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ROJAVA: UNCERTAINTIES AFTER THE FALL OF ISIS

While the takeover by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of ISIS's last reduction in eastern Syria does not mean the end of the jihadist organisation, it should allow them to redeploy their fighters to the West and increase their pressure on the Afrin region. The SDF leaders warned: once ISIS is sufficiently weakened, their main objective will be the liberation of this region, occupied by Turkey and its local mercenaries for more than a year now. Already on the 1st of the month, the Turkish Ministry of Defence announced the death on 31 March of a soldier near the city

in an artillery fire exchange with the YPG. In addition, tension in the occupied area also increased following a new wave of abuses by jihadist militias holding the area, including kidnappings for ransom and arbitrary arrests. Taking advantage of the international community's silence during and since the invasion, militias at the Turkish orders have arrested hundreds of people, including leaders of the opposition to the authorities of the North Syrian Federation, such as Hussein Ibish, leader of the PDK-S (Democratic Party of Kurdistan – Syria) and leader of the Kurdish National Council of Syria (ENKS,

Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê), arrested on 31 March...

Kurdish clandestine groups continued their operations against the occupiers. In particular, the "Afrin Liberation Forces" (ALF) claimed an anti-tank missile fire on 1st April near Azaz against a minibus carrying fighters of the *al-Jabha al-Shamiyya* faction of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), resulting in one death and two injuries (AMN). In another operation, a position of the same group was targeted by another guided missile, with 4 dead and 2 wounded...

However, the SDF left the door

open for discussion if Turkey leaves Afrîn, as their commander-in-chief, Mazlum Kobanê, said on 8 August in a speech celebrating ISIS defeat. The other condition is the end of threats against the Syrian North-East (*Kurdistan 24, Ahval*). The alternative is “the liberation of Afrîn”, whose “preparation” Kobanê announced by the SDF (*Rûdaw*).

The situation in Afrîn seems to have convinced the majority of the inhabitants of the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic that the same fate awaits them if Turkey takes control of their territories, even though Turkish propaganda once again published on 15 January so-called requests from “Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen tribes” in Syria for Turkish intervention to “drive out terrorists” (*Daily Sabah*). Meanwhile, since the 7th, the Turkish military has begun to train their Syrian auxiliaries, particularly for airborne operations using helicopters, but also for urban combat... (*AMN*) According to *AI-Monitor*, the United States is still trying to persuade its SDF allies to agree to a deployment of the Turkish army on its side of the border. Just as Turkey does not seem ready to leave Afrîn, the SDF does not seem ready to let the Turkish army in...

On the evening of the 12th, the Turkish army attacked YPG positions near Tell Rifaat, in northern Aleppo province, with heavy artillery, provoking a response. This attack came just 48 hours after the withdrawal of the Russian Military Police from the area (*AMN*). On the 18th, thousands of displaced Afrin residents demonstrated outside the Russian “Reconciliation Centre” north of Aleppo to protest Russian complicity in the Afrin invasion, and following rumours of an identical Russian-Turkish “deal” for the Tell Rifaat region... YPG spokesman Nuri Mahmud told *Kurdistan 24*

that Russia had lost all influence in the region (*WKI*)... and certainly any SDF confidence. Abroad, several dozen Kurds living in Germany went on hunger strike outside the Turkish consulate in Cologne on the 23rd to protest against the continued occupation of Afrîn (*Kurdistan 24*).

On the 19th, members of an SDF delegation received by the French President stated that Emmanuel Macron had pledged to maintain French forces alongside the SDF and to financially support reconstruction and public services in the Federation. On 1st of April, the Head of French diplomacy, Jean-Yves Le Drian, announced €1 million in humanitarian aid for the camps for displaced people, including Al-Hol, where thousands of foreign women and children who are members of ISIS are packed (*L'Orient-Le Jour*). Turkey immediately condemned this meeting with “terrorists”.

On 27 July, the Federation authorities denounced in a statement Turkey's construction of a wall south of Afrîn, isolating the occupied area from the rest of Syria, and called on the United Nations to take a stand against this creeping annexation in violation of international law: “The Turkish State continues to legitimize invasions and territorial annexations, repeating the same scenarios as in Cyprus and Iskanderun” (*RojInfo*).

On 28 September, *Reuters* reported anti-SDF demonstrations in several cities with a predominantly Arab population in Deir Ezzor province. The protests concerned among other things the use of local oil revenues by Federation authorities and the conscription they impose in these areas... Local Federation officials reported that they had begun discussions with residents.

On the 30th, a violent artillery battle broke out near Azaz when YPG

attacked a Turkish base west of this town in northern Aleppo province. The Turkish Ministry of Defence confirmed the death of at least one soldier, as well as 3 wounded in an attack on a Turkish military convoy. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the gunfire continued for several hours before gradually subsiding (*AI-Masdar News - AMN*).

Despite its declared hostility and continued threats against the Syrian Northern Federation, Turkey will not launch an attack as long as US military personnel are present. On April 3, the State Department's published transcript of the meeting between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu contained unusually strong language from Pompeo that could be interpreted as a threat of a US military response in the event of a Turkish attack on the Syrian North: according to the transcript, Pompeo warned Çavuşoğlu of the “potentially devastating consequences of a unilateral Turkish military action” in northeastern Syria... (*Kurdistan 24*) This is because the relationship to the SDF is not the only element generating Turkish-American tensions. Turkey's persistence in its will to acquire the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system despite the risks that the Americans see in it for the secrets of their F-35 fighters, which Turkey also wants to acquire, is an equally, if not more serious, factor of tension. The US Congress could even ban the sale of these fighter planes to Turkey... (Russia immediately declared itself ready to sell its own fighter to Turkey)

In addition, at the end of the month, on the 25th, the Trump administration's announcement of the end of exemptions from sanctions for foreign companies buying Iranian oil further increased tensions: with an oil pipeline crossing

the border, Turkey is an important customer of Iran (*The Washington Post*). But all the avenues for dialogue are not broken yet, since at the same time, the two partners were continuing discussions to find ways to conduct joint patrols in a "security zone" that seems increasingly impossible to set up... More than ever, the United States seems to be torn between the need to protect its soldiers left behind and its links with its Turkish ally. Given the very small number of troops they would leave in north-eastern Syria (about 200), those would be extremely dependent on the SDF for their security. It is therefore difficult to see how it would be possible to ask SDF for too many concessions towards Turkey...

