US and the UK had advised against the referendum.

The Kurds did not unify around a single coalition for the [2018 Iraqi parliamentary election](#). The independence referendum and declaration in 2017, followed by the loss of the disputed city of Kirkuk, caused splits in the traditional ruling duopoly of the KDP and the PUK.

In September 2018 elections were held to the Kurdistan parliament. The KDP, traditionally the strongest Kurdish party, came first, increasing its dominance of the parliament. The growing hostility between the KDP and the PUK, particularly after the loss of Kirkuk to Iraq, has been a concern but a new [joint policy agreement](#) for the KRG, signed in February 2019, should help alleviate that.

## UK relations

[As pointed out by](#) Tom Tugendhat, chair of the Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, the UK has had a chequered relationship with the Kurds: “The then Colonial Secretary, one Winston Churchill, was the first person to use chemical weapons against the Kurds.”

More recently, the UK has had better relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, especially since the establishment of the no-fly zone over northern Iraq after the 1992 Gulf War. UK warplanes contributed to patrolling the no-fly zone, allowing *de facto* autonomy from the government of Saddam Hussein to develop in part of the area that now constitutes the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq. One analyst very familiar with the region argues that the UK remains “[widely admired](#)”.

Since October 2014, the UK has been providing training to Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces. As well as training, the UK has donated machine guns, ammunition and counter-IED equipment.

The UK did not support the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. In April 2018 the government responded to the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK](#), setting out its support for a united federal Iraq:

*The UK Government supports a strong Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) within a strong and unified Iraq. We underline consistently to the Federal Government of Iraq and to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) the importance of upholding the rights of the Kurdish population in Iraq, as set out in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution*

The Foreign Affairs Committee recommended providing and encouraging capacity-building support to KRG institutions, especially in the light of corruption fears:

The [Government agreed](#) but said that the UK’s focus was on the Peshmerga at present:

*We agree with the need to support reform and capacity building of the KRG’s institutions. We assess opportunities for UK support on the basis of need, the KRG’s appetite for reform, and whether the UK is best placed to provide that assistance. When others are better placed to assist, we encourage them to do so. Our current technical advice to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs is an example of UK expertise facilitating reform. We are leading an international effort to reform the Peshmerga so that it is more capable, more affordable, and more accountable to democratic bodies.*

The [Westminster Foundation for Democracy](#), the FCO and DFID-supported capacity-building body, has worked with the KRG on its anti-corruption strategy, a draft of which was published in April 2017. It does not have a full programme in the Kurdish Region, however.

**Direct flights from the UK**

ON 27 February Mary Glendon tabled an [Early Day Motion](#) calling for direct flights between the UK and Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the EDM, British Airways is considering establishing a direct route soon.

**FCO travel advice**

The [FCO advises](#) against all but essential travel to Iraqi Kurdistan, putting it in the same category as Baghdad and southern Iraq; the FCO advises against all travel to the centre and west of the country. Some MPs have called for the advice on the Kurdish region to be revised.

## 2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or the accuracy of external content.

### [Out of Africa: Why has Somaliland succeeded where Iraqi Kurdistan has failed?](#)

American Enterprise Institute  
Michael Rubin  
27 February 2019

### [The Kurdish hipsters are in town](#)

Qantara.de  
Annette Walter  
12 September 2018

### [We can help Kurdistan bridge the gap](#)

The Times (\*Subscription required)  
Jack Lopresti MP  
3 August 2018

### [What we should do now to help the Kurds – and why](#)

Conservative Home  
Jack Lopresti MP  
17 March 2018

### [UK MPs recognise 'many Kurds feel imprisoned' in Iraq](#)

Rudaw  
Gary Kent  
11 February 2018

### [The Kurds of Iraq have been loyal allies. The west must repay its debt](#)

The Guardian  
Simon Tisdall  
27 September 2017

### [Time for Britain to fix its mistake: how Kurdistan became part of Iraq](#)

Daily Telegraph  
Noreldin Waisy  
21 September 2017

### [Kurdish independence referendum is a win-win for Britain and the Kurds](#)

Daily Telegraph  
Nadhim Zahawi MP  
21 September 2017

### 3. Gov.uk

#### [Foreign Secretary's statement on Kurdish referendum](#)

**Foreign & Commonwealth Office**

**25 September 2017**

Commenting on the referendum being held in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said:

“The UK does not support this referendum and continues to back the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. We believe that any referendum should be agreed with the Government of Iraq.

