



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK

Third Report of Session 2017–19

*Report, together with formal minutes
relating to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed
6 February 2018*

The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Tom Tugendhat MP](#) (*Conservative, Tonbridge and Malling*) (Chair)

[Ian Austin MP](#) (*Labour, Dudley North*)

[Chris Bryant MP](#) (*Labour, Rhondda*)

[Ann Clwyd MP](#) (*Labour, Cynon Valley*)

[Mike Gapes MP](#) (*Labour (Co-op), Ilford South*)

[Stephen Gethins MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, North East Fife*)

[Ms Nusrat Ghani MP](#) (*Conservative, Wealden*)

[Ian Murray MP](#) (*Labour, Edinburgh South*)

[Andrew Rosindell MP](#) (*Conservative, Romford*)

[Royston Smith MP](#) (*Conservative, Southampton, Itchen*)

[Nadhim Zahawi MP](#) (*Conservative, Stratford-on-Avon*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Chris Stanton (Clerk of the Committee), Zoe Oliver-Watts (Second Clerk), Hannah Bryce (Clerk), Dr Ariella Huff (Senior Committee Specialist), Ashlee Godwin, Dr Eoin Martin and Nicholas Wade (Committee Specialists), Clare Genis (Senior Committee Assistant), Zara Wootton (Committee Assistants), and Estelle Currie (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6105; the Committee's email address is fac@parliament.uk

Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	5
1 'Kurdish aspirations'	6
2 Developments in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	11
3 Developments in northern Syria	19
Conclusions and recommendations	25
Annex	29
Formal minutes	30
Witnesses	31
Published written evidence	32
List of reports from the Committee during the current Parliament	33

Summary

Kurdish aspirations for recognition and protection of their identity are complex. They differ for different groups in different places, and are pursued in different ways. But the Kurdish witnesses that we heard from all said that they sought solutions in their separate national contexts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and this inquiry has considered the best way for HM Government to support these aspirations while opposing violence or unilateral moves. The aftermath of the war against Daesh has deepened these challenges.

In Iraq, Kurdish elements held an independence referendum in September 2017. A military confrontation then occurred between Kurdish forces and those of the Iraqi federal government. But despite the overwhelming vote in favour of leaving Iraq, Iraqi Kurdish witnesses frequently described that referendum as a last resort that would have preferably been avoided, although this view may have gained greater currency as a result of the backlash experienced by the Iraqi Kurds in the run-up to and aftermath of the referendum. Or they described it as a political negotiation strategy to win the Kurdistan Region an improved position within Iraq rather than necessarily gaining independence from it. Iraqi Kurdish witnesses were clear that they wanted a negotiated solution, within the framework of the Iraqi constitution. Baghdad says the same. But different interpretations of the constitution are raising tensions and risking conflict. The FCO should offer itself alongside international partners in an enhanced role of facilitating dialogue, and should secure the backing and support of the wider international community to play such a role.

The FCO must be prepared to criticise both Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurds when criticism is due. There are clear signs of corruption, and the possibility that democracy is being curtailed, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The FCO had little to say to us about these issues. It should supply, and encourage others to provide, capacity-building courses and training to promote political and economic reform in the KRI. It is also the case that the restrictions imposed by Baghdad on the KRI after the referendum, as well as the role played by Shi'a militias in confronting the Kurds, are only likely to encourage the Kurds on the path to departure rather than integration. Again, the Committee felt that the FCO did not adequately address these issues. The FCO should call for these restrictions to be lifted, and not shy away from giving a view on these militias' activities and their connections with Iran.

In Syria, the political prominence of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has risen in the north and east of the country with the military expansion of its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), during the war against Daesh. HM Government said that the UK has not provided any weapons to any Syrian group. But it has carried out airstrikes to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of which the YPG is the preeminent component. Given the integral role of the YPG within the SDF, we conclude that UK military support to the SDF is likely to have assisted the YPG.

Turkey sees the PYD/YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Like Turkey, the UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation. Unlike Turkey, it does not apply that designation to the PYD/YPG. But the evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that these organisations were linked, with the nature and extent of these links being debatable. But the FCO's view was incoherent. Its statements refer to 'reported' links,

but to have a clear policy the FCO should have its own clear view. The FCO should also have a position on whether the PYD/YPG should be included within the Geneva process to end Syria's war and discuss the country's future, given that new fighting and a further complication of the conflict risks being the alternative.

In light of the group's influence in Syria, the FCO should clarify its own position on the relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK. Having supported the SDF militarily, the FCO must also be clear about whether it will continue to do so—and whether it will engage with the de facto authorities in the areas liberated by the SDF from Daesh—as the YPG, the SDF's main component, comes into conflict with the UK's NATO ally Turkey.

Introduction

1. Those who fought against Daesh had a common enemy, but often held different goals for what system of government should replace the rule of the extremists. As the area controlled by Daesh receded, and those contradictions were exposed, new threats of conflict emerged in the Middle East. Kurdish groups' influence increased as Daesh collapsed, and tensions with regional states—wary of Kurdish aspirations—rose. Past victories risked causing future wars.

2. Our inquiry began in October 2017, when it was clear that regional tensions were threatening to widen the conflict. Armed confrontations had occurred between the forces of the Iraqi Kurds—who had voted a month earlier for independence—and those of the federal government, who re-took most of the territory that the Kurds had taken or saved from Daesh. Our inquiry concluded in January 2018, after Turkey began a military operation against Kurdish-led forces that had—largely owing to the war against Daesh—come to control more than a quarter of Syria. These tensions have pitted some of the UK's leading allies against Daesh against one another. They have caused new suffering for the people of the region, whose severe humanitarian situation the UK has worked with partners to relieve. And they have given another cause for fighting in a region whose instability threatens the UK through a proliferation of weapons and violent ideologies. The UK's interests are at stake.

3. The evidence given to us was clear: future conflicts were probable, and Kurdish groups would likely be involved. Given the risk of further fighting, and knowing that Kurdish elements have been given military support by the UK during the war against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, this inquiry¹ asked the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to explain: its policies towards Kurdish groups in those countries, how it understood their aspirations, and what the consequences of the UK's support or opposition would be. We thank all those who participated,² including witnesses who provided written and oral evidence.³

1 Foreign Affairs Committee, '[Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK—terms of reference](#)', accessed 6 February 2018

2 The Committee appointed Dr Zeynep Kaya and Mr Robert Lowe, both from the Middle East Centre of the London School of Economics and Political Science, as Specialist Advisers to this inquiry. They had no relevant interests to declare.

3 Foreign Affairs Committee, '[Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK—publications](#)', accessed 6 February 2018

1 ‘Kurdish aspirations’

4. Kurdish identity is diverse, and many factors can contribute. Witnesses described the approximately 30 million Kurds who live in the Middle East,⁴ as well as those in the diaspora, as sharing distinctive languages and cultural elements. Kurdish political parties were also described to us as being ideologically distinctive, and often premised around the influence of personalities such as Abdullah Öcalan, or the Barzani and Talabani families in Iraq. And supportive witnesses argued that the Kurds held values that were distinctive in the Middle East, and shared with the UK.⁵ They described, for example, a greater culture of gender egalitarianism among the Kurds.⁶ They also referred to an identity that was not premised on religion, and that protected both ethnic and religious minorities.⁷ Kurdish witnesses emphasised a political system based on elections,⁸ and an outlook that was internationally-orientated (particularly towards the western world).⁹

5. These perceived values have underpinned praise for the Kurds. The Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign called the self-declared and predominantly-Kurdish region of northern Syria “a beacon for democratic and human rights in the Middle East”.¹⁰ Referring specifically to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, the Foreign Secretary, said that “it is unlike, or could be, very different from many other places in that vicinity. It could be democratic, liberal and pluralist. It is an astonishing thing”.¹¹ He said that it “could be a beacon, an oasis”.¹² Also speaking about the KRI, the Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, the Minister of State for the Middle East, said that:

The Kurdish regional area shares our values: a belief in democracy, tolerance and liberal values, diversity, and preventing extremism—so there are good reasons why we have a long relationship.¹³

4 The Kurds are a group of people who live in, or derive from, an area at the core of the Middle East that centres upon parts of southern and eastern Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. Witnesses said that it was difficult to provide accurate numbers for the Kurds’ population, and explained that a sizable Kurdish diaspora community lives outside of this region, but Guney Yildiz, a Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, and Dr Zeynep Kaya both estimated that around 30 million Kurds lived within the Middle East (Q24).

5 For example, the KRG representation to the UK wrote that “the UK and the Kurdistan Region share fundamental interests and values” (KUR0003) para 34, the Movement of Change (Gorran) from Iraq referred to “common values” with the UK (KUR0026), and the PYD—a predominantly-Kurdish party from Syria—said in its submission that it “complies with the democratic values of the United Kingdom” (KUR0023), ‘On the Legitimate Self-Defence Issue’.

6 See, for example, references by Dr Nazand Begikhani (Q5) and Dr Zeynep Kaya (Q26) regarding the Iraqi Kurds, and the PYD (KUR0023), ‘On the Rojava and Northern Syria Issue’, regarding northern Syria.