In view of these uncertainties, the Syrian Northern Federation has at the same time continued its negotiations with Damascus and its Russian protector to try to get the regime to accept some degree of autonomy, but the discussions seem to have come to a standstill. On the 12th, a Kurdish official, Badran Jia Kurd, declared that the Russians were responsible for this impasse because they had not launched the promised diplomatic initiative... Paradoxically, on 27 July, after the conclusion of the 12th round of negotiations in Nursultan (the new name of Astana, capital of Kazakhstan), to which Federation representatives had still not been invited, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabov assured *Kurdistan 24* that the Federation had "not been marginalized", and that as long as Syria's unity was ensured, solutions "safeguarding the interests of the Kurds" remained possible. However, the discussions ended without any significant progress towards the formation of a "Constitutional Committee" supposed to suggest institutional solutions for the future Syria...

Concerning ISIS, despite the

announcement on 23 March of the fall of Baghuz, the last village held by the jihadists, operations continued in eastern Syria: the SDF continue to hunt down jihadist fighters while the Coalition continues its strikes in coordination with them. On 2 February, Mustafa Bali, the SDF spokesman, said that jihadist groups were "hiding in caves overlooking Baghuz" (*Le Figaro*). Dormant jihadist cells also continue to carry out attacks in the theoretically recovered areas. Thus seven SDF fighters were killed on 26 March in Manbij, and on 3 April, according to the SOHR, two jihadists managed to activate their explosive belts in an SDF command centre. Another suicide attack killed two SDF fighters in Baghuz (*WKI*), and on the 5th, jihadists detained in Derik prison attacked the guards, before a negotiation allowed to stop the movement without human losses (*WKI*). On the 6th, Manbij Security Police arrested a man suspected of links with ISIS and seized a weapons cache (*Kurdistan 24*). But the losses were greatest on the 9th, when according to the SOHR a double bomb attack on a busy street in Raqqa killed 13 people, including nine civilians, near a SDF military post. Earlier the same day, a car bomb had targeted a patrol in Chaddadeh, but the attack was foiled and the suicide bomber was the only killed (*AFP*). During the week of the 15th, a wave of attacks hit Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa. On the 21st in Manbij, the deminers were able to detonate the bomb without any casualties. In contrast, in Raqqa, three civilians were killed and two others wounded. In Tabqa, a child was injured. However, the deadliest jihadist attack since the fall of Baghuz targeted the Syrian Army north of Palmyra on the 20th, killing at least 35 people, including four officers (*Deutsche Welle, DW*).

The issue of the fate of the

jihadists prisoners and their families, thousands of whom are in SDF custody in several camps, including Al-Hol, remains unresolved. On 5 April, the proposal of the authorities of the Northern Syrian Federation to set up an international tribunal to try the crimes committed by ISIS received strong support: that of the German Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer, who stated in *Die Zeit* that he preferred this solution to repatriating jihadists to be tried in Germany. However, he recalled that Germany remains opposed to the death penalty, and that it should not be imposed if for example jihadists are tried in Iraq (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 11th, Iraq did indeed propose to try foreign jihadists, but in return demanded payment of the costs incurred, i.e. \$2 billion, according to an administrative source wishing to remain anonymous. *Human Rights Watch expressed* concern about the lack of guarantees for fair trials and the "risk of torture". In 2018, more than 600 foreigners were sentenced in Iraq, many of them to life imprisonment or the death penalty...

In addition, also on 11 November, the authorities of the Northern Syrian Federation announced that they had reached an agreement with Baghdad, a delegation from which had visited its camps, to repatriate some 31,000 Iraqi nationals held there, mainly women and children from the predominantly Sunni provinces of Nineveh and Salahaddine. Men suspected of being combatants would be tried. However, many people without identity documents, including children born under the administration of the "Caliphate", do not even have an administrative existence.

In France, the lawyers of two women currently imprisoned with their children in Roj camp in Syrian Kurdistan filed an urgent

appeal with the Paris Administrative Court to force the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to repatriate them, on the grounds of the deadly risks faced by children. A first appeal was rejected by the Administrative Court last December and then by the European Court of Human Rights. The new appeal is based on the “constitutional requirement to protect the interests of the child”, enshrined in a recent decision of the French Constitutional Council. In response to a similar request, a Brussels judge had forced Belgium at the end of December to repatriate six Belgian children of jihadists held with their mothers in a Kurdish camp, a decision annulled on appeal at the end of February...

At first instance, the administrative court declared itself incompetent, considering that the decision to repatriate was inseparable from France's diplomacy. On 19 August 2018, on the basis of a provision that entered into force on 1st August 2018, the mothers' lawyers asked the Council of State (*Conseil d'État*) to refer the matter to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in an advisory capacity. The Council of State rejected their request on the 23rd, also considering that it did not have jurisdiction over a decision taken by French diplomacy. The lawyers considered that this decision was “far from embodying the mission of the Council of State to act as the guardian of civil liberties”,

adding: “There is no precedent in the history of our country of such a situation of neglect by the French State of minor children at a very young age”. The lawyer of another woman imprisoned in Syria has indicated to AFP his intention to refer the matter to the ECHR herself.

On a completely different level, this month the North of Syria suffered from floods, as did the whole Middle East, which was subjected from Iran to the Mediterranean to weeks of incessant rain. In Qamishli, earlier this month, residents asked the authorities for help, and on the 22nd, a man was found dead in the water in the street, presumably electrocuted.

FRANCE: THE FRENCH PRESIDENT RECEIVES A DELEGATION FROM THE SDF, PROVOKING ANKARA'S ANGER

On 19 April, French President Emmanuel Macron received in the Elysée palace a delegation from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with which French soldiers are working on the ground, and the United States-led International Coalition aircrafts from the air, to fight against the Jihadist ISIS organization. After the meeting, the French presidency issued a communiqué reaffirming France's “active support” for the SDF “in the fight against ISIS”.

According to the members of the delegation, Emmanuel Macron made a commitment during this meeting to maintain French forces alongside the SDF. While the latter are in uncertainty about the main-

tenance of an American military presence, they are threatened from the South by the Damascus regime, but especially from the North by Turkey, whose president considers them terrorists. Faced with this unstable situation, while Turkey has already seized the Afrin region with the tacit consent of Russia and in the indifference of the West – including Washington – the SDF has gone so far as to seek Russian mediation in their discussions with Damascus, without much success till now. The maintenance of a French military contingent, even a small one and for an unspecified duration, is therefore a positive point for the Federation of Northern Syria.

