



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report

**Sixth Special Report of
Session 2017–19**

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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.

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Publication

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

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

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Sixth Special Report

On 11 February 2018, the Foreign Affairs Committee published its Third Report of Session 2017–19, on Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK. The response from the Government was received on 10 April 2018. The response is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government welcomes the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on 'Kurdish Aspirations and the Interests of the UK', published on 11 February 2018.

This document sets out the Government's response to each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations. The Committee's text is in bold and the Government's response is in plain text. Paragraph numbers refer to the Committee's report.

Summary

The aspirations of the various Kurdish groups in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran are shaped by their objectives, personal relationships, and competition for power and resources. UK policy towards these groups depends on the extent to which their interests and values align with our own.

In Iraq, the UK Government believes that a strong Kurdistan Region of Iraq within a strong, successful and unified Iraq is the best way to ensure stability and an economy that works for all of Iraq's people.

In Syria, the UK is committed to defeating the scourge of Daesh, and achieving a political settlement that ends the war and suffering, and provides stability for all Syrians, including the Kurds.

The UK Government has limited contact with the PYD / YPG, and none at all with the PKK. In interactions with the PYD / YPG, we raise our concerns about any links they may have with the PKK and urge them to distance themselves from the PKK and its terrorist activity.

The UK Government also continues to closely follow developments in Afrin, and wider north-western Syria. The UK Government has called for de-escalation and the protection of civilians, while recognising Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders. Ministers have urged their Turkish counterparts to do everything they can to minimise humanitarian suffering.

Iraq

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)

The UK Government supports a strong Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) within a strong and unified Iraq. We underline consistently to the Federal Government of Iraq and to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) the importance of upholding the rights of the Kurdish population in Iraq, as set out in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. Moreover, we make clear at every opportunity, to both the Federal Government and the KRG, the importance of Kurdish political leaders and Members of Parliament playing a central role in the Iraqi Council of Representatives in Baghdad and in the national political affairs of Iraq. Kurdish political participation is not only vital for safeguarding Kurdish interests, but also for ensuring the unity, stability and success of Iraq as a whole. One of our immediate priorities is to help to ensure Kurdish participation and turnout in the May 2018 national Elections. We have been pressing Kurdish politicians to ensure that their voices, and those of the Kurdish people, are heard.

The FCO has played a diplomatic role in trying to prevent or resolve conflict between the federal government and the KRG, 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)

We agree that the FCO and partners across Government have played an important role in trying to prevent and resolve conflict between the Federal Government and KRG. We should continue to play this role in the future, in our capacity as a sincere and concerned ally that has a long history of close ties and cooperation with both sides. We are encouraged that international flights to the Kurdistan Region have now resumed. The FCO and UK ministers urged both sides to reach an agreement at the earliest opportunity. The Foreign Secretary underlined this message with Prime Minister Abadi on 6 February, as did Minister Burt with both Prime Minister Abadi and the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Nechirvan Barzani, at the Munich Security Conference on 16 and 17 February.

The agreement enabling flights into the Kurdistan Region to re-start demonstrates that the two sides are able to resolve differences through dialogue. There have been frequent high-level discussions between Prime Minister Abadi and Prime Minister Barzani. They met in Baghdad on 20 January, at the World Economic Forum in Davos and at the Munich Security Conference. Official-level technical discussions between the two parties are also

continuing on borders and salaries. We will continue working with the UN, US and other international partners to urge compromise on both sides. The Government of Iraq and KRG are aware of our willingness to play an active role in facilitating discussion, should this be requested by both parties.

Once the remaining immediate issues are resolved, and confidence has grown, we would like to see the Government of Iraq and KRG engage in substantial discussions on all outstanding issues—oil and revenue sharing, Kurdistan's share of the Federal budget and the status of the disputed territories—in line with the Iraqi Constitution. In this way, we hope that the Baghdad-Erbil relationship can be placed on a more sustainable footing within a unified Iraq.

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)*

The FCO agrees that it should be an honest friend of both the Federal Government and the KRG. We are urging both sides to reach an agreement quickly on all immediate issues. The Foreign Secretary underlined this message with Prime Minister Abadi on 6 February, as did Minister Burt with both Prime Minister Abadi and the Prime Minister Barzani, at the Munich Security Conference on 16 and 17 February. And we regularly raise these issues at the highest levels through our Embassy in Baghdad and Consulate-General in Erbil.