With our international allies, we proposed an alternative plan which would have seen negotiations take place between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to address all issues of dispute. This alternative would have given the opportunity for the aspirations of the Kurdish people to be met. It is regrettable that a part of the Kurdish leadership rejected the proposal.

The long-term security and prosperity of Iraq and Iraqis can only be met through dialogue and cooperation. I urge all sides to refrain from provocative statements and actions in the aftermath of the referendum. The priority must remain the defeat of Daesh and returning stability to liberated areas.”

## 4. PQs

### [Iraq: Politics and Government](#)

26 Feb 2019 | 909450

**Asked by: Eddie Hughes**

What recent diplomatic steps his Department has taken to support peace and stability in Iraq.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

I visited Iraq last month and held useful discussions with leaders from the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Governemnt. We discussed how the UK and Iraq could cooperate together to promote peace and stability in Iraq. I announced a further £30 million in funding to help rebuild Iraq and reinvigorate the economy.

### [Iraq: Politics and Government](#)

08 Feb 2019 | 215164

**Asked by: Dr Matthew Offord**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what steps his Department has taken to support the development of democracy in Iraq.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The UK supports the consolidation of democracy in Iraq through both diplomatic engagement and programme support. During my visit to Baghdad and Erbil in January, I welcomed the recent national elections and those in the Kurdistan region and encouraged swift completion of the formation of the Iraqi cabinet and Kurdistan Regional Government. We recently welcomed the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament and a delegation of Iraqi MPs to the UK where they were able to witness British parliamentary processes and exchange experiences. As part of our programme assistance, the UK is helping the Government of Iraq in newly liberated areas and in Basra to make governance and the delivery of services more effective and responsive, so strengthening relations between local communities and the Iraqi authorities.

### [Kurds: Syria and Iraq](#)

07 Feb 2019 | 214589

**Asked by: Stephen Gethins**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what diplomatic steps his Department is taking to ensure the protection of the Kurdish population in (a) Syria and (b) Northern Iraq.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The UK is a leading member of the Global Coalition against Daesh which has worked with partner forces in both Iraq and Syria to fight

against Daesh and protect the local population, including Kurdish communities, in the areas concerned. We have consistently called for protection of minorities, including Kurds, in both Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, that has included through our engagement with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); I held productive discussions with the President-elect, Prime Minister-elect and Minister of Interior and Peshmerga Affairs of the KRG during my visit to Erbil on 25 January. With respect to Syria, this has included through resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and support for a UN-facilitated political process as well as our diplomatic engagement with allies and regional partners.

[Iraq: Internally Displaced People](#)

**10 Oct 2018 | 174692**

**Asked by: Jack Lopresti**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what assessment he has made of the safety and security of internally displaced persons returning from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to the Nineveh Plains.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

Displaced people in all areas of Iraq continue to deal with significant challenges, including forced displacement, risk of eviction and a lack of access to services. A significant number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) reside in Ninewa; recent updates from camps in the governorate suggest that the majority of issues are around poor access to electricity and water, whilst the main concerns for out-of-camp IDPs relate to need for healthcare services and cash assistance. UK officials closely monitor the humanitarian situation across the whole of Iraq. Overall there has been significant progress since the country was liberated from Daesh, with the number of IDPs now below two million, and the number of returnees over four million. If we are to see continued progress, it will be vital for the Government of Iraq to coordinate closely with the Kurdistan Regional Government to ensure that IDPs continue to be able to return to areas such as the Ninewa Plains.