On 1st April, the French Foreign Minister had already announced

€1 million in aid for the IDP camps run by the Autonomous Administration, a political offshoot of the SDF in north-eastern Syria. On 19 January, the French President also promised financial support to the Autonomous Administration to support reconstruction and public services, without it being clear whether these are new funds.

Turkey immediately condemned this meeting with “terrorists”. The spokesman for the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hami Aksoy, said in particular: “We condemn the reception by the French President of a delegation of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces”, criticising an interview “aimed at giving artificial legitimacy to an extension of terrorist groups”.

TURKEY: AKP LOSES ANKARA AND ISTANBUL, ORGANISES “ELECTORAL HOLD-UP” AGAINST EIGHT HDP WINNERS IN THE EAST

The municipal elections on 31 March were held under particularly undemocratic conditions, with hundreds of members of the HDP, the “pro-Kurdish” party, imprisoned, including some 60 arrested on the eve of the elections, after a campaign during which the HDP was denied access to the media. It should be noted that once again, the HDP had presented the most “gender equal” lists with 50% women, against 33% for the CHP and... 5.2% for the AKP!

The results were mixed. The President Erdoğan’s AKP, despite having scored first, suffered its most serious setback since coming to power, as it lost the major cities of the West, Ankara, Izmir and especially Istanbul, the former city of the President. These cities, where the HDP did not present candidates and called to support opposition, went to the CHP (Kemalist opposition). On the other hand, the AKP gained ground in the East, where the HDP won only 8 provinces, compared to 11 in 2014. The HDP was certainly disappointed by its results in the Kurdish provinces, but it also got back most of the municipalities from which it had been deprived by the 2016 dismissal decrees. However, it conceded to the AKP several cities, as Ağrı, which he had managed for years, Şırnak, and Bitlis... At Muş, where the AKP candidate won by 538 votes, the HDP candidate Sirri Sakik reported fraud leading to the cancellation of 2,500 ballots, and filed a complaint with the High Electoral Committee (YSK). At Ağrı, HDP candidate Dilan Dirayet Taşdemir denounced the pressure and threats against her constituents and the YSK’s rejection of the most popular HDP can-

didates... After the HDP protests, the authorities banned all demonstrations for 15 days in Hakkari and Muş, a city which was literally placed under occupation by Special Forces (*Ahval*).

In Diyarbakir, where the HDP won by a large margin, its co-president, Pervin Buldan, said in front of thousands of residents celebrating the victory: “The administrators’ policy has collapsed, it’s over!” Another success of the HDP in the East is the wresting of Kars from the MHP. According to unofficial results quickly announced by the YSK, the HDP won 70 municipalities, including three metropolitan areas with a population of more than one million. HDP female candidates played an important role in its victories: in Mardin, the 5 cities were won by women (*Rûdaw*).

For the AKP, the hardest failure is the loss of Istanbul, especially since the CHP candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won, after a partial recount, only with 13,000 votes in advance... The ruling party filed an appeal with the YSK to obtain a new election, then requested a recount of the ballots, as well as in Kars and Gevas (Van), where the HDP had won (*WKI*).

Then the AKP found other ways to prevent the new HDP mayors from taking office. On the 5th, the Diyarbakir prosecutor launched an investigation for links with the PKK against the 2 election winners, Adnan Selcuk Mizrakli and Hulya Alokmen. Together with Ağrı HDP MP Berdan Öztürk, they are accused of having participated in a meeting the day before where pro-PKK songs were sung (*Rûdaw*). Then on the 10th, the YSK decided to deprive 8 victorious HDP candidates of their electoral mandate on the pretext that

they had been dismissed by decree in 2016, a particularly scandalous decision since YSK itself had validated their candidature at the beginning of the campaign! Even more shockingly, the Committee pronounced the award of the mandate to the candidates who came second, generally (as if by chance) to the AKP candidates... Among the winners thus excluded, we find the HDP candidate from the district of Bağlar in Diyarbakir, arrived first with more than 70% of the votes (*AFP*), but also those from Siirt, from the districts of Tusba, Edremit, and Caldiran (Van), Tekman (Erzurum), and Dağpınar (Kars)... Accusing the YSK of having become a mere tool under the orders of the AKP, the HDP described this unprecedented decision as a “violation of the constitution”, and a “coup d’État by the AKP against the will of the people”. The Council of Europe also expressed its emotion, as its Secretary General, Thorbjørn Jagland, wrote on 15 April to YSK President Sadi Güven denouncing a decision that goes “against the general principles of democracy” (<https://rm.coe.int/image2019-04-16-171615-letter-addressed-to-mr-sadi-guven-president-of-168093fe38>).

On the 10th, none of the 70 newly elected HDPs had yet received their election certificate. By the 11th, more than half of them were still waiting for it (*Reuters*). In Mardîn, where Ahmet Türk, a HDP veteran, had won, the AKP asked for the position for its candidate, who came second, because Türk had been dismissed by decree in 2016. After the rejection of this request, the provincial section of the AKP reiterated its request on the 12th, arguing that Türk was “sick, and too old to perform his duties”! (*Ahval*). Türk

and his co-mayor Figen Altındağ were finally certified elected on the 15th.

Also on the 10th, police arrested at Diyarbakir airport a member of the HDP Executive Committee, Hülya Ertas, who was leaving for Ankara, and eight people at Viranşehir (Urfa), including two of the new Municipal Councillors (WKI).

The first HDP official elected in a metropolitan city to receive the election certificate was a woman, Bedia Ozgokce Ertan, for Van, on the 10th... It was only on the 17th, after two weeks of uncertainty, that the new HDP mayor of Diyarbakir, Adnan Selcuk Mizrakli, received his (like the CHP winner of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu). On the 17th, HDP MP Remziye Tosun was injured at Bağlar (Diyarbakir) during a demonstration attended by about 100 people protesting against the YSK's refusal to issue warrants. After falling, she had to be hospitalized with a back fracture (AFP). Some participants were also attacked with batons, and another deputy from the city, Musa Farisogullari, was also wounded and transferred to hospital (Kurdistan 24).