7 See, for example, see references by Professor Mohammed Ihsan (Q1) and the London Kurdish Institute about the Iraqi Kurds (KUR0009) para 6, and the PYD regarding northern Syria (KUR0023), ‘On the Legitimate Self-Defence Issue’.

8 See, for example, references to “democratic values” by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, (KUR0014), ‘Emerge of Daesh and filling the gap by Peshmarga’, and the London Kurdish Institute (KUR0009) para 6, regarding the Iraqi Kurds. For northern Syria, see the emphasis on elections by the PYD (KUR0023), ‘The PYD’s Vision for the Syrian Solution’.

9 See, for example, references to close ties with the west by Professor Mohammed Ihsan (Q1), the KDP (KUR0014) ‘UK-KRG relations’, and Gary Kent, the Secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KUR0018) para 3.

10 Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign (KUR0020) para 5

11 Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q96

12 Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q97

13 Q124

6. But Mr Burt said that it was important not to idealise the Kurds.¹⁴ Several submissions accused specific Kurdish groups of violating the above values despite rhetorically supporting them. Those criticisms are examined later in this Report. Mr Burt also said that it was important not to generalise. In terms of ‘the Kurds’ being a “unified group of people” with “commonality in all sorts of areas [...] politics, values, interests and so on”, the Minister told us that “nothing is ever that simple”.¹⁵ Witnesses said, for example, that while there were distinctive Kurdish languages, Kurds were still often divided among themselves by different dialects or because they speak other languages.¹⁶ The divisive salience of ‘tribal’ identities was noted, often underpinning patronage networks or exacerbating the factor that most witnesses described as the deepest division between Kurds: the significant and longstanding political differences, and in some cases rivalry, between Kurdish factions and regions.¹⁷

7. Despite these differences, witnesses described a shared sense of solidarity between the Kurdish communities that form minorities within Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. They also described a shared sense of persecution among Kurds, rooted in a sense that their identity had been threatened with non-recognition or even eradication by the central governments of the states in which they are minorities, as well as by the menace of Daesh.¹⁸ This sense of solidarity and of persecution has in turn contributed to a sense of ‘statelessness’¹⁹—the absence of a state in which Kurds form a majority—informing debates about how best to achieve the central tenet of Kurdish aspirations: the recognition and protection of their distinctive identity.

8. Regional countries have strongly opposed any secession by their Kurdish communities. The FCO told us that the UK supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of regional states. It is also the case that many Kurds are firmly integrated within the states where they live.²⁰ But a ‘pan-Kurdish’ identity, characterised by the imagination of a ‘Greater Kurdistan’ connecting areas in the Middle East where Kurds live, has been salient for some Kurds. Kurdish witnesses and their supporters nevertheless argued that, although it might retain symbolic value, this idea of ‘Greater Kurdistan’ was not now a practical political objective. In terms of ‘where’ Kurdish aspirations should be achieved, these witnesses said that that Kurds in different countries now looked to separate solutions in their own, distinctive national contexts rather than to a cross-border, ‘pan-Kurdish’ outcome. For example:

14 Q125

15 Q125

16 See, for example, (Q25) Dr Zeynep Kaya

17 See, for example, descriptions of Kurdish factionalism by BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)), and Bill Park, a Visiting Research Fellow at King’s College London ([KUR0013](#)) para 3.

18 For example, Dr Nazand Begikhani told the Committee that the Kurds “have resisted the different politics in the region practised against them. They have resisted politics of denial, politics of physical elimination, identity discrimination and extreme violence” (Q5), and argued that “in all parts of Kurdistan, Kurds have experienced persecution and violent, chauvinistic ideologies” (Q7). Other examples of evidence describing the persecution of the Kurds include answers from Professor Mohammed Ihsan (e.g. Q4 and Q18), and the submission from BBC Monitoring which says of the Kurds that “their struggle since to achieve recognition of Kurdish identity or nationhood and the opposition they have faced to this have been key factors in instability and conflict in Kurdish regions” ([KUR0022](#)) ‘Introduction’.

19 (Q5); BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)) ‘Introduction’

20 The submissions from the Turkish Embassy ([KUR0027](#)) and Iraqi Embassy ([KUR0025](#)) gave examples of Kurdish employment and participation in the state in Turkey and Iraq.

- Dr Nazand Begikhani, a Senior Research Fellow at Bristol University, said that “Kurds in Turkey have their own political agenda for achieving and establishing their rights. Iraqi Kurds have their own agenda, and Iranians the same. We see that [...] in Syria, they have their own agenda. Having a big, independent Kurdistan is no longer on the Kurdish agenda”.²¹
- Professor Mohammed Ihsan, a former Minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), said that “the new generation thinks about their own piece of Kurdistan”,²² and that “the idea of pan-Kurdishness, which goes back to the ’60s, no longer exists”.²³
- The Democratic Union Party (PYD), a predominantly-Kurdish party from Syria, told us that it was not arguing for a ‘Greater Kurdistan’,²⁴ but instead that “different solutions to each part of Kurdistan are needed in line with the objective circumstances of each part”.²⁵ (It did nevertheless hope, in the future, for the chance of “self-determination for a confederal united Kurdistan”.²⁶)

9. In terms of ‘how’ Kurdish aspirations would be achieved in these national settings, witnesses emphasised the achievement of rights and recognition within these existing regional states rather than through independence from them. For example:

- When asked whether his party opposed independence from Syria, the PYD’s representative in the UK, Alan Semo, replied “yes, that is right. We want a democratic federal Syria”.²⁷ The Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign argued that “the PYD [...] are seeking autonomy and self-governance in a peaceful, federal Syria rather than independence from the state”.²⁸
- The PKK, a Turkish-Kurdish group that is defined as a terrorist organisation by the UK, was described to us as having abandoned its original goal of independence to instead seek the enhancement of Kurdish rights and local autonomy within Turkey.²⁹ The FCO was among those to tell us that the PKK’s goal had changed in this way,³⁰ but the Turkish government disagrees and calls the PKK a secessionist group.

10. The rejection of secession as a way of achieving Kurdish aspirations was challenged in Iraq where—on 25 September 2017, and despite opposition from Baghdad, regional states, and the international community—Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum that

21 Q14 [Dr Nazand Begikhani]

22 Q13 [Professor Mohammed Ihsan], Footnote 8

23 Q14 [Professor Mohammed Ihsan]

24 Q87

25 Democratic Union Party ([KUR0023](#)) ‘On the Kurdish issue’

26 Q87

27 Alan Semo, the UK representative of the PYD, Q73

28 Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign ([KUR0020](#)) Para 4

29 See, for example, Dr Zeynep Kaya’s reference to the PKK’s goals as “increased Kurdish rights and increased democratisation within the boundaries of Turkey” (Q22), or references to “autonomy” by Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) para 25 and BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)) ‘PKK’. Guney Yildiz also described a “significant evolution” in the PKK’s thought (Q27).

30 Foreign and Commonwealth Office said that “while the PKK’s original objective was to achieve Kurdish independence from Turkey, since the 1990s this objective has changed. Öcalan now claims to advocate ‘democratic autonomy’ for Kurds, with a focus on equal cultural and political rights within the Turkish state rather than secession” ([KUR0015](#)) para 24.

delivered a clear vote in favour: 93% on a turnout of 72%, according to Kurdish sources.³¹ But Iraqi Kurdish parties were divided over the referendum,³² and Kurdish witnesses described the vote as a last resort³³ that would have preferably been avoided through the protection of Kurdish rights under the Iraqi constitution.³⁴ And, despite posing a question about secession, several Iraqi Kurdish witnesses argued that the vote was non-binding and did not necessarily relate to the achievement of independence now, or perhaps even in the future. It was described instead as part of a bargaining strategy, through which the KRG sought to negotiate an improved position for itself while remaining, for now at least, within Iraq.³⁵

11. For those who hold them, specifically-Kurdish aspirations seek to secure recognition and protection for distinctively-Kurdish identities. These identities are diverse, and vary between different contexts. So too, therefore, do the ways in which Kurds seek to fulfil these aspirations. There is no state in which the Kurds form a majority. As such, and given that their identity has been denied—or been used as a basis for persecution and sometimes violence—by the governments in the states where they have minority status, Kurdish aspirations have been voiced against the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

12. Kurdish witnesses told us that the idea of breaking Kurdish regions away from these four states, and merging them into an independent state of ‘Greater Kurdistan’, had been abandoned. They instead looked for solutions in their own national contexts where, again, many told us that independence was not the outcome they now sought. Even Iraqi Kurdish witnesses, whose region held a referendum on independence in September 2017, frequently described that referendum as a last resort that would have preferably been avoided, although this view may have gained greater currency as a result of the backlash experienced by the Iraqi Kurds in the run-up to and aftermath of the referendum. Despite it delivering a vote in favour of independence, some Kurdish

31 See, for example, Gary Kent, Secretary of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq APPG ([KUR0018](#)) para 45, London Kurdish Institute ([KUR0009](#)) para 3, and the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) para 33.