[Iraq: Internally Displaced People](#)

**09 Oct 2018 | 174693**

**Asked by: Jack Lopresti**

To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, what assistance the UK is providing to livelihood creation for (a) internally displaced persons in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and (b) Internally Displaced Persons returning from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to the Nineveh Plains.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Department for International Development**

The UK funds livelihood projects in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq through the UN's Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF). In 2017 IHF-funded livelihoods projects provided 6,033 displaced or conflict

affected people with temporary employment opportunities. The UK also funds livelihood creation through the UNDP Funding Facility for Stabilisation (FFS), which focuses on areas liberated from Daesh. In order to create conditions for people to return home, the FFS aims to kick-start local economies by rehabilitating critical infrastructure, providing grants for small businesses, and by directly generating income opportunities.

### [Iran: Kurds](#)

**09 Oct 2018 | 174034**

#### **Asked by: Jack Lopresti**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what representations he has made to the Iranian Government in relation to the recent missile attack on an Iranian Kurdish camp in Koya in the Kurdistan region in Iraq; and if he will make a statement.

#### **Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The UK has been following recent events in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with concern.

Following the attack near Koya, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Republic of Iraq travelled to Kurdistan Region of Iraq to speak to all parties alongside Consul General Erbil. On 13 September the Ambassador publicly condemned the attacks as disproportionate and dangerous.

Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran regularly raises our concerns over Iran's destabilising activity in the region, pressing the Government of Iran to play a more constructive role. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials continue to engage regularly on this and other issues with Iran at all levels.

### [Iraq: Kurds](#)

**10 Jul 2018 | 159545**

#### **Asked by: Emily Thornberry**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what steps he is taking to de-escalate tensions between the Kurdistan regional government and the Iraqi Government.

#### **Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are urging the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to resolve their differences on all immediate issues. Our Ambassador in Baghdad and Consul General in Erbil are pressing this message, as are UK ministers. For example, the then Foreign Secretary spoke to Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi on 6 February and emphasised the need for an agreement on border security. I met with both sides and pressed these messages during my visit to Iraq in April.

Following national elections on 12 May, discussions are taking place between political parties and groups, including Kurdish parties, to form a government. We look forward to the formation of an effective, inclusive government that addresses the needs and hopes of all Iraqi citizens.

**[Iraq: Kurds](#)**

**04 Jul 2018 | 157742**

**Asked by: Jim Shannon**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, whether he has had discussions with the US Administration on enabling the Kurds to hold on to territory that they have taken from Isis in order to achieve regional autonomy; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We support the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and engage regularly with our US partners. We work closely with the US in support of our ongoing priorities of defeating Daesh and reaching a political settlement to the conflict. The Syrian Democratic Forces continue to make an important contribution to counter-Daesh efforts.

We support an inclusive political process to achieve a political settlement that ends the conflict and protects the rights of all Syrians including Kurds. The UK believes that Syria's future constitutional arrangements should be resolved through an inclusive political process under UN auspices in line with Security Council Resolution 2254.

**[Iraq: Aviation](#)**

**27 Mar 2018 | HL6298**

**Asked by: Lord Hylton**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what discussions they have had, if any, with the government of Iraq and the regional government of Kurdistan regarding the resumption of international flights to Erbil.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are pleased that Prime Minister Abadi has announced that the suspension of international flights into the Kurdistan Region will be lifted shortly. The UK had been urging both sides to reach an agreement that would enable international flights to resume at the earliest opportunity. Ministers – including the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary – as well as officials at our Posts in Iraq have consistently pressed this message since the suspension came into force following the Kurdistan Region's unilateral referendum on independence from Iraq in September 2017.