Even when the transfer to the HDP finally took place, the pro-AKP "trustees" in place made it drag on as long as possible to take with them furniture and computers, sometimes even selling buildings before letting the newly elected officials take office; Necati Pirinççioğlu, co-mayor of Kayapınar (Diyarbakir), reported that most of the district's municipal buildings had been seized, and the town halls of Cizre and Bismil district (Diyarbakir) were transferred to the district governorate and the police respectively! Undeterred, Bismil's co-mayor, Orhan Ayaz, said: "They sold our town hall [...], we will set up a

tent"... Even the rest of the opposition, although generally unmotivated to defend the HDP, finally reacted: on the 18th, the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu called on the YSK to cancel its "illegal" refusal to issue electoral certificates (Ahval).

On the 19th and 20th in Mardin and Kocaeli, police beat up elderly women, mothers of Kurdish prisoners, who were protesting in the street, arresting one. The video of these unnecessary brutalities has been widely seen all over the country, prompting CHP MP Sezgin Tanrikulu, himself a lawyer and a Kurd, to criticize the Minister of Interior (Kurdistan 24). On the 21st, it was the turn of the CHP leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, to be violently attacked by the crowd and beaten while travelling to Çubuk (North of Ankara) to attend the funeral of a soldier killed fighting the PKK. The next day, nine people were arrested. The following week, the Turkish President, mentioning the case, avoided any wish of fast recovery...

On the 24th, Ayşe Celik, the Diyarbakir teacher who had called the *Beyaz Show* live in 2016 to denounce the deaths of children during military operations in Kurdish cities across the country, was jailed again. Sentenced to 15 months' imprisonment in December 2017 for "terrorist propaganda", she had been imprisoned with her 6-month-old baby, the footage of her arrival in prison with her child in her arms becoming viral over the country. Having first obtained an adjournment of sentence because of the baby's age, she was again incarcerated and this time entrusted the child to her grandmother. In 2018, according to the Turkish Association for the Defence of Human Rights İHD, 668 infants and children under 3 years of age were imprisoned with their mothers, as well as 2,491 children

aged 12 to 17. On the same charge, the German female journalist of Kurdish origin Mesale Tolu had spent 5 months in a cell with her 2-year-old child in 2017 (*Deutsche Welle*).

The hunger strike movement initiated on 7 November 2018 by Leyla Güven to demand an end to Abdullah Öcalan's isolation and anti-Kurdish repression in the country continued. On the 29th, according to the co-president of the HDP parliamentary group, Fatma Kurtulan, about 3,000 people imprisoned in 92 prisons throughout Turkey were fasting, and there was also support abroad: fasters in Strasbourg, Toronto (Canada), Wales, Germany, Switzerland "and other European cities" (*L'Orient-Le Jour*, AFP). On April 2, Margaret Owen, an 86-year-old British lawyer who had come as observer to many trials of Kurdish leaders, entered the fast. On the same day, a letter from Leyla Güven was read out to the European Parliament in a session of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Also present were Izmir HDP MP Serpil Kemalbay and former Siirt HDP Deputy Besime Konca (*RojInfo*). On the same day, political prisoner Sıraç Yüksek committed suicide in his cell, the 7th since the beginning of the movement, despite recent calls from the HDP to stop the immolations (ANHA, WKI).

On the 13th, a rally was held in Paris on the Parvis des Droits de l'Homme in support of Leyla Güven and all Kurdish hunger strikers, and on the 17th, *L'Humanité* published an article of solidarity signed by several personalities, entitled "No Kurd must die on our soil", concluding with these words: "Does the human-rights-defending France need the death of one of the 14 Kurdish activists, who have been hunger striking in Strasbourg for nearly 120 days, to wake up?". In

London, Kurdish activists began an occupation of *Amnesty International's* premises on the 24th to demand greater support from this NGO to the hunger strikers in Turkey and their demands. *Amnesty* said it opposes the isolation of prisoners, while stating that it issued statements only after independent verification of the information and the agreement of the individuals concerned. Finally, *Amnesty* called on the police to evacuate the premises occupied on the 26th, justifying its decision by its inability to ensure the safety of its staff on the spot. In France, the Strasbourg Criminal Court on the 4th sentenced seventeen people to prison terms of one month to one year for the damage committed on 25 February at the Council of Europe, for which they will also have to jointly compensate. The "Agora", the building housing the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), had been targeted (*AFP*).

On the 22nd, Ankara police fired rubber bullets at a delegation of human rights organisations which had come to the Ministry of Interior to submit a report on the situation of fasters (*WKI*). On the 24th, 300 Kurds gathered in front of the European Parliament to demand an increased pressure on Turkey (*La Libre Belgique*).

In an act of gratuitous violence, on the 14th, Diyarbakir police shot and killed a 20-year-old Kurdish man, Recep Hantas, with three bullets at *Sümer Park*, announcing to his brother that he had been "killed by mistake". The governor justified the action: Hantas did not stop at the request of the police... An investigation was opened (*Bianet*).

Abroad, Turkish-American tension continues to increase. On the 1st, the Pentagon announced that it would suspend the delivery of the F-35 fighters to Turkey until

Turkey renounced the purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system. Turkey should acquire 100.... At the same time, US State Department called on Turkey to "respect the results" of municipal elections (Ankara denounced interference), while the *Times* expressed concern that the Turkish President, shaken in the polls, is trying to regain his popularity by attacking "the Kurdish allies of the United States in Syria". The Congressional Human Rights Commission also expressed its birthday wishes on 10 October to Selahattin Demirtaş, calling him a "prisoner of conscience" – a clear message to Ankara... (*Kurdistan 24*) In addition, American justice continues to pay attention to the former president of the "American-Turkish Council" (ATC), Kamil Ekim Alptekin (now in Istanbul), charged as an "illegal agent of Turkey" with "conspiracy" and "FBI false testimony" on 4 occasions. Alptekin is reported to have worked with former National Security Advisor Mike Flynn on a plan to transfer Fethullah Gülen to Turkey. In addition, the Turkish bank *Halkbank*, whose former high executive Mehmet Hakan Atilla was recently sentenced to 32 months' imprisonment for violating sanctions against Iran, continues to pay lobbyists to influence the federal investigation concerning it, officially only "media counselling"; Fethullah Gülen also engages US lobbyists (*Al-Monitor; Lobbying updates*).