32 Of the main Kurdish parties, witnesses generally described the vote as being driven by the KDP, partly supported by the PUK, and warned against by Gorran as well as other, smaller parties. See the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 21, BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)) ‘Iraqi Kurdistan statehood referendum’, Bill Park (Q94), and Dr Zeynep Kaya (Q40).

33 Karwan Jamal Tahir, the UK representative of the KRG, said that “we only held the referendum [...] because the constitution was violated”. The KRG representation to the UK referred in written and oral evidence to having “no choice” but to hold the vote (see for example Q49, Q50, and ([KUR0003](#)) para 12).

34 Professor Mohammed Ihsan said that “if Iraq were democratic and federal and implemented its constitution, the Kurds of Iraq would never, ever think of going for independence or for a referendum” (Q14). The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) said that “had the Iraqi governments implemented the constitution [...] Kurds most probably would have not gone to [a] referendum” ([KUR0014](#)), ‘Executive Summary’. Dr Massood Al-Mufti was clear that, from his own perspective, “as an Iraqi Kurd I would much prefer to remain within a strong, united, democratic, liberal, and federal Iraq” ([KUR0007](#)) para 7.

35 Dr Nazand Begikhani described the referendum as aiming “to sort out their outstanding disagreements with Baghdad peacefully and establish a confederal model of governance in Iraq with greater autonomy” (Q8), while the Kurdistan Democratic party called it “not binding, [but] to give a strong mandate for the Kurds to negotiate with Baghdad in order to solve all the issues and disputes” ([KUR0014](#)) ‘Executive Summary’. Gary Kent wrote that, after the vote, “Kurdistani leaders also left open the possibility of a genuine and reliable federal settlement or confederation” ([KUR0018](#)) para 25. Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, the former speaker of the KRI’s parliament, described the KRG’s leaders as “gambling with its people’s rights of self-determination” ([KUR0021](#)) para 1.1, II. The Middle East Minister, the Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, told the Committee that he was aware of the idea that the referendum was a bargaining tactic, and said that “we advised the KRG that just because they saw it as a bargaining chip, that did not necessarily mean that that was how it was seen in Baghdad” (Q134).

witnesses described the referendum as a political negotiation strategy to win the Kurdistan Region an improved position within Iraq rather than necessarily gaining independence from it.

13. *These disputes can only be resolved by those in the region. But the FCO should support meaningful political participation and representation for Kurds, as well as cultural recognition, equal rights, and economic opportunities for them, underpinned by national constitutions and achieved through negotiation, as a means of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations. It is not in the UK's interests for any state to deny Kurdish identity through law or force. It is likewise not in the UK's interests for Kurdish groups to seek their goals through violence or unilateral moves.*

2 Developments in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

14. The war against Daesh in Iraq aggravated pre-existing tensions between the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which is administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).³⁶ In 2014, as Iraqi federal forces pulled back in the face of early advances by Daesh, Kurdish forces captured territory in northern Iraq whose control was disputed between the KRI and Baghdad.³⁷ It included the city of Kirkuk. On 25 September 2017—in the face of opposition from Baghdad, regional states, and the international community—the Iraqi Kurds held a referendum that voted in favour of independence, and they applied its terms to these disputed territories. In October 2017, and facing partial resistance from Kurdish forces, military elements under the command of the Iraqi federal government moved into, and re-gained control of, Kirkuk and most of these disputed territories. Baghdad also imposed subsequent restrictions on the KRI. Relations between Baghdad and the KRI are now at an historic low, and the risk of fighting was described to us as being high.³⁸

15. Militarily, the UK has supported both Baghdad and the KRI (whose forces are referred to as ‘Peshmerga’). The Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in London thanked the UK for “training, armament, air strikes and the presence of military advisers” for federal forces.³⁹ In terms of Kurdish forces, the FCO and many other witnesses praised the Peshmerga’s role in fighting Daesh.⁴⁰ Speaking about the UK military support, the FCO told us that:

As part of the package of assistance provided by the Global Coalition to counter Daesh, we have provided the Peshmerga with military support, channelled through the Coalition and distributed based on requirements: UK training teams have trained over 57,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces, including 9,000 Peshmerga fighters; since September 2014 we have gifted £3 million of arms and ammunition to the Peshmerga; and the UK has given air support to the Peshmerga as part of the Coalition.⁴¹

36 The KRI was legally established in 2005 by the Iraqi constitution as an autonomous area in the predominantly-Kurdish north of the country, which is administered by the KRG.

37 For accounts of these events from different perspectives, see the submissions by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 10, the KRG representation in the UK ([KUR0003](#)) paras 17 and 18, and Iraqi Embassy ([KUR0025](#)).

38 For examples of warnings about the risk of renewed war in Iraq, see the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 25, or the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) para 37 and 38, or Bill Park Q104 and ([KUR0013](#)) para 26.

39 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq ([KUR0025](#)). The Embassy did also complain about “training for the Peshmerga forces in isolation from the federal forces”

40 The Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, told us that “we owe a great debt to the Peshmerga for their bravery and sacrifice. What they are doing is on behalf of all of us. That is why instinctively we are so supportive of the Kurds and their aspirations—the KRG” (Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q96). The Middle East Minister, Mr Burt, also praised the role of the Iraqi Kurds (Q124) and the FCO’s written submission said that “the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq have been a critical ally in the campaign to defeat Daesh” ([KUR0015](#)) para 8. Other witnesses referring to the role of the Iraqi Kurds in the fight against Daesh included the KDP ([KUR0014](#)) ‘Emerge of Daesh and filling the gap by Peshmerga’, Dr Massood Al-Mufti ([KUR0007](#)) para 5, Gary Kent ([KUR0018](#)) paras 16 and 56) and the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) paras 17 and 18.

41 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 8

Karwan Jamal Tahir, the UK representative of the KRG, referred to a “permanent commander from Britain [being] stationed at the Ministry of Peshmerga”⁴² and thanked the UK for its efforts to unify the Peshmerga, which has suffered from factional divides.⁴³ Bill Park, a Visiting Research Fellow at King’s College London (KCL), said that Peshmerga officers had received training in the UK.⁴⁴

16. In its statements, there have been areas where the FCO has appeared reluctant to criticise each side. When describing the events that took place after the referendum, for example, the FCO’s account was very different to that of Kurdish witnesses and their supporters. These witnesses expressed their deep disappointment with the UK’s policy,⁴⁵ which some accused of encouraging Baghdad’s actions.⁴⁶ The FCO, in turn, appeared reluctant to criticise Baghdad:

- a) Kurdish witnesses and their supporters frequently referred to the Iraqi federal government as having ordered its forces to “attack” the “Kurdistan Region”.⁴⁷ The KRG representative told us that “over 100 Peshmerga were killed and injured”.⁴⁸ But, in contrast to the Kurdish account, the FCO described this area as “disputed territory”⁴⁹ and these actions as “largely peaceful”.⁵⁰ The Foreign Secretary told us that “things could be a lot worse”.⁵¹ The Middle East Minister said “we believe that the way in which those difficulties were handled in the short period after the referendum gave rise to a great deal of hope”.⁵²
- b) Kurdish witnesses and their supporters frequently referred to the Iraqi federal government as having imposed an “embargo” or “blockade”⁵³ on the KRI, which they described as “punishments”.⁵⁴ The FCO did not use these terms, and instead said that that Baghdad had “closed Kurdish airspace to inbound and outbound international flights”.⁵⁵ But Bill Park, from KCL, described “triumphalism [and] a mood for revenge”⁵⁶ in Baghdad. He warned that this would “only lead to continuing Kurdish resistance, and to wider regional instability”.⁵⁷
- c) Kurdish witnesses and their supporters also frequently emphasised the role of Shi’a militias (particularly those known as Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF,

42 Q63

43 Q62

44 Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) para 13

45 See, for example, criticism by Professor Mohammed Ihsan (Q13), Dr Nazand Begikhani (Q13), the London Kurdish Institute ([KUR0009](#)) para 5, the KRG representative to the UK (Q55 and [KUR0003](#) para 26), Zana Gulmohamad ([KUR0011](#)) para 12, Dr Massood Al-Mufti ([KUR0007](#)) para 5 and, reporting Kurdish sentiments, Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) para 17.

46 See, for example, London Kurdish Institute ([KUR0009](#)) para 5, the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) para 25, and Gary Kent ([KUR0018](#)) para 60

47 See, for example, references to an “attack” on the “Kurdistan Region” by Dr Nazand Begikhani in Q10 and Q13, and the KRG representative to the UK in Q56 and ([KUR0003](#)) paras 3 and 28.

48 KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) para 32

49 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 13

50 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 10

51 Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538Q98

52 Q158

53 See, for example, the use of these words by Professor Mohammed Ihsan (Q11), Dr Nazand Begikhani (Q18), the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) para 27 and Gary Kent ([KUR0018](#)) para 31.

54 See, for example, the submission from the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) paras 25, 40 and 41), Gary Kent ([KUR0018](#)) paras 33 and 48, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party ([KUR0014](#)) ‘Conclusion’.