**Kurds: Foreign Relations****14 Mar 2018 | 131282****Asked by: Jack Lopresti**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, With whom the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN met with in an official capacity during his recent visit to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; what subjects were discussed in those meetings; what assessment he has made of the value of visit to UK-Kurdistan Region relations; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

On 2 and 3 March, the Minister for The Commonwealth and UN, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon met the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani; the Head of the Department for Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa; Minister of Interior, Karim Sinjari; and representatives from Women's Rights, Yezidi and Christian organisations. The Minister's visit was primarily focused on preventing sexual violence in conflict, holding perpetrators to account and supporting survivors. The Minister pressed the KRG to meet its international obligations on human rights, discussed challenges around preventing sexual violence in conflict and gender-based violence, and emphasised the importance of female participation in the political and reconciliation process. It was a positive visit which advanced UK objectives and underlined UK support for the Kurdistan Region within a unified Iraq.

**Kurds: Foreign Relations****08 Dec 2017 | 116922****Asked by: Jack Lopresti**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what the reasons are for changing the name of the British Consulate General in the Kurdistan region to the British Consulate General Erbil on his Department's Facebook page; and what his policy is on UK relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government.

**Answering member: Alistair Burt | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The British Consulate General in Erbil has not changed its name. Its Facebook page was recently changed from a monolingual (English) to a bilingual (English and Kurdish) version. Subsequently, the Kurdish name on the site was shortened as the previous title exceeded the maximum allowed characters in Kurdish. The British Consulate General in Erbil has informed local media and officials of the change. The British Government continues to support the security, stability and prosperity of the Kurdistan Region within a unified Iraq.

[Iraq: Kurds](#)

**28 Nov 2017 | HL3213**

**Asked by: Baroness Hodgson of Abinger**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what diplomatic, military, and humanitarian training and support they have provided to the Iraqi Kurds in the last two years.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The Kurds in Iraq have been a critical ally in the campaign to defeat Daesh.

As part of the Global Coalition against Daesh, the UK has trained over 9,100 Peshmerga in infantry, counter-IED, engineering, and medical skills, as well as on the protection of civilians. The UK has also provided arms and ammunition to the Peshmerga and air support as a part of the Coalition

We are seeking to improve cooperation among Kurdish parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and encourage political and economic reform. Officials have regular contact with members of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraqi Kurdish political parties and other representatives. The Minister for the Middle East visited Erbil in July and September; and the Secretary of State for Defence visited in September

This year, the Department for International Development is providing £40 million in humanitarian assistance to Iraq, which includes the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, taking the Department's total commitment towards the humanitarian response to £209.5 million since 2014. This includes UK support for a Joint Crisis Coordination Centre in Erbil which plans disaster responses and humanitarian operations.

[Kurds: Human Rights](#)

**25 Sep 2017 | HL1525**

**Asked by: Lord Patten**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the welfare of the Kurdish people in Syria, Turkey and Iraq.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

Kurdish people in Syria have suffered during the conflict, alongside much of the country's population, including through the brutality of both the Assad regime and terrorist groups like Daesh. As such Syrian Kurds have been amongst the recipients of UK aid in our largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis (£2.4 billion since the start of the crisis). UK funding is distributed on the basis of need, to ensure civilians are not discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, or ethnicity. In the same way, our policy position is that a transition away from the Assad regime to a government that can protect the rights of all Syrians, unite the country and end the conflict is necessary to protect all minority groups: we continue to use all of our diplomatic levers to advocate for this.

All communities in Iraq have also suffered at the hands of Daesh. We are committed to ensuring that the Kurds in Iraq can look forward to a brighter future within a stable, democratic and unified Iraq. One that can provide the security, jobs, healthcare and education that all Iraqis want and deserve, including the Kurds. The Department for International Development has provided £209.5 million in life-saving humanitarian aid to Iraq since June 2014, which has helped to support internally displaced people across Iraq, including those hosted in the Kurdistan region.