Another factor of tension is the successive arrests of United States consular employees. On 27 March, it was reported that after Metin Topuz, the translator of the American Consulate in Istanbul arrested in October 2017 and charged last month with "attempting to overthrow the government", a new employee of the Consulate, security officer Nazmi Mete Canturk, was charged on 8 March with "links with a terrorist

organisation" and his wife and daughter accused of links with Gülen. In February 2017, an employee of Adana's consulate, Hamza Ulucay, had already been arrested for links with the PKK and Gülen, and released in January 2018 after serving his sentence... Congress recently introduced a bill that would allow sanctions against Turkish officials who detain US citizens or consular staff... (*Reuters*)

Finally, in Japan, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly tried to put pressure on the University of Tokyo to prevent the organisation of Kurdish language courses. However, they started on the 1st with 40 students, under the direction of Vakkak Çolak, author of the first Kurdish-Japanese dictionary and the first Kurdish grammar in Japanese. About 2,000 Kurds reside in Japan (*Rûdaw*).

Turkey has continued its military operations against the PKK, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan. At the end of March, the Turkish General Staff had already reported that one of the PKK leaders, Riza Altun, had been seriously wounded in an air strike. But the Turkish strikes are causing increasing public anger because of the civilian casualties they have caused, a dozen in the past two years and at least six last month. On 6 April, mortar fire hit a village near Zakhō without casualties. The day before, air strikes had targeted PKK positions near Qandil. On the 9th, *Rûdaw* reported the comments of the village chief of Kolka village (Mergasur district), according to which the villagers had been "terrorized" for days by Turkish strikes launched from the nearby military base. The chief of a nearby village testified about the presence of Turkish military helicopters. It seems that a PKK attack pushed the Turkish military to strengthen their base's defences and launch these operations. On the 8th, the Turkish

Ministry of Defence announced strikes on Khwakurk and Avasin. On the 9th, a new series of Turkish shots towards three Christian villages in the district of Amêdî (Dohuk), Meruk, Ribatka and Belmand, caused the inhabitants to flee (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 13th, after air strikes killed at least 6 civilians, hundreds of demonstrators entered the Shiladze Turkish base in Dohuk province, burning down the buildings and several vehicles. One of the demonstrators was killed. On the morning of the 26th, Turkish air force conducted a one-hour strike in the northeast of

Dohuk, according to local residents for the first time in this area. There were no civilian casualties (*Rûdaw*). On the 29th, further air strikes targeted two villages in Dohuk province for several hours, again frightening residents (*Kurdistan 24*).

On the Turkish side, according to the *Anatolia* Agency, four soldiers were killed on the evening of the 19th in clashes with the PKK in Çukurca (Hakkari). The next day, two other soldiers were wounded in the same province. Another operation took place on the 25th in

Diyarbakir province, this time by police, who announced having eliminated three Kurdish fighters. The last week of the month was marked by violent fighting on both sides of the Turkish-Iraqi border, with the PKK claiming the death of six Turkish soldiers and the Turkish army announcing it had “neutralized” 14 Kurdish fighters. In particular, the PKK announced that on the 28th it had carried out a deadly attack on a Turkish base located in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Iranian and Turkish borders, in Lelikan, near Sidakan.

IRAQ:

STILL NO REGIONAL GOVERNMENT IN KURDISTAN, VOTERS GET IMPATIENT...

As in the Middle East as a whole, from Syria to Iran, April was marked by torrential rains in Iraq and its Kurdistan Region, causing heavy flooding. Earlier this month, 60 families had to leave their homes in Kirkuk province, Zab overflowed into Hawija, and schools were closed in Erbil, Suleimaniyeh and Halabja... (*Kurdistan 24*). In Salahaddin province, the United Nations counted 1,173 displaced families on 3 April. In Suleimaniyeh, landslides damaged roads and bridges, and five of Mosul's bridges were closed. In Dokan, for the first time since 1988, the lake level reached the safety spillway of the dam... (*Rûdaw*) The floods also caused the loss of large quantities of cereals, wheat or barley, stored in silos. The situation was particularly critical in the south, in the provinces of Basra, Diwaniya and Wasit (*Kurdistan 24*). However, as recalled in a United Nations report published on 4 February, these floods followed a period of severe drought that had affected 45 different regions in the central governorates of the country, resulting by February in 1,727 families being

displaced. This drought is expected to resume in the summer... (*ISHM*)

In an important political decision, the Iraqi Electoral Commission proposed on 11 November a date for the next provincial elections, which, originally scheduled for 22 December, had been delayed indefinitely: 16 November 2019. The electronic machines used in May 2018, although source of many disputes, would be used again. While this decision does not concern the four provinces of the Kurdistan Region (Erbil, Suleimaniyeh, Dohuk, and the new province of Halabja), which has its own electoral commission, it does however concern the province of Kirkuk, disputed between Baghdad and Erbil...

With regard to Baghdad-Erbil relations, *Rûdaw* announced on the 1st of the month that, for the first time, Baghdad would proceed as agreed to the payment of Peshmerga salaries to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as part of the federal budget (*ISHM*). After receiving a delegation from the Peshmerga KRG Ministry in Baghdad, Prime

Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi, also acting Minister of Defence, indicated that he had agreed to release 4 months' salary (*WKI*). Another sign of improved relations was the refusal of both the Prime Ministers of the KRG and the Federal Government to sign the subpoenas presented to them by the Supreme Court on the legal dispute over hydrocarbon exploitation, which forced the Court to delay its session (*Iraq Oil Report*).

On the other hand, with regard to Peshmerga salaries, the bad news came the day after from the United States: the Pentagon's draft budget, which starts next October, provides for a reduction by more than half in the funding of Kurdish fighters, with a fall from USD 290 million to USD 126 million. While the Department of Defence justified this reduction by the increase in Baghdad's contribution, it is nevertheless a very bad signal sent by the United States to its Kurdish ally in Iraq... As reminded by the Prime Minister of the KRG, the fight against ISIS is far from over. While the contribution of the Peshmerga is essential, and projects to modernize and unify this force under

the command of the KRG had been driven in part by the United States, this decision by the Pentagon could have a very negative impact on the possibilities and morale of the combatants...

In Baghdad, the completion of the federal government, which still lacks the portfolios of the Ministers of Interior and Defence, still seems far away: the announcement on 10 October that a Sunni party would withdraw from one of the two main coalitions dominating the parliament, *Binah*, could make the negotiations even more difficult...