55 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 13

56 Q104

57 Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) para 30

or ‘Hashd al-Shaabi’) in October’s military re-acquisition of territory, and these witnesses spoke in highly condemnatory terms about what they saw as Iran’s role in supporting these militias. They accused these militias of committing sectarian crimes against Kurds.⁵⁸ The Iraqi Embassy described reports of “non-Iraqi forces or irregular militias or groups backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard” as “completely false”.⁵⁹ The FCO’s written submission described the PMF as a source of potential conflict,⁶⁰ but said only that they were “perceived by some in the Kurdistan Region as sectarian”.⁶¹ The FCO’s written submission made no mention of Iran’s alleged role in backing these militias. The Middle East Minister did later refer to “the activities of those in PMF and Hashd, who take their orders from outside the country”.⁶²

17. But there are also areas where the FCO has appeared reluctant to criticise the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. This was notable in the case of corrupt and undemocratic practices, which some witnesses alleged were apparent in the KRI. Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, the former speaker of the KRI’s parliament, is a critic of the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and his role was at the centre of a bitter political dispute in the KRI that led to the closure of its parliament for two years. But he said that there was “rampant and brazen corruption in the KRI, with billions of dollars of oil revenues stolen”,⁶³ and complained of “the UK Government and its allies’ perceived indifference to the KRG’s financial mismanagement”.⁶⁴ He also referred to “the deliberate stalling and alarming reversal of the democratic process in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by the dominant political party and the presidency”.⁶⁵ Mr Sadiq called the situation a political and economic “crisis”.⁶⁶ Numerous witnesses made similar accusations.⁶⁷ Some witnesses appeared particularly to criticise the ruling KDP⁶⁸ and its leaders. But the FCO made no reference to corruption, or the curtailment of democracy, in its written submission.⁶⁹ When asked directly about

58 Witnesses often named the town of Tuz Khurmatu as an example of where this had happened. See, for example, evidence from Zana Gulmohamad ([KUR0011](#)) para 4, Thomas Hardie-Forsyth, an adviser to the KRG representation in the UK, ([KUR0028](#)) paras 2 and 3, Karwan Jamal Tahir (the KRG representative to the UK) in Q57, and Professor Mohammed Ihsan in Q4.

59 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq ([KUR0025](#))

60 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) paras 14 and 25

61 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) paras 14

62 Q151

63 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq ([KUR0021](#)) ‘Executive Summary’ VI

64 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq ([KUR0021](#)) para 3.3

65 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq ([KUR0021](#)) para 4.1, I

66 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq ([KUR0021](#)) paras 3.1, 3.3, 4.1 II, 4.1 III, and 4.1 V

67 For example, the Gorran Movement described corruption as “widespread” and “an enormous challenge and problem in Kurdistan and Iraq” ([KUR0026](#)), while BBC Monitoring described “accusations of corruption and nepotism” as “common” ([KUR0022](#)) ‘The ruling KDP and PUK’. Referring to the KRG’s President at the time of the September 2017 referendum, Masoud Barzani, Bill Park spoke of an “unconstitutional extension of his presidency in 2015, and his suspension of parliament in October of the same year” ([KUR0013](#)) para 15. Mr Park also described, more generally, the strength of “patronage networks” in the KRI (Q99). Dr Goran Zangana described “the empowerment of tribal, undemocratic, authoritarian and corrupt parties and groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)” ([KUR0012](#)). The Embassy of Iraq also referred to “corruption” in the KRI, to “violations of the principles of the democratic system in the KRI, especially halting the parliament of the KRI for two years, and through the concentration of power and senior positions by one party”, and to “the insistence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party to dominate the power despite the opposition of the other Kurdish parties” ([KUR0025](#)). Integrity UK argued that “the KDP has attempted to further strengthen its hegemony over the Kurdistan Region’s political system” ([KUR0017](#)).

68 The party provided a written submission to this inquiry, [KUR0014](#).

69 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#))

corruption, the Minister for the Middle East the Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP did not directly address the issue.⁷⁰ He instead said that “it would be wrong for the UK Government to idealise any group at all. Our relationship with them is realistic”.⁷¹

18. Some witnesses accused the FCO of encouraging malpractices in the KRI by engaging with too narrow and shallow a range of interlocutors. Again, Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, an opponent of the ruling KDP, accused “the FCO and the UK’s diplomatic service in Iraq” of having a “sanitized and romanticized perception of the KRI and its traditional leadership” and “a rather shallow understanding of the real dynamics”.⁷² He argued that the UK engaged primarily with this leadership, and that this approach had “resulted in emboldening the dominant political party [and] inadvertently and indirectly resulted in seriously destabilizing the KRI”,⁷³ and he called on the FCO to “meaningfully engage with more representative and democratic political institutions and civil society”.⁷⁴ Dr Goran Zangana also referred to groups in the KRI that “abused the military, moral and diplomatic support of the West to consolidate their monopoly of power”.⁷⁵ The FCO’s written submission did emphasise engagement with leaders, saying that “[we] maintain close and constant political contact with Iraqi Kurdish leaders from all parties”.⁷⁶ But the Middle East Minister Mr Burt strongly denied that the FCO was too narrow in its approach, saying that “it is the hallmark of our diplomatic staff abroad that they gain their information by being engaged throughout a community”.⁷⁷ He later described in a letter the wide array of individuals and organisations that the FCO said it had engaged with in the KRI.⁷⁸

19. Despite the acrimony between them, both sides appeared to share the same view of how their dispute should be resolved. The Iraqi Embassy called for “dialogue [...] on the basis of the Iraqi constitution”.⁷⁹ The KRG’s representation called for “dialogue [...] based on the principles of the constitution”.⁸⁰ Representatives of the Iraqi Turkmen, a distinctive ethnic group in northern Iraq, also said that “any decision must be taken within the framework of the federal constitution”.⁸¹ That was also the FCO’s view.⁸² And, while the FCO was clear that the UK’s great preference was for the Kurdistan Region to

70 Q125

71 Q125

72 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq (KUR0021) para 3.5

73 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq (KUR0021) para 1.1

74 Dr Yousif Mohammed Sadiq (KUR0021) para 3.5

75 Dr Goran Zangana (KUR0012)

76 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (KUR0015) para 8

77 Q157

78 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (KUR0030) ‘Q157–158: UK engagement with civil society in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)’

79 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq (KUR0025)

80 KRG representation to the UK (KUR0003) para 41. The ruling KDP called for “negotiation [...] in the line with the Iraqi constitution” (Kurdistan Democratic Party (KUR0014) ‘Conclusion’). Both sides also acknowledged that the Kurdish public had supported the current Iraqi constitution when it was approved by a referendum in 2005. See for example evidence from the KRG’s representative in the UK, Karwan Jamal Tahir (Q52) and the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq (KUR0025).

81 European Turkmen Association League (KUR0004) para 1

82 Amy Clemishaw, the Head of Eastern Mediterranean Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, told us that “we were urging the Baghdad authorities and the KRG to have a dialogue, and to resolve any differences of view within the framework of the Iraqi constitution” (Q140).

remain within a united Iraq,⁸³ it also said that it could potentially accept any outcome—including independence—that was negotiated consensually with the government of Iraq.⁸⁴ “Unilateral” steps, the FCO said, would not be supported or recognised by the UK.⁸⁵

20. But while the 2005 constitution was repeatedly referred to as the path to a solution, it was also consistently cited as the problem. Both sides accused the other of violating the constitution in numerous ways, with the Kurds focusing on the failure to implement Article 140 (about resolving the status of the disputed territories),⁸⁶ and on disputes over the allocation of the federal budget, while the Iraqi Embassy accused the Kurds of violating Articles that described the powers of the federal government and its role in preserving national unity.⁸⁷ Given these differences in interpretation of the constitution, Nick Hills—a lawyer with knowledge of Iraq—argued that

merely encouraging the Federal Government and the KRG to settle their differences “in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution” will, in present circumstances, achieve no more than exacerbate what is, and has almost since the Iraq Constitution was adopted in 2005 been, an impasse.⁸⁸

21. In terms of how these differences between two sides could be overcome, numerous witnesses called for the UK to facilitate a dialogue. Some Kurdish witnesses and their supporters specifically called for the UK to “mediate”. They included Dr Nazand Begikhani,⁸⁹ the London Kurdish Institute,⁹⁰ and Zana Gulmohamad.⁹¹ Other Kurdish witnesses used a different word, but still called on the UK to play a role in encouraging dialogue. They included Professor Mohammed Ihsan (a Senior Research Fellow at King’s College London, and a former minister in the KRG),⁹² the KRG representation to the

83 The FCO said in its written submission that “we believe that a strong Kurdistan Region within a strong and successful Iraq is the best way to ensure stability and an economy that works for all of Iraq’s people, including the Kurds” (KUR0015) para 13. A subsequent letter from the FCO said that “the UK has always supported the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iraq” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office (KUR0030) ‘Q135–139: When the UK adopted its position on the Kurdish referendum’). The support for unity was referred to by both the Foreign Secretary (Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q92 and Q96) and the Middle East Minister (Q130).

84 The Middle East Minister, Mr Burt, told us that “we said consistently that any process that was to lead to a referendum and possible independence had to be part of an agreement with Iraq” (Q130), and that “if there is ultimate agreement by the Government of Iraq about an independent Kurdish region, that is a matter for Iraq and the Kurdish and Iraqi people” (Q131).