We are concerned by ongoing violence and reports of civilian casualties in South Eastern Turkey where a significant proportion of the Kurdish community live, and a worsening humanitarian situation in that region. We urge the Turkish state to treat all of its citizens equally, regardless of ethnicity or faith. We regularly urge the Turkish authorities to respect human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, and to support the rule of law. We will continue to monitor these issues closely.

## 5. Other Parliamentary material

### 5.1 Debates

[Iraq: Religious and Ethnic Minorities](#)

11 Jan 2018 | House of Lords | 788 cc402-425

[Kurdistan Region in Iraq](#)

04 Jul 2017 | House of Commons | 626 cc35-58WH

[Bilateral Relations: Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#)

15 Jan 2014 | House of Commons | 573 cc275-296WH

### 5.2 Statements

#### Written Statements

[Gift of Equipment to the Kurdish Regional Government](#)

22 Jun 2015 | HCWS45

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I am laying a departmental minute today concerning the gifting of military equipment to the Government of Iraq (GOI), including the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This is at the request of the KRG.

The UK is providing extensive support to the GOI in the continuing fight against ISIL, with the gifting of equipment forming a significant part of this. Previously, HMG has gifted 50 tonnes of non-lethal support, 40 heavy machine guns and nearly half a million rounds of ammunition to the Kurdish Peshmerga. The latest equipment to be gifted to the Peshmerga consists of additional medical supplies. The supplies will consist of items such as tourniquets, bandage kits and dressings for wounds and will fill a significant gap in their resources, leading to the preservation of life and proper treatment of injuries sustained in combat.

It is estimated that the total cost of the equipment will be approximately £600,000, although this may change dependent on the need of the KRG.

[Gift of Equipment](#)

09 Sep 2014 | 585 c33WS

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I am laying a departmental minute today concerning the gifting of military equipment to the Government of Iraq (GoI), including the Kurdish Regional Government. This is at the request of the GoI.

The UK is committed to assisting the GoI by: alleviating the humanitarian suffering of those Iraqis targeted by ISIL terrorists; promoting an inclusive, sovereign and democratic Iraq that can push back on ISIL advances and restore stability and security across the country; and working with the international community to tackle the broader threat that ISIL poses to the region and other countries around the world, including the UK. The Kurdish forces remain significantly less well equipped than ISIL and we are responding to help them defend themselves, protect citizens and push back ISIL advances.

The initial gifting package is scheduled to arrive in Iraq on Wednesday 10 September and will consist of heavy machine guns and ammunition. The total cost is approximately £1.6 million plus an estimated £475,000 in transport costs.

## Committee Statement

### [Kurdish Aspirations and UK Interests](#)

**22 Feb 2018 | 636 cc354-9**

*Statement on the third report of the Foreign Affairs Committee on Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK (HC 518 2017-19).*

**The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee: Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con):** When you do those introductions, Mr Speaker, I keep waiting for you to say “No hesitation, repetition or deviation”, but I am afraid I cannot make that commitment today.

This is the third report by the Foreign Affairs Committee this Parliament, and I am proud to present it to the House. I think it addresses an important aspect of our foreign policy that, sadly, has often been overlooked by the United Kingdom for many years: the aspiration of the Kurdish people.

Britain has a long and historic connection to the Kurdish people that goes back well over a century. Our relationship with them during our period of governing Iraq, and later with the air policing role that we conducted over Iraq in the '90s, demonstrates that we have recognised and on many occasions had an appropriate commitment to the Kurdish people. That is made particularly relevant by Turkey's recent attacks on Kurdish positions near Afrin, which in recent weeks have been deeply concerning. Those attacks are a continuation of a long struggle between Ankara and the various Kurdish groups, but they are also a new departure. On one side is NATO's second largest army, and on the other, a militia that is backed by the alliance's largest.

Those recent events have highlighted the relevance of the Committee's work, and I thank all those who were key to this inquiry, especially all right hon. and hon. Members of the Committee. Those included—they deserve a mention—my hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). Their elevation to ministerial greatness has removed them from citation in the report, but they were very important to many elements of its production and it would be wrong to overlook their contributions.