After the discovery on 12 December in the southern province of Muthanna of a mass grave with more than 300 bodies, most of them Kurdish women and children victims of the *Anfal*, the KRG Prime Minister called on the Iraqi government to "assume its moral duty" by granting compensation to the victims of this genocidal operation carried out 31 years ago by the Saddam Hussein regime, which had claimed some 182,000 victims. The memory of this tragedy is recalled every year on April 14 (*Rûdaw*). On that occasion, President Barham Salih, himself a Kurd, said after visiting the country that "Iraqis must never forget the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein or allow his party to return to power".

Regarding ISIS's more recent genocide attempt against the Yezidi community in 2014, Iraqi Minister of IDPs and Migration, Nofal Musa, announced at a press conference on 18 December the launch of the "compensation" programme under which each member of this community would receive two million dinars (about €1,500). The necessary law was passed in Parliament after discussions between Baghdad and Erbil. The announcement was made in the presence of 100 Yezidi women

who came with their families to receive their compensation (*Kurdistan 24*).

On 28 April, a meeting was held in Erbil between senior officials of the KRG and the Federal government, such as the Governor of the Iraqi Central Bank, and many ministers. After this meeting, the most important since Adil Abdul-Mahdi's appointment as Iraqi Prime Minister, KRG Planning Minister Ali Sindi and Federal Trade Minister Mohammed Hashim held a joint press conference during which they commanded the progress achieved. The Kurdish Minister indicated that the meeting was aimed at improving economic cooperation between the two partners and that there had also been talk of the Federal government opening certain offices in the Kurdistan Region to strengthen relations. A delegation from the KRG Ministry of Trade will travel to Baghdad early May to discuss imports (*Kurdistan 24*).

On the 29th, a member of the Iraqi Parliament called on the Prime Minister to pay "urgently" the amounts due to Kurdish farmers in exchange for grain sold to the central government. Kurdish farmers, some of whom have been waiting since 2014, recently held a sit-in in front of the Iraqi President's office in Baghdad to claim their due... (*Kurdistan 24*)

In Kurdistan, discussions to try to form the regional government continued. The KDP and *Goran* signed an agreement on February 18 to form a government, but given the impossibility of governing the region without the PUK, which controls Suleimaniyeh province, KDP and PUK are also continuing negotiations. *Goran*, for its part, makes its participation dependent on the vote of a draft law to reform the salaries of civil servants in order to limit corrup-

tion, for example by cleaning the lists of beneficiaries and avoiding double perceptions. For their part, PUK and KDK still disagree on the distribution between them of several government positions...

On April 3, just hours after KDP President Masoud Barzani warned that "time was almost up", PUK spokesman Latif Sheikh Omar announced that after "intense" discussions and a conversation between the two leaders, Masoud Barzani and Kosrat Rasul, an agreement had finally been reached with the KDP on the positions assigned to the PUK and was to be signed within days (*Rudaw*). With Masrur Barzani as the next Prime Minister, the post of Deputy Prime Minister would be held by the PUK, as well as 5 other ministerial portfolios, 3 Deputy Ministers and 3 seats on the Kurdistan Security Council (*ISHM*). Following this progress, the PUK deputies, who since their swearing in on 6 November had not participated in any parliamentary session, returned the same day to participate in the session discussing the amendment of the law on the Regional Presidency (*Rûdaw*). Later, it was indicated that the PUK should also obtain the new position of Regional Vice-President, plus those of Speaker of Parliament, Planning and Peshmergas portfolios, and Deputy Ministers of Natural Resources and Interior.

The parliamentary session on the 10th was to be devoted to the 3rd reading of the draft law amending the Presidency, which would make it possible for the next 4 years to have the President elected by Parliament rather than by universal suffrage. Once the law passed article by article in its 3rd reading, the Parliament would have the power to elect the new President of the Region until the drafting of a new Constitution definitively determines its mode of appoint-

ment (*Kurdistan 24*). But the session was delayed by three days. Officially, the Law Commission asked for “clearer wording”, but according to a deputy who wanted to remain anonymous, this delay was due to disagreements between *Goran* and the PUK: the PUK had asked for the creation of a position of “Second Vice-President in charge of Military Affairs” to be assigned to it; *Goran* opposed this proposal.

On the 15th, things had not progressed. According to *Rûdaw*, the contradiction between the KDP-PUK agreement and the PDK-*Goran* agreement still blocked any progress. *Goran*, PUK's rival in Suleimaniyeh province, who has no military force, has always campaigned for the abolition of party control over Peshmerga. However, the movement eventually accepted the appointment of a PUK member as the Second Vice-President of the Region in charge of Military Affairs, but requested in exchange an additional ministerial position, either Interior or Peshmerga. To further complicate the situation, the PUK Peshmerga commander then declared that he would not obey the orders of a *Goran* security official...

Finally, on the 23rd, *Goran* indicated his acceptance without “ministerial compensation”. According to *Rûdaw*, the outgoing Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, who is also the KDP candidate for the Regional Presidency, met with *Goran* and the PUK to remind them of their responsibilities towards the voters and ask them to speed up the discussions. However, at the end of the month, voters were still waiting for the announcement of the formation of the new KRG, while Parliament had still not passed the new law on the presidency...

As the agreement that would allow Kurdish forces to return to

certain parts of the disputed territories has not yet been finalised, ISIS's jihadist militants were able to take advantage of the security vacuum and the lack of coordination between Kurdish Peshmerga and federal forces to continue their attacks. Already on 30 March, they had attacked the Kurdish village of Shaykh Mahmud in Daquq district (Kirkuk), killing one resident and wounding another, and on the same day ambushed Iraqi security forces inspecting the village of Tell Zahab, in Salahaddin province, killing two of its members, including a police officer. On the 2nd, Iraqi Air Force conducted air strikes against ISIS on Hamrin Mountains (Diyala), claiming to have killed four jihadists (*ISHM*). On the 8th, the Anti-ISIS Coalition, responding to an ambush that had killed five federal police in Daquq, also carried out strikes. On the 11th, the *Asaysh* (Kurdish Security) of Kalar announced that they had arrested a man responsible for helping jihadists fleeing Kirkuk for Diyala. On the same day, the Iraqi Special Forces announced the launch of a “major military operation” on the Hamrin Mountains supported by the Coalition to “clean up” the area of jihadists. After three days of air strikes, they announced on the 14th that they had killed an ISIS commander and four fighters in the North-East of Baquba, the provincial capital (*Asharq Al-Awsat*). On the same day, ISIS published a video on the Internet showing the execution of several militiamen and *mukhtars* (village chiefs) accused of passing information to Iraqi soldiers... (*Rûdaw*)

On the 22nd, it was on the Syrian border, in the West of Nineveh province, that the village of Madfa was attacked, its inhabitants having to flee. On the 25th, Iraqi forces announced they had eliminated six fighters Southwest of Daquq, in the Wadi al-Chai valley, and

destroyed several underground shelters and weapons caches with the support of Iraqi and Coalition airstrikes. The next day, the Ministry of the Interior announced on *Al-Sumaria News* that it had dismantled in Mosul a vast network manufacturing and distributing fake papers to jihadists seeking to change their identity. On the same day, 17 alleged jihadists were arrested in Bashiqa and an individual who was about to carry out a suicide attack was shot dead by the *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Mosul (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 27th, a group of Kurdish civilians from Makhmur who had left early in the morning in search of truffles was ambushed, and one of them was kidnapped. Following this case, the Iraqi authorities banned the harvesting of mushrooms in unsecured areas (*Rûdaw*).