85 See the use of the word “unilateral” by the FCO in Q130 and KUR0015 para 12. The Middle East Minister, Mr Burt, wrote to us that the UK “cannot support any move towards independence which has not been agreed with the Government of Iraq” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office (KUR0030) ‘Q135–139: When the UK adopted its position on the Kurdish referendum’).

86 Three Kurdish witnesses said that Baghdad had violated 55 articles of the constitution: The London Kurdish Institute (KUR0009) para 4, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KUR0014) ‘Executive Summary’ and the KRG representation to the UK (KUR0003) para 5. Among these, and other evidence from Kurdish witnesses and their supporters, are numerous references to Article 140. See, for example, Karwan Jamal Tahir, the KRG representative to the UK (Q54), and Nick Hills (KUR0029) para 7.

87 The Iraqi Embassy said that the actions Baghdad took after the referendum were “to maintain the unity, safety and security of Iraq according in the light of its duties in the constitutional provisions” (KUR0025). The Embassy also accused the KRG of exceeding its authority in numerous ways, and seeking powers that were preserved for the federal government. Among the articles that the Embassy accused the Kurds of violating were Articles 93, 94, 109, 110, 111 and 112 (see KUR0025).

88 Nick Hills (KUR0029) para 24

89 Q15 [Dr Nazand Begikhani]

90 London Kurdish Institute (KUR0009) para 6

91 Zana Gulmohamad (KUR0011) ‘Executive summary’ and ‘Recommendations’

92 Q18 [Professor Mohammed Ihsan]

UK,⁹³ and the KDP.⁹⁴ Nick Hills described “informal mediation or external direction” as “essential”.⁹⁵ Speaking from a perspective that had much in common with that of the federal government, Integrity UK argued that “the FCO should encourage communication between Baghdad and Erbil, and help foster dialogue”.⁹⁶ The submission of the Iraqi Embassy⁹⁷ itself did not, however, specifically call for the UK to play such a role.

22. Asked whether the UK had offered to “mediate”, the Middle East Minister Mr Burt said “I cannot recall—I do not think we have formally put mediation in this dispute to Baghdad”. He nevertheless emphasised that “I’m not sure that mediation is the right word”,⁹⁸ and “I do not think it is for the United Kingdom to mediate”.⁹⁹ Mr Burt explained his view that “this is something that must be settled by Iraqis themselves [...]. There is no suggestion that an outside state or body should be given the responsibility to produce a deal, which, then, each party would agree to. This is a sovereign matter for Iraq”,¹⁰⁰ and that “it is not for the United Kingdom to determine what that ultimate future is”.¹⁰¹ The Minister also said that “I am not aware of any invitation from Baghdad [...] that the United Kingdom should act as mediator”,¹⁰² and that he “[did] not think it is appropriate for the British Government to approach Baghdad and say “We demand to be the mediator in this dispute””.¹⁰³

23. But the FCO agreed that the UK could and should play a diplomatic role in helping to resolve the dispute. Prior to the referendum, the FCO said in both written and oral evidence that it had worked along with international partners “on a dialogue”¹⁰⁴ in order “to try and get an agreement between the parties that would mean the referendum was not necessary and some of the long-standing issues between Baghdad and Erbil could be dealt with”.¹⁰⁵ The FCO provided us with a list of the numerous meetings it had undertaken in Iraq with this intent.¹⁰⁶ In the aftermath of the referendum, the Minister said that the UK was “encouraging [...] a better dialogue between the two”,¹⁰⁷ adding that “various messages can be passed”.¹⁰⁸ Asked by the Committee whether the UK could play a bigger role in facilitating an agreement, the Foreign Secretary said:

I totally agree that we could. When we talk to our friends in the region they say, “Please convene a summit, get everybody around the table, knock heads together.” Let’s see how we go.¹⁰⁹

93 Q65, and the KRG representation to the UK ([KUR0003](#)) paras 9, 37, and 41

94 Kurdistan Democratic Party ([KUR0014](#)) Executive Summary

95 Nick Hills (KUR0029) para 24

96 Integrity UK ([KUR0017](#))

97 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq ([KUR0025](#))

98 Q198

99 Q142

100 Q145

101 Q151

102 Q144

103 Q145

104 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 13

105 Q145

106 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#)) ‘Q135–139: When the UK adopted its position on the Kurdish referendum’

107 Q142

108 Q142

109 Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q99

The Middle East Minister, Mr Burt, referred to:

the United Kingdom using its diplomatic influence, as we have been trying to in the region for some time, to point to those areas where conflict might arise, and to offer advice about how conflict might be scaled back and about institution building, non-sectarianism and things that can be done to prevent communities feeling excluded or being pushed towards an area of conflict [...]. In future, I think that that will be a more important role in the region for the United Kingdom than anything else.¹¹⁰

24. **There is a serious risk that tensions between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which have been worsened by the independence referendum and its aftermath, will result in conflict. This violence and instability would be detrimental to the interests of the UK. But it can still be averted. Our evidence showed that both sides are committed to resolving their differences through negotiation. But negotiations are being impeded by profound differences, not least that each side accuses the other of violating the constitution and both emphasise different aspects of that document.**

25. *The FCO has played a diplomatic role in trying to prevent or resolve conflict between the federal government and the KRI, and it wants to continue to play such a role in the future. The Minister rejected the word “mediate”, saying that that this is a sovereign matter for Iraqis to resolve. We agree. But the two sides would clearly benefit from any assistance that the UK, in cooperation with international partners, can offer. The FCO should write to the Government of Iraq, formally offering itself in an enhanced role of facilitating dialogue if that is desired. This would be an offer from a sincere and concerned ally that has a long history of close ties and cooperation with both sides and a shared interest in preventing conflict. The FCO should also secure the backing and support of the wider international community to play such a role.*

26. **The Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum in the face of overwhelming opposition from the Iraqi government and the international community. They unilaterally included the disputed territories that Kurdish forces had occupied, and failed to disaggregate the results. We praise the FCO’s efforts to find an alternative way of meeting Kurdish aspirations. But the overwhelming vote in favour of independence was a manifestation of deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the KRI’s place in Iraq. The restrictions imposed by Baghdad after the referendum will inevitably be seen as punitive, and collectively so, in the KRI. They, along with the role played in subsequent events by Iraqi Shi’a militias connected with Iran, are only likely to encourage the Kurds on a path to departure rather than integration.**

27. *As the FCO offers its support to the Iraqi government and the KRI when possible, it should also be prepared to criticise them when necessary. This should be part of an effort to achieve not only a dialogue between leaders, but a positive interaction between people on both sides to turn—as far as possible—mutual suspicion into a shared belief that they can all benefit from being diverse regions of a united country. The FCO told us that, while it could potentially accept any outcome—including independence—that was negotiated consensually with the government of Iraq, its preference would be for*

the Kurdistan Region to remain in a united Iraq. But many Kurds feel imprisoned in a country that they see as not implementing its commitments of equality to them. The FCO must therefore press for these commitments to be fulfilled. The FCO should:

- i) *press the government of Iraq to lift the restrictions placed on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq after the referendum.*
- ii) *set out its assessment of the role of Shi'a militias in the re-acquisition of the disputed territories, and whether reports of crimes being committed by them are credible.*
- iii) *set out its assessment of the extent to which Iran supports, or controls, these militias.*
- iv) *explain the extent to which it recognises problems of a) corruption and b) the monopolisation of power or curtailment of democracy in the Kurdistan Region, and what steps the FCO is taking in response. Corruption is a serious problem in Iraq in general, and it risks impeding the reconstruction of that country.*
- v) *supply and encourage others to provide capacity-building courses and training that equip KRI policy-makers and others with the greater ability to promote political reform and economic reform and diversification.*

3 Developments in northern Syria

28. The Syrian government has long viewed Kurdish identity as a threat, suppressing the group's political and cultural rights and denying citizenship to many of them until 2011. The Syrian Kurds are characterised by many groups and factions. But the Democratic Union Party (PYD), along with its predominantly-Kurdish armed affiliate the People's Protection Units (YPG), is now the most influential group on the ground in much of northern and eastern Syria. It is not the sole Syrian Kurdish group or the oldest, and it has a prominent political opponent in the Kurdistan National Council (KNC).¹¹¹ But, following its foundation in 2003, the PYD significantly expanded its areas of military and political operation as the YPG took territory from Daesh between 2014 and 2018. After 2015 it did so while operating as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition that includes non-Kurdish elements and that received military support from the Global Coalition against Daesh (including the UK). The FCO told us that the expansion of the PYD/YPG risked triggering new conflicts in the region,¹¹² and that expansion is therefore the focus of this chapter.