Our inquiry considered the aftermath of the war against Daesh, during which those fighting the extremists shared an enemy but often held competing visions for what should follow its defeat. Kurdish groups were among those fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria. They played their part in the military victory and were supported by a global coalition, including us here in the United Kingdom. Their success led them to significantly expand their territory in both countries. That expansion has, in turn, raised tensions with regional Governments. In October last year, after Iraqi Kurds held a referendum that voted in favour of independence, the federal forces re-took most of the territory that the Kurds had taken off ISIS. In January, Turkey began the ongoing offensive against predominantly Kurdish forces in the Afrin region of northern Syria. Our report warned that new fighting, or a complication of the conflicts already under way, was indeed probable, and the Kurdish elements empowered by the war against Daesh are likely to be involved. Yesterday's victories risk causing tomorrow's wars.

These tensions have pitted some of the UK's leading allies against each other, not only the Turks and the Americans, who are so intimately involved on both sides, but the forces on the ground. Moreover, they have caused new suffering for the people of the regions, whose severe humanitarian situation the UK has worked with partners to relieve. They have given another cause for fighting in the region, whose instability threatens the United Kingdom through a proliferation of weapons and violent ideologies. The Kurdish groups told us that they shared the democratic and inclusive values of the United Kingdom, but national Governments frequently described those Kurdish groups as a danger to the region. The United Kingdom's military support for the Kurdish fighters opposing ISIS emphasises the stake we have in these conflicts and the role we play in helping to resolve them.

Our report examined the aspirations of specific Kurdish elements in Iraq and Syria, and suggested what the response of the United Kingdom should be. In Iraq, Kurdish elements held a referendum in September 2017. They voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence. They did so in the face of opposition from Baghdad, regional states and the international community. They unilaterally included territories that the Kurds had taken from Daesh, but whose governance was disputed by Baghdad. That left them open to accusations of a land-grab.

We praised the work of the Foreign Office in trying to avert the referendum and in seeking to find an alternative way of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations. The FCO told us that, while it could potentially accept any outcome—including independence for the Kurds—that was negotiated consensually with the Government of Iraq, its preference would be for the Kurdistan region to remain in a united Iraq. But the overwhelming vote in favour of independence showed deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the region's place in Iraq. Many Kurds feel imprisoned in a country that they see as not implementing its commitments of equality to them.

The deep differences between the sides have raised the risk of war. We recommended that the FCO should write to the Government of Iraq, formally offering itself in an enhanced role of facilitating dialogue. We

asked that it be prepared to criticise both sides when criticism was due, because it had little to say to us about some of the issues underpinning the tensions. We said that the FCO should press the Government of Iraq to lift the restrictions placed on the Kurdistan region of Iraq after the referendum, most notably on air travel. It should also set out its assessment of the role of Shi'a militias in the reacquisition of the disputed territories and whether reports of crimes being committed by them are credible. It should explain whether it sees Iran as supporting or controlling the militias. For the Kurdistan region, the FCO should speak out against signs of corruption, the monopolisation of power or the curtailment of democracy. It should encourage political reform and economic diversification. These are issues that affect the whole of Iraq, undermining its reconstruction and threatening the viability of its future as a diverse but united country.

For Syria, our report focused on the People's Protection Units—the so-called YPG—the armed group that is the target of Turkey's current operation in Afrin. Its role as the armed wing of the Democratic Union party—the PYD—means that the two are often referred to as the PYD/YPG, a single, predominantly Kurdish entity. Since 2015, it has operated as part of a coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces, or—ready for another one?—the SDF. The SDF includes non-Kurdish elements, but the PYD/YPG is the pre-eminent component.