In the disputed territories, seven Turkmen parties in Kirkuk managed, after months of discussions, to agree on two possible candidates for the post of Governor of the province, which they intend to submit to the Federal Parliament, in an attempt to “bypass” the Kurdish-dominated Provincial Council (KDP and PUK have initiated discussions to propose a common Kurdish candidate). The Arabs have no objection to a Turkmen governor, but want him to be approved by the entire Council rather than appointed by Baghdad. The Turkmen have nine seats out of 44 in the Provincial Council, the Kurds 26, including 15 for the KDP, the best represented party. Masoud Barzani said he could accept that the post of Governor should go to a member of the PUK, provided that the candidate had no role in the loss of the city in October 2017... (*Rûdaw*)

In addition, the Kurds continue to protest against the Arabisation attempts they are suffering in Kirkuk province. On the 19th, demonstrators accused interim

governor Rakan al-Jaburi of supporting Arabs who wanted to seize their land gathered with banners in the Sargaran district (on the Mosul road between Kirkuk and Makhmur), and the next day in Bajwan.

Finally, on the 30th, the *Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF)* announced the suspension of its humanitarian activities in the city of Sinjar following the obstruction of groups affiliated with the PKK. In particular, the BCF accuses the

Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) of regularly attacking its teams, and of having arrested and detained the head of their local office on 28 July during a food distribution jointly conducted with an American NGO (*Kurdistan 24*).

IRAN:

BI-NATIONAL OR FOREIGN ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARRESTED IN KURDISTAN LITERALLY TAKEN HOSTAGES BY THE REGIME

Most of the environmental activists arrested and imprisoned since the beginning of the year in Iran, and in particular in Kurdistan, are still in prison. According to the *Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI)*, 12 of them are detained in Sanandaj by the *Etelaat* (Security Agency) or the Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*), deprived of lawyers and visits from their relatives. Several lawyers volunteered to defend them, but the magistrates rejected their requests. Other detainees have been released for huge bail, ranging from 500 to 700 million tomans (US\$ 118,000 to 167,000). With their phones and computers confiscated, they were threatened if they talked. Some are members of the (perfectly legal) Party of Iranian National Unity, others belong to the *Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF)*, a legal organization registered in Tehran. All are accused of actions against national security, propaganda against the state, or contacts with opposition groups. Several Iranian security agencies have testified that there was no espionage, but they are judged on the basis of "confessions" extracted under torture. The PWHF leader, Kavous Seyed-Emami, suffered an extremely suspicious death in custody at Evîn prison, near Tehran, all the more suspicious as the authorities, who told his family that he had committed suicide, returned the body to his family only on condition that he would be buried immediately and with no autopsy... Seyed-Emami had dual Iranian-Canadian nation-

ality, as had 11 of the detainees, who were either bi-national or foreign nationals. At a time of rising tensions with the United States and as the country's economy suffers more and more from American sanctions, Iran is seeking in turn, with these arbitrary arrests, to raise the pressure. Thus, on April 24, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, very officially proposed an exchange of prisoners: American nationals detained in Iran for Iranians detained in the United States... These statements contradict many previous ones affirming the "independence" of the Iranian judicial system.

Not only is the economic situation deteriorating steadily, but moreover, like the whole of the Middle East, Iran has been hit for several weeks by torrential rains that have caused major floods. Luristan province in particular has been badly affected, with many roads and bridges damaged, and by early April there were already 67 deaths, while further rains were expected. The provincial Governor reported on the 5th that water had blocked access to 132 villages, 12 villages were without drinking water and 27 others without electricity. The streets of the provincial capital, Khorramabad, were overrun with mud, and 3,000 soldiers had to be deployed to clean them up (*Radio Farda*). Another consequence of the floods is that 5,000 people lost their jobs. Residents of the affected areas have strongly criticised the authorities for their insufficient action, including food

distributions, accusing them of discrimination against the Kurdish provinces. It seems that the authorities reacted much more slowly in Kurdistan than in the rest of the country, even preventing aid collected in Khanaqîn, in neighbouring Iraq's Kurdistan, from reaching its destination. According to the KMMK, most of the people who provided aid preferred to entrust it to NGOs rather than government entities, which they no longer trust to convey it to the victims. Donation campaigns have been launched in Ilam, Sanandaj, Kamyaran, Baneh and Salmas (*WKT*). In addition to the floods, Iran's Kurdistan was hit in the afternoon of the 1st by a 5.2 magnitude earthquake, with its epicentre in Sumar, Southwest of Kermanshah and just a few kilometres from the Iraqi border near Mandali. The earthquake was felt as far away as Baghdad. There do not appear to have been any casualties, partly because the region is sparsely populated (*Kurdistan 24*).

The *kolbars*, these cross-border Kurdish carriers, continue to be targeted by the repressive forces, who shoot them on sight in the mountains as smugglers, despite the fact that they are unarmed and hence pose no danger. According to the KMMK, since the beginning of the year the *Kolbars* have had 21 dead and 64 wounded... On the 11th, a group of porters was ambushed by Iranian border guards near Chaldiran and one of them was seriously injured. On the 14th, another was shot dead

near Khoy, on the Iran-Turkey border, and another on the 16th. According to the testimony of a *kolbar*, border guards are now demanding payment from families for ammunition used to shoot their relatives... Another was shot on the 19th near Urumieh. Others die of cold or fall into ravines, the roads being very dangerous. On the 9th, the Washington Kurdish Institute (*WKI*) reported that a porter had been seriously injured near Mariwan by a mine from the Iran-Iraq war, the 7th such mine victim since the beginning of the year. Despite these risks, the catastrophic economic situation and high unemployment rate are forcing more and more Kurds in Iran to engage in this dangerous activity, the only way to survive (*WKI*). On the 30th, the body of a young *kolbar* from Saqqez, married and father of a child, was found in a valley near Baneh when the snow melted. He had been missing for 3 months, when his group was fired upon by the regime's forces (*Rûdaw, Hengaw*).