29. The FCO acknowledges the role of the PYD/YPG in the fight against Daesh. It has said that “the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) have made an important contribution to counter-Daesh efforts”.¹¹³ But the FCO was also clear that there were limits to the military support that the UK has provided. Unlike in Iraq, the FCO emphasised that “the UK has *not* provided weapons to any actors in the Syrian conflict” [emphasis in original].¹¹⁴ The military support that the UK had provided, the FCO said, was indirect and came in the form of “air strikes to support the campaign to liberate Raqqa and other areas of Syria”.¹¹⁵ The United States, by contrast, has provided weapons and direct military support to the SDF, including the YPG.¹¹⁶ The Foreign Secretary wrote, in response to a written question, that “the decision to provide arms is a matter for the US government”.¹¹⁷

30. The PYD told us that it does not seek independence from Syria. But it has declared a self-governed region in northern Syria, which it refers to as ‘Rojava’ or ‘the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria’.¹¹⁸ The PYD has worked to establish governing structures in this region, which the group's written submission strongly argues are in line with the UK's values. It said that its model was based on local elections, and represented “the

111 A detailed account of the different Syrian Kurdish groups, including those allied with the PYD and the KNC, is contained in the submission by BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)) ‘Syria's Kurdish Region—Rojava’. The KNC is also mentioned by the submissions from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) paras 4 and 22, and the submission from the Embassy of Turkey ([KUR0027](#)).

112 The FCO wrote that “in Syria, there remains a further (or continued) conflict between the Syrian Kurds and other groups, including: the Syrian regime, seeking to recapture SDF/PYD held territory [...] and military clashes between the YPG and Turkey” ([KUR0015](#)) para 27. Other witnesses to make such warnings include Guney Yildiz Q45, Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) paras 21 and 27, Kyle Orton, a Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, ([KUR0019](#)) ‘Executive Summary’, and Alan Semo, the UK representative of the KRG, who said that he nevertheless preferred to see a negotiated solution to the tension (Q92).

113 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([TUR0010](#)) para 21

114 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#)) ‘Q170–177: Relationship between the PYD and PKK’

115 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#)) ‘Q170–177: Relationship between the PYD and PKK’

116 See, for example, the reference to this decision by Professor William Hale, an Emeritus Professor at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), University of London, ([KUR0005](#)) para 12, and Kyle Orton, from the Henry Jackson Society, ([KUR0019](#)) para 2

117 [PQ 106547](#) [on Syria: Armed Conflict], 9 October 2017

118 The PYD's vision for this region is detailed in the party's written submission, [KUR0023](#).

true expression of democracy”.¹¹⁹ The PYD also emphasised its commitment to gender equality and civil liberties,¹²⁰ as well as arguing that “we have kept the door of dialogue and alliances open to all Syrian parties”¹²¹ while fighting Daesh on the ground.¹²² This region, we were told, also hosted large numbers of internally-displaced people.¹²³ But the Syrian government rejects the declaration of this self-governing region, and has threatened to re-establish its own control by force.¹²⁴ Because this region was declared unilaterally, the FCO said that the UK would not recognise it.¹²⁵

31. A further consideration for UK policy is that Turkey sees the PYD/YPG as an integrated extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Like Turkey, the UK considers the PKK to be a terrorist organisation. Unlike Turkey, the UK does not apply that designation to the PYD/YPG, and it draws a distinction between that group and the PKK. The UK has diplomatic contact with the PYD (which the FCO described as “occasional”¹²⁶ and “very infrequent”¹²⁷), but the FCO said that it does not have “any contact” with the PKK.¹²⁸ Despite the PYD’s denials, Turkey also accuses the PYD/YPG of committing a range of human rights abuses.¹²⁹ Other parts of our evidence also referred to such allegations.¹³⁰ The FCO said that it expressed “concern over reports of human rights abuses” to the PYD. But when asked whether the PYD had been intolerant of political opposition, the Middle East Minister the Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP replied “I don’t know the answer to that question”.¹³¹

32. The Embassy of the Republic of Turkey described the military support given to the PYD/YPG against Daesh as a “reckless course of action [that] poses a direct threat to the Turkish people and Turkish security”,¹³² saying that

[The] PKK and PYD share the same leadership cadres organizational and military structure, modus operandi, strategies and tactics. They both use the same propaganda tools and financial resources and conduct trainings in the same camps. The perpetrators of PKK terrorist attacks in Ankara of

119 Democratic Union Party ([KUR0023](#)), ‘The PYD’s vision for the Syrian solution’

120 Democratic Union Party ([KUR0023](#)), ‘On the Rojava and Northern Syrian issue’

121 Democratic Union Party ([KUR0023](#)), ‘On the Syria issue’

122 Democratic Union Party ([KUR0023](#)), ‘On the legitimate self-defence issue’

123 See, for example, the Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign ([KUR0020](#)) para 10 and Alan Semo, the UK representative of the PYD (Q79).

124 See, for example, Assad sets sights on Kurdish areas, risking new Syria conflict, *Reuters*, 31 October 2017, and Land we took is ours, say Syria’s victorious Kurds, *The Times*, 10 January 2018

125 The FCO told us that “while a range of Kurdish groups will play an important role in any settlement for Syria, we would not support a unilateral push for autonomy by the PYD or any other group. The UK continues to support the territorial integrity of Syria and has made clear that the exact nature of Syria’s eventual political settlement, federal or otherwise, will be for all Syrians to determine as part of the political process in Geneva” ([KUR0015](#)) para 23.

126 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 9

127 Q166 [Amy Clemitshaw]

128 Q166 [Amy Clemitshaw], Q169

129 Embassy of the Republic of Turkey ([KUR0027](#))

130 See, for example, alleged restrictions placed on political opponents of the PYD discussed by Robert Lowe, from the London School of Economics and Political Science, (Q116) and BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#)) ‘Syria’s Kurdish region – Rojava’. Kyle Orton, from the Henry Jackson society, described the governing system established in northern Syria as “an authoritarian, militarized, and exclusivist regime” ([KUR0019](#)) para 27.

131 Q183 [Alistair Burt]

132 Embassy of the Republic of Turkey ([KUR0027](#))

17 February 2016 and of 13 March 2016; in Bursa of 27 April 2016; in Adana of 24 November 2016 and in İstanbul of 10 December 2016 were trained in YPG camps in Syria.¹³³

In January 2018, and citing these security concerns, Turkish and Turkish-backed forces began a military operation to remove the YPG from the northern Syrian region of Afrin. Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said that his country next intended to remove the group from Manbij in northern Syria.¹³⁴

33. A year earlier, in January 2017, when the FCO had been asked directly about the risk of fighting between Turkey and the YPG, it had appeared reluctant to comment.¹³⁵ The two sides, it said, were both fighting Daesh.¹³⁶ But in November 2017 the FCO told us that Turkey aimed to prevent further expansion by the YPG,¹³⁷ and that there was a risk of "military clashes".¹³⁸ When the Afrin operation began, the Foreign Secretary Mr Johnson wrote on Twitter that "Turkey is right to want to keep its borders secure".¹³⁹ But Bill Park, from KCL, cautioned that "it is far from clear that Turkish forces could militarily defeat [the YPG]",¹⁴⁰ and Guney Yildiz, a Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), warned that

it is inevitable that the campaign will drag out into a prolonged conflict and may spread to other Kurdish areas across Northern Syria. This will not only help ISIS—who have been held at bay by Kurdish forces—to regain a foothold in the region, from which to potentially launch attacks on Europe. It will also re-ignite conflict within Turkey between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the state [...]. Mr Johnson's support for the Turkish intervention is thus remarkable for its short-sightedness.¹⁴¹

34. It appeared from our evidence that military support provided to the SDF, by the Global Coalition including the UK, is likely to have benefitted the YPG. Although the FCO emphasised that the UK had not provided weapons to any group in Syria,¹⁴² it said that the UK has provided "military support" within Syria in the form of airstrikes.¹⁴³ The FCO told us that "the UK does not provide any direct assistance to the YPG or PYD, but as part of the Global Coalition, has provided military support to the SDF".¹⁴⁴ The 'Syrian Democratic Forces', a coalition of which the YPG is a part. While the FCO said that "we don't regard the SDF as a YPG force",¹⁴⁵ it also said that the YPG was "a dominant force"

133 Embassy of the Republic of Turkey ([KUR0027](#))

134 "[Erdoğan: Ground operation in Syria's Afrin begins](#)", Anadolu Agency, 20 January 2018

135 Oral evidence: UK's relations with Turkey, HC 615, [Q241](#): when asked about the risk of fighting between Turkey and the YPG, the Minister of State for Europe and the Americas the Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan MP replied that "I'm not sure it is helpful to speculate".