Behind these TLAs—sorry, I mean three-letter acronyms—lie significant policy challenges with deep implications for the United Kingdom. The YPG, PYD and SDF are not just names—or letters—but an armed force and a political project that now encompasses more than a quarter of Syria. Their rise to that position was rapid, occurring in just over four years, as they led to the defeat of ISIS on the ground. That defeat was achieved with military support from the UK, the United States and others. The Americans provided weapons to the SDF and the YPG. The UK Government say they did not, but the RAF did carry out airstrikes to clear ISIS from its way. As such, we concluded that the expansion of the same group that Turkey is now attacking was likely assisted by the UK.

The PYD says that it does not seek independence from Syria, but it has helped to declare and administer a self-governing region in the areas of the country it now controls. The group described this region as being based on values of democracy and inclusivity that the UK should support, but Turkey's account of the group and its self-declared region could not be more different. This leaves the UK caught between its two leading NATO allies. The US sees the SDF, of which the YPG is the main part, as its leading local ally against Daesh, but Turkey regards the YPG not only as an abuser of human rights but as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' party, or PKK. It therefore sees the PYD and the YPG as a threat to its national security.

We asked the Foreign Office to explain its position and policy regarding the serious differences in approach between two of the UK's leading allies. Like Turkey, the UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation; unlike Turkey, it does not apply that designation to the PYD or YPG. The evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that these organisations were linked, with the nature and extent of those links being debatable—some claimed they were remote, others that they were indeed the same

organisation. The FCO's view, however, was incoherent. Its statements referred to reported links between them, as though it had no clear view of its own, which is simply not credible. The UK is providing military might to one party in this conflict, and the Foreign Office should be clear on the nature of the group receiving military air support. It cannot have a clear policy unless it has a clear view on this fundamental dispute.

The extent to which the UK engages diplomatically with the PYD and supports the group's inclusion in the Geneva peace talks will have deep implications for relations with the UK's leading allies in the region. It will also have implications for whether a negotiated end can be brought to Syria's conflict or whether the war will become yet more complicated and prolonged. Having supported the SDF, and therefore the YPG, militarily during the war against Daesh, the Foreign Office should now clarify whether it will continue to do so and whether it will engage diplomatically with the territory that the UK has helped the group to win.

## 5.3 Early Day Motions

### **FLIGHTS BETWEEN THE UK AND KURDISTAN REGION IN IRAQ**

**EDM 2122 (session 2017-19)**

**27 February 2019**

**Mary Glendon**

That this House believes that direct flights between the UK and the Kurdistan Region in Iraq would encourage more commercial, cultural, and educational connections with Kurdistan, whose capital city has been deemed the fifth safest in the world; recognises that the Kurdistan Region is rightly proud of its security, religious tolerance and hospitality and that there is a deep esteem and affection for the UK in a place where English is the second language; further believes that direct flights would encourage the private sector in Kurdistan to develop its tourist infrastructure and that UK citizens and others using a link in London would be attracted by its cosmopolitan night-life, good hotels, restaurants of many types, the oldest city in the world, scenic natural beauty in its vast countryside with its rivers, mountains, plains and tranquillity, many archaeological sites and historical sights and buildings; welcomes the news that British Airways is considering establishing direct flights possibly in the summer of 2020; and encourages the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to revise its travel advice on travel to the Kurdistan Region.

### **HOME OFFICE AND PASSPORT ISSUE FOR IRAQI KURDS**

**EDM 1922 (session 2017-19)**

**11 December 2018**

**Robert Halfon**

That this House notes that some Iraqi Kurds have been deprived of their British passports by the Home Office on the grounds that their names and birth dates are inaccurate; further notes that this is the case for

those who fled from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and who feared, in the event of their being returned to Iraq, a prison sentence or execution; and considers that the Home Office should recognise their original and understandable caution given real threats and fears and, as it has done with others in the past, adopt a policy of regularising the status of those affected by aligning such data between their Iraqi and British documents or an equivalent solution.

