

# TURKEY AND THE KURDISH QUESTION: BRIEFING PAPER

---

*Peace in Kurdistan Campaign*  
November 2015

## **Peace in Kurdistan**

*Campaign for a political solution of the Kurdish Question*

Email: [estella24@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:estella24@tiscali.co.uk)

[www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com](http://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com)

Contacts Estella Schmid 020 7586 5892 & Melanie Sirinathsingh - Tel: 020 7272 7890

Fax: 020 7263 0596

*Patrons: Lord Avebury, Lord Rea, Lord Dholakia, Baroness Sarah Ludford, Jill Evans MEP, Jean Lambert MEP, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Hywel Williams MP, Kate Osamor MP, Elfyn Llwyd, Sinn Fein MLA Conor Murphy, John Austin, Bruce Kent, Gareth Peirce, Julie Christie, Noam Chomsky, John Berger, Edward Albee, Margaret Owen OBE, Prof Mary Davis, Mark Thomas, Nick Hildyard, Stephen Smellie, Derek Wall*

## INTRODUCTION

Following some of the worst incidents of violence the modern state of Turkey has ever seen we have prepared this policy briefing on the current state of the Kurdish question and its implications for democracy in Turkey and across the region. Finding an answer to this 'question' is, as in the past, of critical importance both for the international community and regional powers, as well as for the people of the region who have faced decades of war and deserve peace. We strongly believe that a resolution to the Kurdish issue, particularly in Turkey and Syria, will play a decisive role in fostering stability in the Middle East and Britain has a key role to play in supporting

## RECENT EVENTS IN THE KURDISH REGIONS

On 20 July 2015 in Suruc, a town just across the border from Kobane, a suicide bomb was detonated at the Amuda Cultural Centre, killing 33 Kurdish solidarity activists. In the days after, Turkish jets began the first aerial bombing of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) sites in Iraq since 2011.<sup>i</sup> What has followed has been an intensive police and military crackdown on Kurdish guerrillas and civilians, who the Turkish government claim are guilty of terrorism by association, and an escalation of vigilante violence that has led to the deaths of over 300 people; the arrest of over 1000 mostly Kurdish or pro-Kurdish members of the People's Democratic Party (HDP); raids on HDP party offices and news rooms across the country; the arrest and deportation of journalists critical of the government and physical attacks on and intimidation of independent journalists.<sup>ii</sup>

Taken in context, the recent tragedy in Ankara on 10 October, when a bomb targeting HDP supporters, trade unionists and peace activists killed 128 people and injured 500 more, is a condemnation of the Turkish government which has laid fertile political ground for horrific events like this.

There has been no political accountability for any of the attacks and the government has instead sought to blame the victims. There is now a widespread view that the AKP has been negligent, if not

complicit, in the attacks. It can be no accident that the massacre was timed to coincide with the announcement of a ceasefire by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); the AKP seems intent to wage war against its political rivals.

## HOLDING THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT

### *The Peace Process*

When Prime Minister David Cameron visited Turkey last December, he emphasised that much of his discussions with officials in Ankara were about developing stronger bilateral ties through common trade and national security imperatives. Revealingly, he uttered not one single word in any public statement regarding the erosion of democratic freedoms in Turkey or failure to deliver the genuine democratic and constitutional reforms needed for the full and free inclusion of its 20-million strong Kurdish population into Turkish society. Nor was Turkey's collusion with ISIS and other radical rebel groups in Syria mentioned.

While Britain and other Western allies of Turkey have been silent on the issue, reports from human rights organisations have been expressed grave concerns about the tactics used by the Turkish government. The attack on Zergele in which 8 people were killed was condemned by Amnesty International as 'flagrantly unlawful'; while human rights lawyers from the UK denounced the 9-day curfew imposed on Cizre in August, during which 21 civilians were killed, as 'collective punishment' that was wholly unjustified and disproportionate.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite two years of faltering attempts at negotiations, and despite clear expressions of commitment to the peace process from Kurdish political leaders, it seems evident from the actions of the Turkish government that they are more committed to the elimination of the PKK rather than to a genuine negotiated settlement to the conflict that takes legitimate Kurdish demands into account. The Turkish government's policy towards the Kurdish administration in Syria (Rojava) is another example of this.

## ***Collusion with reactionary groups in Syria***

It is now well documented that Turkey has provided logistical support, training and military cover to ISIS and its affiliated groups in Syria.<sup>iv</sup> The Turkish government has relied on these groups as proxies in an attempt to illegally overthrow the Assad government and attack Kurdish positions, such as the siege on Kobane last year. It should go without saying that these actions are extremely dangerous and will have far-reaching implications for the region, including leading to, in the medium-term, the entrenchment of extremist ideologies in an already volatile region.

Rojava's northern border with Turkey has been blocked since Rojava declared self-rule in January 2014 and the region remains under embargo, despite hosting millions of refugees in dire need of food, medical equipment and other basic supplies. Turkey's attitude towards the Syrian Kurdish political movement is increasingly at odds with the international coalition against ISIS, even warning the ambassadors of both the US and Russia against backing the Syrian Kurdish forces for fear of emboldening the PKK.<sup>v</sup> Rather than join the fight against ISIS in earnest, the Turkish administration is more concerned with fighting Kurdish forces, the only outfit on the ground which have successfully push ISIS back. As recently as July, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter acknowledged that the YPG is a "capable" and "effective" force in the fight against IS in Syria.