136 See, for example, "[Written evidence from Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan MP](#)", Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([TUR0042](#)) Section 3, and [The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17](#), para 20

137 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 11

138 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 27

139 <https://twitter.com/BorisJohnson/status/955399236459393024>

140 Bill Park ([KUR0013](#)) para 22

141 "[UK too complacent on Turkish Syria intervention](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 January 2018

142 See Q189, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#)) 'Q170–177: Relationship between PYD and PKK'

143 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#)) 'Q170–177: Relationship between PYD and PKK'

144 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 9

145 Q195

in the SDF¹⁴⁶ with a “significant presence”¹⁴⁷ and “significant leadership role”.¹⁴⁸ When asked directly whether UK airstrikes had benefitted the YPG on the ground in their fight inside Syria, the Minister for the Middle East replied that “if it is a fight against Daesh forces, then that is important, and important for the United Kingdom to support”.¹⁴⁹

35. The UK has not designated the PYD or the YPG as a terrorist organisation. The Foreign Secretary, Mr Johnson, told the Committee that “we don’t share the perspective of the Turkish Government on this matter, though we are certainly aware of Turkish sensitivities”.¹⁵⁰ When asked why the UK had designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation but not the PYD/YPG, the Middle East Minister Mr Burt replied: “because we believe they are separate organisations”.¹⁵¹ But our witnesses overwhelmingly argued that the PYD/YPG and PKK were linked. Some argued that these links were more abstract and historical (based on a common heritage and ideology, as well as a shared esteem for Abdullah Öcalan as a figurehead),¹⁵² while others described a deeper current relationship (involving common organisational structures and the exchange of weapons, fighters, finance, or other support).¹⁵³

36. The FCO’s own view on the existence of links between the PYD/YPG and the PKK nevertheless appeared to be incoherent. Its statements routinely refer to “reported links”,¹⁵⁴ and Amy Clemitchaw—the Head of the Eastern Mediterranean Department at the FCO—told us that “in terms of the existence of those links, it is not right for us to comment”.¹⁵⁵ But, moments later in the same session, the Middle East Minister told us that “when we talk to the PYD-YPG in relation to this, we say that they should sever links with the PKK. The practicalities are that they are probably not doing that, so those links are there”.¹⁵⁶ Mr Burt later said of the groups that “they have clearly got links. It is a messy situation on the ground”.¹⁵⁷

37. The FCO was also ambiguous in its assessment of whether the PYD/YPG could be involved in the Geneva peace talks. The FCO emphasised the UK’s support for these talks¹⁵⁸

146 Q169

147 Q195

148 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 9

149 Q197

150 Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary November 2017, HC 538, Q106

151 Q179

152 See for example the argument of Guneş Yildiz in Q29, Q33, and Q45 (including Footnote 16). BBC Monitoring also referred to the shared influence of Abdullah Öcalan for the groups, while also saying that the PYD describes itself as “organisationally different” from the PKK ([KUR0022](#)) ‘PKK’. The PYD’s representative in the UK, Alan Semo, also said of his party and the PKK that they “did not have any organisational links” (Q84).

153 For example, Professor William Hale from SOAS called the PYD/YPG and PKK “closely linked” ([KUR0005](#)) para 9, and Robert Lowe argued that “you cannot separate the PYD from the PKK. The PYD would not exist if the PKK did not exist. It was founded out of the PKK party complex and structure” (Q121). Kyle Orton, from the Henry Jackson Society, used his submission ([KUR0019](#)) to make the argument that “the PYD/YPG is a wholly integrated component of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)” (Executive Summary).

154 For example, in its written submission, the FCO referred to “the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is reportedly linked to the PKK” ([KUR0015](#) para 4). In a subsequent letter, the Middle East Minister Mr Burt said that “we are aware of reported organisational and ideological links between the PYD and the PKK” (Burt Letter Q170–177: Relationship between the PYD and the PKK”). Amy Clemitchaw, the Head of the Eastern Mediterranean Department at the FCO, told us that “we are aware of reports of links between the PYD and the PKK” (Q166).

155 Q167

156 Q169

157 Q173

158 Q182

and said that “all Syrians”¹⁵⁹ should be involved. The Middle East Minister Mr Burt said that the process “does include Kurdish representatives [...] through the Kurdish National Council’s participation”.¹⁶⁰ But our evidence, including from the FCO, was clear that the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) consisted of political opponents of the PYD. The PYD itself told us that it had been excluded from the Geneva.¹⁶¹ It blamed Turkey for that exclusion.¹⁶² Mr Burt called the PYD “the main Kurdish actor on the ground”,¹⁶³ and we asked him whether it should therefore be included in the Geneva process. Mr Burt replied that “there will not be a settlement in the region unless all voices are heard”,¹⁶⁴ but that inclusion within the Geneva process was “a matter for [the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan de Mistura to decide upon”.¹⁶⁵

38. Although the UK says that it has not provided any weapons to any Syrian group, it has carried out airstrikes to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF consists of other units in addition to the YPG, but our evidence shows—and the FCO appeared to agree—that the YPG is the preeminent component in the coalition. Given how integral the YPG is to the SDF, UK military support to the SDF is likely to have assisted the YPG. *The FCO should:*

- i) *provide an assessment of whether the YPG has benefitted militarily from UK airstrikes.*
- ii) *explain its future policy towards the YPG and SDF in all areas under their control, including whether the UK will continue to provide military or other support to the SDF after the defeat of Daesh.*
- iii) *explain its position towards Turkish military intervention in northern Afrin, and other areas of northern Syria.*

39. The Turkish government considers the PYD/YPG to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and therefore considers it to be a terrorist organisation. The UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation, but does not define the PYD/YPG as such. The PKK and the PYD/YPG operate in different contexts, but the evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that they were linked. There is nevertheless debate about whether those links are abstract and historical, or deep and current.

40. *The FCO’s view about the nature and extent of the links between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, or about whether those links exist at all, is not coherent. Its repeated reference to these links being ‘reported’ is not sufficient or credible. To have a clear policy the FCO should have a clear view. In light of the group’s influence in Syria, the FCO should clarify its own position on the relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK. The FCO should:*

- i) *specifically answer whether it sees no links between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, OR it sees abstract and historical links (such as a common heritage*

159 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#)) para 23

160 Q187

161 Q74

162 Q82

163 Q186

164 Q187

165 Q187

or ideology or inspiration), OR it sees deep and current links (such as shared organisation, or the exchange of weapons, personnel, finances, training, or safe-havens).

- ii) *answer whether it sees a risk of the PYD/YPG providing support to the PKK in the future.*
- iii) *explain, having refused to speculate a year ago about the risk of clashes between the YPG and Turkey, what prior assessments it made of the impact that the provision of military support to the SDF by the Global Coalition would have on the security of, and relations with, the UK's NATO ally Turkey. It should provide an assessment of how the operation in Afrin will impact on these issues, as well as on the possibility of Daesh's re-emergence in the region.*

41. **There is a high risk that the expansion of the PYD/YPG will result in new conflict in the region. Turkey has already moved militarily against the group. The Syrian government has threatened to do so. But the PYD/YPG has not been included in any way in the Geneva negotiations, which the UK supports as the sole way of resolving the Syrian civil war and determining the future of that country. Their absence is notable, given the extent of the PYD/YPG's territorial and military influence in northern and eastern Syria, its apparent degree of popular legitimacy, and its claim to support democratic values. The FCO should clarify:**

- i) *whether, given that the decision of who to invite to Geneva is ultimately that of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, the FCO sees merit in recommending, either unilaterally or with its allies in the international community, to Mr de Mistura the inclusion of the PYD/YPG in order to avert future fighting and to ensure improved representation at the talks for the population of northern Syria.*
- ii) *whether Turkey is blocking the diplomatic inclusion of the PYD/YPG.*
- iii) *what level of engagement it has had, or plans to have, with the de-facto local administration in northern Syria.*

Conclusions and recommendations

Kurdish aspirations

1. For those who hold them, specifically-Kurdish aspirations seek to secure recognition and protection for distinctively-Kurdish identities. These identities are diverse, and vary between different contexts. So too, therefore, do the ways in which Kurds seek to fulfil these aspirations. There is no state in which the Kurds form a majority. As such, and given that their identity has been denied—or been used as a basis for persecution and sometimes violence—by the governments in the states where they have minority status, Kurdish aspirations have been voiced against the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. (Paragraph 11)
2. Kurdish witnesses told us that the idea of breaking Kurdish regions away from these four states, and merging them into an independent state of ‘Greater Kurdistan’, had been abandoned. They instead looked for solutions in their own national contexts where, again, many told us that independence was not the outcome they now sought. Even Iraqi Kurdish witnesses, whose region held a referendum on independence in September 2017, frequently described that referendum as a last resort that would have preferably been avoided, although this view may have gained greater currency as a result of the backlash experienced by the Iraqi Kurds in the run-up to and aftermath of the referendum. Despite it delivering a vote in favour of independence, some Kurdish witnesses described the referendum as a political negotiation strategy to win the Kurdistan Region an improved position within Iraq rather than necessarily gaining independence from it. (Paragraph 12)
3. These disputes can only be resolved by those in the region. But the FCO should support meaningful political participation and representation for Kurds, as well as cultural recognition, equal rights, and economic opportunities for them, underpinned by national constitutions and achieved through negotiation, as a means of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations. It is not in the UK’s interests for any state to deny Kurdish identity through law or force. It is likewise not in the UK’s interests for Kurdish groups to seek their goals through violence or unilateral moves. (Paragraph 13)