We are aware that members of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) were among those forces which moved into areas disputed between Baghdad and Erbil following the Kurdish referendum. We have consistently made clear to the Federal Government in Baghdad that we support Prime Minister Abadi in his efforts to ensure all armed groups in Iraq are under the direct command and control of the Federal Government. We are also aware of allegations of human rights violations carried out by elements of the PMF and other forces in these areas. The Government of Iraq and KRG have both been clear that International Humanitarian Law must be respected, and that any allegations will be investigated in a transparent manner and those responsible held to account. We will continue to hold them to this commitment and our ministers continue to urge action at every opportunity.

The PMF is comprised of a number of armed groups under the authority of Prime Minister Abadi and the guidance of the Popular Mobilisation Committee. As well as predominantly Shia units, the PMF also comprises Sunni, Christian, Shabak and Yazidi units. While we believe that some groups within the PMF have received training, material and financial assistance from Iran, it is important to recognise that the extent and strength of those links differs from group to group.

Like the whole of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region faces significant challenges with corruption and in cementing its young democracy. We are concerned by the potential monopolisation of power and curtailment of democracy in the Region. We are also concerned by the extent of KRG's commitment to safeguarding a free and independent media. We do, and will continue to, challenge them in these areas. UK Ministers and senior officials consistently underline to KRG ministers and senior officials the need to tackle corruption, to uphold their commitment to democracy and the rule of law, and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially freedom of the press. For instance, we raised concerns through our Consulate-General in Erbil about violence following recent demonstrations in Sulimaniyah. We also continue to make the case for economic reform, of which tackling corruption is an important component. The KRG has taken positive steps in this area, including reform of its public sector payroll systems.

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

Syria/Turkey

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 benefited 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)*

As part of the Global Coalition, The UK has provided military support, in the form of airstrikes, to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), of which the YPG are a contingent part, in the campaign to remove Daesh from Eastern Syria. Our support has played a part in enabling the Syrian Democratic Forces to liberate significant territory in Syria from the control of Daesh, including the capture of Raqqa in October 2017. The SDF have therefore benefited in the sense that our support has helped them take territory from Daesh, but we have not provided any weapons, funds or equipment in direct support of either the SDF or the YPG as an entity.

The UK is providing air support in operations against remaining Daesh holdouts and will continue to do so until we have secured its enduring defeat. The RAF's targeting processes and permissions are formulated to ensure that our support to the SDF is restricted to the support of their activities against Daesh.

Our political approach to areas under SDF control is that these should be reintegrated into Syria through a national political settlement arrived at through the UN-led process in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This is in line with the clear international commitment to maintaining Syria's territorial integrity. We will continue to support a political settlement that provides protection for the rights of all Syrians, including the country's Kurdish population. In the interim, we will also continue to provide humanitarian aid and essential early recovery support to people in areas under SDF control. We are not providing any direct support to SDF or PYD-led institutions. We are underlining with international partners, and in our limited contact with PYD and SDF representatives, the need to develop local governance structures which are representative of the population, respect human rights and tolerate political pluralism.

The FCO has been closely following developments in Afrin since the beginning of Turkey's military intervention, Operation Olive Branch, on 20 January. The Foreign Secretary issued a statement on 22 January supporting Turkey's right to secure its borders, and stating clearly our commitment to de-escalation of violence and to the wider political process in Syria. The FCO has maintained this position, both publically and in conversations with Turkish ministers and officials. We have strongly urged protection of civilians and humanitarian access to the area: the Foreign Secretary underlined these points in the House of Commons on 26 February. We have also been clear that, ultimately, the UK wants to see a political settlement in Syria which provides stability and is determined by the Syrian people. Defeating Daesh must also remain a central priority; we have discussed with the Turkish government the interaction of Operation Olive Branch with ongoing Coalition operations in Syria, and highlighted the importance of remaining focussed on the counter-Daesh campaign.

In regular discussions with Turkish counterparts, Ministers and officials have raised concerns about the scope of the Afrin operation, including Turkey's declared intention to

advance eastward to Manbij. The potential for direct clashes with US forces supporting the SDF in that location is concerning, and we have urged restraint, de-escalation and dialogue at all opportunities.