In addition, Turkey is said to be key to resolving the Syrian refugee crisis with EU leaders wanting to stem the flow of refugees into Europe. In return for cooperation on migration, Turkey is seeking to exact concessions from the EU and gain some strategic advantage, including pushing its idea of a safe zone in northern Syria, which it is feared is really aimed at undermining Rojava. With a general willingness among European leaders to lend Erdogan international prestige, the danger is that a blind eye will be turned to abuses of power and suppression of democratic rights in the run up to the 1 November election. We are concerned that the blocking of the publication of the EU's next Turkey Progress Report, said to be critical of

Turkey's human rights abuses particularly in the area of press freedom, is an example of this.<sup>vi</sup>

## **DEFINING TERRORISM**

Turkey's framing of the Kurdish question as a war against terrorism is deeply misleading. Much of the basis for Britain's official response to Turkish security forces' attacks on Kurdish citizens relies on this framing also, clumsily lumping the PKK into the same list of blacklisted groups such as Al Qaeda, ISIS and Jabhat Al Nusra.

The PKK have declared 9 unilateral ceasefires since 1993. Their stated aim is for a devolved and representative autonomy within Turkey, the decentralisation of political powers, and recognition of Kurdish identity. As the embodiment of a larger social movement, its relationship to broader Kurdish and leftist civil society is strong and has great importance for the prospects of a sustainable political settlement. Global and domestic listing of the PKK in fact works in parallel with and extends forms of warfare against the PKK, casting a wide net that criminalises peaceful political protest. Tens of thousands have been arrested in Turkey since the listing under Turkey vague and abusive Anti-Terror Law.

It is imperative that the British government revise its listing of the PKK, as a show of support for a political solution to the conflict. The only other resolution is military one, and nothing less than genocide of the sort perpetrated against the Tamils in Sri Lanka in 2009 would be the outcome.

## **SYRIA AIR STRIKES**

We hold the position that air strikes or any other military involvement in Syria by the UK or any foreign power should only take place within the boundaries of international law and not be undertaken unilaterally. As such, it is extremely concerning that the British government has carried out covert drone strikes in Syria without parliamentary approval and in violation of international law.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In continuing to express commitment to its NATO ally in its 'fight against terrorism', the British government is in reality colluding with an increasingly authoritarian, extremist, and violent administration in Ankara. It is in the interests of all parties involved to ensure that the peace process between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish government is restarted as a matter of priority. Equally as important is that the democratic administration of Rojava must be recognised. Here we offer several recommendations for the UK government to support the Kurdish people:

**1. Resumption of peace process:** We call upon the British government to pressure Turkey to resume the peace process with the PKK and other Kurdish organisations immediately, and to stop attacks on PKK positions and civilian targets in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

**2. Delist the PKK:** As long as the PKK remains a blacklisted organisation, peace talks are unlikely to turn into genuine negotiations. Some of the Kurdish movement's most important representatives, who should be playing a key role in the resolution process, are still in prison, including Abdullah Ocalan. The blacklisting has led to intensive criminalisation of political dissent and of pro-Kurdish voices, creating a host of political prisoners whose amnesty must also be a condition for a genuine peace process. We urge the British government to take the step of removing the PKK from its own terrorism list as a show of peaceful intention and support for a resolution.

**3. Freedom for Ocalan:** This year, 10 million people signed a signature campaign calling for Ocalan's release. We urge the British government to use all available diplomatic means to ensure the release of Turkey's best-known political prisoners.

**4. Humanitarian corridor to Rojava:** Measures must be agreed to ensure the borders between Rojava and Turkey, and between Rojava and the Kurdish region of Iraq, remain open for humanitarian aid and the flow of basic goods.

**5. Cutting off ISIS support:** We call on the British government to pressure Turkey to stop supporting

radical groups in Syria and Iraq and to terminate trade relations with them. Financial transactions and oil smuggling can be contained by secure borders controlled by the UN. If the British government is serious about ending the threat of ISIS, they must hold their allies to account for facilitating the group's rise in Syria and Iraq.

**6. Recognition of Rojava:** We call on the British government to recognise the democratic self-administration of Rojava. It is now well acknowledged that Rojava is a beacon of stability and peaceful co-existence in the region. Any discussions on the future of Syria must include considerations of the people of Rojava and the administration they have formed.

---

## References

- <sup>i</sup> *Is PKK real target of Turkish strikes?* Al Monitor, 27 July 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-syria-iraq-pkk-kurds-pyd-ypg-two-front-conflict.html>
- <sup>ii</sup> *Turkey deports Dutch journalist accused of 'aiding' Kurdish militants*, The Guardian, 10 September 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/10/turkey-deports-dutch-journalist-frederike-geerdink>. See also: *VICE News Condemns Turkish Government Over Detention of Its Journalists on Terrorism Charges*, Vice News, 31 August 2015. <https://news.vice.com/article/vice-news-condemns-turkish-government-over-detention-of-its-journalists-on-terrorism-charges>
- <sup>iii</sup> *Peace in Kurdistan Campaign Report: Women's Delegation condemns the arbitrary killing of 21 civilians in Cizre*, September 2015. <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2015/09/28/delegation-on-report-womens-delegation-condemns-the-arbitrary-killing-of-21-civilians-in-cizre/>
- <sup>iv</sup> See, for example, this paper by David Phillips of Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke\\_b\\_6128950.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html)
- <sup>v</sup> *Turkey takes Russia and US to task over their backing of Kurds in Syria*, The Independent, 15 October 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/turkey-takes-russia-and-us-to-task-over-their-backing-of-kurds-in-syria-a6695911.html>
- <sup>vi</sup> *European Council, parliament at odds over Turkey*, Hurriyet, 16 October 2015. <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/european-council-parliament-at-odds-over-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nID=89934&NewsCatID=510>