Developments in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

4. There is a serious risk that tensions between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which have been worsened by the independence referendum and its aftermath, will result in conflict. This violence and instability would be detrimental to the interests of the UK. But it can still be averted. Our evidence showed that both sides are committed to resolving their differences through negotiation. But negotiations are being impeded by profound differences, not least that each side accuses the other of violating the constitution and both emphasise different aspects of that document. (Paragraph 24)
5. The FCO has played a diplomatic role in trying to prevent or resolve conflict between the federal government and the KRI, and it wants to continue to play such a role in the future. The Minister rejected the word “mediate”, saying that that this is a sovereign matter for Iraqis to resolve. We agree. But the two sides would clearly

benefit from any assistance that the UK, in cooperation with international partners, can offer. The FCO should write to the Government of Iraq, formally offering itself in an enhanced role of facilitating dialogue if that is desired. This would be an offer from a sincere and concerned ally that has a long history of close ties and cooperation with both sides and a shared interest in preventing conflict. The FCO should also secure the backing and support of the wider international community to play such a role. (Paragraph 25)

6. The Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum in the face of overwhelming opposition from the Iraqi government and the international community. They unilaterally included the disputed territories that Kurdish forces had occupied, and failed to disaggregate the results. We praise the FCO's efforts to find an alternative way of meeting Kurdish aspirations. But the overwhelming vote in favour of independence was a manifestation of deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the KRI's place in Iraq. The restrictions imposed by Baghdad after the referendum will inevitably be seen as punitive, and collectively so, in the KRI. They, along with the role played in subsequent events by Iraqi Shi'a militias connected with Iran, are only likely to encourage the Kurds on a path to departure rather than integration. (Paragraph 26)
7. As the FCO offers its support to the Iraqi government and the KRI when possible, it should also be prepared to criticise them when necessary. This should be part of an effort to achieve not only a dialogue between leaders, but a positive interaction between people on both sides to turn—as far as possible—mutual suspicion into a shared belief that they can all benefit from being diverse regions of a united country. The FCO told us that, while it could potentially accept any outcome—including independence—that was negotiated consensually with the government of Iraq, its preference would be for the Kurdistan Region to remain in a united Iraq. But many Kurds feel imprisoned in a country that they see as not implementing its commitments of equality to them. The FCO must therefore press for these commitments to be fulfilled. The FCO should:
 - i) press the government of Iraq to lift the restrictions placed on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq after the referendum.
 - ii) set out its assessment of the role of Shi'a militias in the re-acquisition of the disputed territories, and whether reports of crimes being committed by them are credible.
 - iii) set out its assessment of the extent to which Iran supports, or controls, these militias.
 - iv) explain the extent to which it recognises problems of a) corruption and b) the monopolisation of power or curtailment of democracy in the Kurdistan Region, and what steps the FCO is taking in response. Corruption is a serious problem in Iraq in general, and it risks impeding the reconstruction of that country.

- v) supply and encourage others to provide capacity-building courses and training that equip KRI policy-makers and others with the greater ability to promote political reform and economic reform and diversification. (Paragraph 27)

Developments in northern Syria

8. Although the UK says that it has not provided any weapons to any Syrian group, it has carried out airstrikes to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF consists of other units in addition to the YPG, but our evidence shows—and the FCO appeared to agree—that the YPG is the preeminent component in the coalition. Given how integral the YPG is to the SDF, UK military support to the SDF is likely to have assisted the YPG. The FCO should:
 - i) provide an assessment of whether the YPG has benefitted militarily from UK airstrikes.
 - ii) explain its future policy towards the YPG and SDF in all areas under their control, including whether the UK will continue to provide military or other support to the SDF after the defeat of Daesh.
 - iii) explain its position towards Turkish military intervention in northern Afrin, and other areas of northern Syria. (Paragraph 38)
9. The Turkish government considers the PYD/YPG to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and therefore considers it to be a terrorist organisation. The UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation, but does not define the PYD/YPG as such. The PKK and the PYD/YPG operate in different contexts, but the evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that they were linked. There is nevertheless debate about whether those links are abstract and historical, or deep and current. (Paragraph 39)
10. The FCO's view about the nature and extent of the links between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, or about whether those links exist at all, is not coherent. Its repeated reference to these links being 'reported' is not sufficient or credible. To have a clear policy the FCO should have a clear view. In light of the group's influence in Syria, the FCO should clarify its own position on the relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK. The FCO should:
 - i) specifically answer whether it sees no links between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, OR it sees abstract and historical links (such as a common heritage or ideology or inspiration), OR it sees deep and current links (such as shared organisation, or the exchange of weapons, personnel, finances, training, or safe-havens).
 - ii) answer whether it sees a risk of the PYD/YPG providing support to the PKK in the future.
 - iii) explain, having refused to speculate a year ago about the risk of clashes between the YPG and Turkey, what prior assessments it made of the impact that the provision of military support to the SDF by the Global Coalition would have on the security of, and relations with, the UK's NATO ally

Turkey. It should provide an assessment of how the operation in Afrin will impact on these issues, as well as on the possibility of Daesh's re-emergence in the region. (Paragraph 40)

11. There is a high risk that the expansion of the PYD/YPG will result in new conflict in the region. Turkey has already moved militarily against the group. The Syrian government has threatened to do so. But the PYD/YPG has not been included in any way in the Geneva negotiations, which the UK supports as the sole way of resolving the Syrian civil war and determining the future of that country. Their absence is notable, given the extent of the PYD/YPG's territorial and military influence in northern and eastern Syria, its apparent degree of popular legitimacy, and its claim to support democratic values. The FCO should clarify:
 - i) whether, given that the decision of who to invite to Geneva is ultimately that of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, the FCO sees merit in recommending, either unilaterally or with its allies in the international community, to Mr de Mistura the inclusion of the PYD/YPG in order to avert future fighting and to ensure improved representation at the talks for the population of northern Syria.
 - ii) whether Turkey is blocking the diplomatic inclusion of the PYD/YPG.
 - iii) what level of engagement it has had, or plans to have, with the de-facto local administration in northern Syria. (Paragraph 41)

Annex

Glossary

Gorran—Movement of Change

KDP—Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG—Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI—Kurdistan Region of Iraq

PKK—Kurdistan Workers' Party

PUK—Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PYD—Democratic Union Party

SDF—Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG—People's Protection Units

Formal minutes

Tuesday 6 February 2018

Members present:

Tom Tugendhat, in the Chair

Ian Austin	Stephen Gethins
Chris Bryant	Ian Murray
Rt Hon Ann Clwyd	Andrew Rosindell
Mike Gapes	Royston Smith

Draft Report (*Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 41 read and agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till tomorrow at 2.15pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 21 November 2017

Question number

Dr Nazand Begikhani, Senior Research Fellow, Bristol University, and **Professor Mohammed Ihsan**, Senior Research Fellow, King's College London, and a former Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government

[Q1–21](#)

Dr Zeynep Kaya, Research Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science, and **Guney Yildiz**, Visiting Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations

[Q22–46](#)

Tuesday 5 December 2017

Karwan Jamal Tahir, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), High Representative to the United Kingdom

[Q47–72](#)

Alan Semo, Representative of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to the United Kingdom

[Q73–93](#)

Robert Lowe, Deputy Director, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, and **Bill Park**, Visiting Research Fellow, King's College, London

[Q94–123](#)

Tuesday 9 January 2018

Rt Hon. Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East, and **Amy Clemitshaw**, Head of Eastern Mediterranean Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q124–202](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

KUR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 BBC Monitoring ([KUR0022](#))
- 2 Dr Goran Zangana ([KUR0012](#))
- 3 Dr Massood Al-Mufti ([KUR0007](#))
- 4 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq ([KUR0025](#))
- 5 Embassy of the Republic of Turkey ([KUR0033](#))
- 6 Embassy of the Republic of Turkey ([KUR0027](#))
- 7 Embassy of the Russian Federation ([KUR0031](#))
- 8 Embassy of the United States of America ([KUR0032](#))
- 9 European Turkmen Association league ([KUR0004](#))
- 10 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0015](#))
- 11 Foreign Affairs Committee, Republic of Turkey ([KUR0034](#))
- 12 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR0030](#))
- 13 Gary Kent ([KUR0018](#))
- 14 Hamish de Bretton-Gordon ([KUR0024](#))
- 15 Integrity UK ([KUR0017](#))
- 16 Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Parliament ([KUR0021](#))
- 17 KRG Representation ([KUR0003](#))
- 18 Kurdistan Democratic Party ([KUR0014](#))
- 19 Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign ([KUR0020](#))
- 20 London Kurdish Institute ([KUR0009](#))
- 21 Mohammed Alhariri ([KUR0016](#))
- 22 Movement of Change – Iraqi Kurdistan ([KUR0026](#))
- 23 Mr Bill Park ([KUR0013](#))
- 24 Mr Brendan O'Brien ([KUR0001](#))
- 25 Mr Kyle Orton ([KUR0019](#))
- 26 Mr Thomas Hardie-Forsyth ([KUR0002](#))
- 27 Mr Thomas Hardie-Forsyth ([KUR0028](#))
- 28 Mr Zana Gulmohamad ([KUR0011](#))
- 29 Nick Hills ([KUR0029](#))
- 30 Professor William Hale ([KUR0005](#))
- 31 The Democratic Union Party (PYD) ([KUR0023](#))

List of reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2017–19

First Report	Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response	HC 435
Second Report	The future of UK diplomacy in Europe	HC 514
First Special Report	The United Kingdom's relations with Russia: Government Response	HC 332
Second Special Report	The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response	HC 333