### **THE POSITION OF KURDS IN IRAQ**

**EDM 1719 (session 2017-19)**

**17 October 2018**

**Mary Glendon**

That this House expresses its relief that relations between the Kurds in Iraq and the federal Government in Baghdad appear to be improving after the failed attempt to blockade and dissolve the Kurdistan Regional Government following its people's overwhelming support for the principle of negotiated independence in a referendum in September 2017; accepts that the process of forming a new Government has yet to be finalised but that the leading contender, Adel Abdul Mahdi, is a more emollient figure who fought alongside the Peshmerga against Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and resigned on principle when his plans for a sustainable deal between Erbil and Baghdad on oil and gas was rejected by the then Iraqi Prime Minister; hopes that he, the Kurds and others can implement the federal constitution that protects the rights of the Kurds which, if it had been done from its acceptance in an Iraqi referendum in 2005, would have forestalled a vote on independence; and wishes all well in finally moving towards a fully federal Iraq with a strong Kurdistan Regional Government.

### **SITUATION IN THE KURDISTAN REGION IN IRAQ**

**EDM 894 (session 2017-19)**

**1 February 2018**

**Mary Glendon**

That this House is cautiously optimistic about the prospects of dialogue between the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the federal Government of Iraq on opening Kurdistan's airports, which have been blockaded since September 2017, and reaching a sustainable settlement based on full implementation of the Iraqi constitution; applauds the KRG for defending its rights within the constitution despite Baghdad's unconstitutional use of force and collective punishment in reaction to a peaceful referendum which established that 93 per cent of the people prefer independence in desperation at Baghdad's refusal to implement the constitution; notes increased pressure from nations, including the UK, to encourage this dialogue; recalls the UK's debt to the KRG and its Peshmerga, with international coalition forces and the Iraqi Army, in resisting the Daesh death cult; commends Norwegian MP Himanshu Gulati's nomination of the Peshmerga for the Nobel Peace Prize for their contributions in the fight against Daesh; welcomes continuing internal KRG reforms, including its commitment to transparency in the oil and gas sector, with the publication of the first report by international auditing company, Deloitte, which includes verified numbers of export

and sales of oil in the Kurdistan Region for the first half of 2017; and urges further economic and political reform in that region to overcome needless divisions, unleash enterprise, diversify the economy and enable the Kurdistan Region and its people to make their contribution to wider reform in the Middle East.

**PRIME MINISTER'S INVITATION TO THE PRIME MINISTER OF  
THE KURDISTAN REGION**

**EDM 684 (session 2017-19)**

**13 December 2017**

**Jack Lopresti**

That this House congratulates the Prime Minister on her decision to invite the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq to London; believes that the UK is well-placed, thanks to its history with Iraq and Kurdistan and the respect for the UK there, to encourage much needed dialogue on all outstanding issues between the Kurdish Regional Government and the federal Government in Iraq, based on the full implementation of the Iraq constitution whose neglect in recent years underpinned the Kurdistan decision to hold a referendum on eventual and negotiated independence; welcomes the Prime Minister's commitment that the UK would continue to fight to protect the identity and rights of the Kurdish people under the Iraqi constitution and the UK's continued support for the Kurdistan Region and Kurdish people within a unified Iraq, while urging continued reform in the political, economic and security sectors to strengthen Kurdistan's institutions and deliver for the Kurdish people; and wishes the very best for the visit by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani.

## 6. Further reading

[\*\*Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report\*\*](#), Sixth Special Report of Session 2017–19, Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 983, 20 April 2018

[\*\*Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK\*\*](#), Third Report of Session 2017–19, Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 518, 11 February 2018

[\*\*UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq\*\*](#), Eighth Report of Session 2014–15, Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 564, 21 January 2015

[\*\*The Kurdish Project \(Iraq\) Website\*\*](#)

[\*\*All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq\*\*](#)

[\*\*Website of the All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Kurdistan\*\*](#)

[\*\*Erbil Lifestyle\*\*](#) (Tourism and lifestyle website)

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