Previously, in August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield focused on countering Daesh in northern Syria. By the time the operation was declared completed on 29 March 2017, Turkey's forces and those of the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition (TBO) controlled nearly 2,000 sq. km of Syrian territory in the north of Aleppo province. Since then, the (opposition) Syrian Interim Government and the TBO have had a visible role in governance of the Euphrates Shield area, alongside an ongoing Turkish military presence. The UK welcomes this significant contribution by Turkey to the Global Coalition's campaign against Daesh. All members of the Coalition should continue to focus on ensuring a lasting defeat of Daesh.

Turkey has also made a more limited deployment into Idlib (and neighbouring Aleppo province). This has been to establish a series of observation posts to monitor implementation of the de-escalation measures, introduced as part of the so-called De-Escalation Zone announced by Turkey, Russia and Iran in September 2017. The Turkish forces only control the ground upon which their bases are located and do not control the Syrian armed groups, including Hay'at Tahrir-al-Sham, in the vicinity of their observation posts. The UK welcomes Turkish efforts to support a reduction in violence in Idlib, but we remain concerned that the regime and its backers have continued to carry out airstrikes and ground offensives in the areas, in spite of their stated commitment to de-escalation.

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)***

The FCO has previously given evidence to the committee concerning links between the PKK and PYD / YPG. The PKK is a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK, as it is in the US and EU. We do not proscribe the PYD / YPG in a similar manner, which is also consistent with the practice of the US and European allies.

We are aware of ideological and organisational links between the PKK and PYD. The PKK and PYD / YPG share similar ideological goals and inspirations in some respects. They are both influenced by the sociological and philosophical ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader imprisoned since 1999 by Turkey on charges of terror offences. This ideology, including a political model called 'democratic confederalism', is a source of common inspiration to both the PKK and members of the PYD / YPG. The YPG has introduced political structures in areas under its control guided by this ideology. We have concerns about governance in PYD areas, in particular its intolerance of political opposition and the lack of inclusivity in its governance structures.

The FCO has limited contact with the PYD / YPG, and none at all with the PKK. In interactions with the PYD / YPG, we raise our concerns about any links they may have with the PKK and urge them to distance themselves from the PKK and its terrorist activity.

On the other hand, support to the SDF has been an element of the wider policy of defeating Daesh, embarked upon as part of the Global Coalition, of which Turkey has been a member since its inception. We recognise this has been a source of tension between the Coalition and Turkey but we have been in close dialogue with Turkey throughout this process about both the situation in Syria and the Counter-Daesh campaign.

From the perspective of the Counter-Daesh campaign, the Turkish incursion into Afrin is concerning. The UK understands Turkey's position regarding the PYD / YPG and the PKK. Turkey has a legitimate need to protect its own security. We are, however, concerned about the diversion of Kurdish fighters among the SDF from the eastern part of Syria to Afrin and the Manbij area, in response to the Afrin operation.

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. (Paragraph 41)*

The UK is committed to working for a political transition in Syria to a government that protects the rights of all Syrians, including the country's Kurdish population. We support the principle of full representation of Syrians in the political process but it is for the UN Special Envoy to decide how to involve different groups in the Geneva talks. The final political settlement in Syria must be for Syrians to decide and we support the principle, enshrined in the 2012 Geneva communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution 2254, that all groups must be represented in this process.

The UK provides support to the Syrian Opposition Negotiations Commission, within which Kurdish constituencies are represented through the Kurdish National Council. Turkey has also made clear its support for the UN-mediated Geneva process but has stated its opposition to participation by the PYD/YPG in these political talks.

Beyond the Geneva process, we support the territorial integrity of Syria and do not support any unilateral declaration of autonomy. As set out above, we will continue to provide humanitarian and essential early recovery support to people and communities under SDF control in eastern Syria.

Since the liberation of Raqqa, the UK has stepped up its humanitarian support in eastern Syria. In October 2017, we announced £10m of humanitarian funding for the north east to respond to displacement from Raqqa and Deir ez Zour. This is on top of our existing humanitarian support to the area (approximately £10m). The UK has also committed £2m from the Conflict Stability and Security Fund to support vital early recovery work in Raqqa.

The FCO has limited direct contact with the PYD and its governance structures in eastern Syria. We plan to maintain this limited contact, both through meetings at working level with PYD representatives outside Syria and occasional visits into eastern Syria. We will use this engagement to urge the PYD to distance itself from the PKK and its terrorist activity and to press for more representative and inclusive governance structures in eastern Syria.