As part of the escalation of Iranian-American tensions, on April 8, the Trump administration announced that it was placing the Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of terrorist organizations (to which Iran responded by declaring the American Command Centre for the Middle East, *CentCom*, a terrorist organization). On the 11th, the Kurdish parties in Iran, gathered in the "Centre for Cooperation of the Kurdish Political Parties of Iran", including the two branches of the PDKI and *Komala*, expressed their

satisfaction with the American decision and asked the European Union to do the same. Kurdish parties accuse the *pasdaran* of murder, kidnapping and terrorist actions abroad, including the recent bombing of their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. Two successive leaders of the PDKI had also been murdered abroad, Abdulrahman Ghassemlou in Vienna in 1989 and Sadegh Sharafqandî in Berlin in 1992, in actions in which the *Pasdaran* had participated. In Iranian Kurdistan, the regime has launched a campaign to show public support for the *pasdaran*, in which it forces young Kurds to appear with slogans and photos (*WKI*).

In this context of growing tensions, Kurdistan in Iran is still experiencing repression and arrests. In the first week of the month, *Etelaat* (Intelligence Agency) arrested a Kurd from Bokan, Qadir Alawesyan, for "disrespecting the Supreme Leader", Ali Khamenei. In Kermanshah, activist Said Iqbali was summoned to appear before the Tehran Revolutionary Court for "organizing an anti-government campaign" (*WKI*). *Etelaat* has also increased the number of investigations and arrests of Kurds for "cooperation with an opposition party", such as in Bokan (two people arrested) and Oshnavieh (opening of an investigation against two municipal councillors from Hassan Noran village for having organised festivities for Newrouz!). On the 11th, the Islamic Court in Kermanshah upheld the 10-year sentence for

"belonging to an opposition party" against Kurdish activist Kianosh Qaramani, already jailed by *Etelaat* for two months. In Sanandaj, the trial of activist Mokhtar Zirai for "insulting the Supreme Leader" began on the 13th. The accused faces several years in prison. The Divandarreh Islamic Court (between Saqqez and Sine/Sanandaj) sentenced a Kurd to 7 years in prison for "insulting sacred symbols" and "publishing false news". On the 17th, another person was arrested by *Etelaat* in Mahabad without any indication of the reason, as well as two environmental activists in Sanandaj and Kamyaran.

Finally, on 25 April, two 17-year-old cousins, Mehdi Sohrabifar and Amin Sedaghat, were hanged in secret in Shiraz prison, their families having only been informed when the authorities asked them to come and collect their bodies. Accused of rape, they had been sentenced after a trial marked by irregularities, such as the absence of any lawyer or relative, as provided for by law for minors. *Amnesty International* recalled that international law prohibits the death penalty for acts committed during the minority. The bodies also bore whiplash marks applied before the execution.

On the 24th, a Revolutionary Guard (*pasdar*) was killed in clashes near Kamyaran, in Kurdistan province. The *Mehr* agency, which reported the news, did not precisely identify the authors, simply talking about "counter-revolutionaries".

Sérieux revers électoral pour Erdogan

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POLITIQUE La nuit de dimanche à lundi fut longue et douloureuse pour Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Après douze heures d'attente, alimentée par l'incessante réactualisation d'un décompte à suspense - suspendue, un temps, par l'agence étatique Anadolu -, le verdict est tombé au petit matin : Ankara, la capitale, bascule, pour la première fois en vingt-cinq ans, entre les mains de l'opposition. Selon les résultats partiels du scrutin municipal de ce week-end, la coalition politique du président islam-conservateur serait, aussi, en passe de perdre Istanbul. Un véritable camouflet pour le chef de l'État : c'est ici même que l'enfant du quartier populaire de Kasimpasa bâtit sa carrière politique quand il y remporta la mairie en 1994.

Signe d'un revers cuisant, c'est sans commentaire ni communiqué que son protégé, Binali Yıldırım, est parti se coucher vers 5 heures du matin. Sur une vidéo, qui tourne sur les réseaux sociaux, on voit l'ex-premier ministre qui brigait la municipalité d'Istanbul quitter, mine défaite, le QG de l'AKP avant de rejoindre en silence sa voiture... Quelques heures plus tôt, il avait pourtant revendiqué la victoire, avant d'être rapidement imité par son adversaire, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Prudent, mais confiant, ce dernier affiche fièrement ses nouvelles fonctions - « Maire de la municipalité d'Istanbul » - sur son compte Twitter, suivi par près de 900 000 personnes.

Des opposants sous-estimés

Alors que sa coalition avec les ultranationalistes du MHP a également perdu d'autres grandes villes comme Antalya et Adana, le chef de l'État turc a dû se résigner à reconnaître à demi-mot sa défaite. « Même si notre peuple a renoncé à la mairie, il a confié les quartiers à l'AKP », a-t-il déclaré lors d'un discours devant ses sympathisants, tout en ajoutant que son parti ferait appel des résultats si besoin. Une façon de sauver la face : des semaines durant, l'homme fort du pays s'est lancé corps et âme dans ce scrutin en enchaînant les meetings à travers le pays - une centaine en 50 jours ! -, et en tentant d'électrifier les foules à renfort de tubes sulfureux chantés en direct.

Accusant les adversaires de l'AKP de « liens avec le terrorisme », il a fait de

Villes perdues par l'AKP aux élections municipales du 31 mars



cette campagne particulièrement agressive une affaire personnelle en menaçant par leur nom ses opposants de longue date, tout en promettant de garantir la « survie de la nation ». Par crainte d'un vote sanction en pleine récession économique - la première en dix ans -, il s'est également employé, en vain, à masquer la crise en faisant déployer des tentes à Ankara et à Istanbul, pour y faire vendre des fruits et légumes à prix cassés. « Erdogan a pris un risque en transformant ce scrutin en une élection nationale [...] Cette défaite va être considérée comme la sienne », confie à l'AFP Berk Esen, professeur associé à l'université Bilkent, à Ankara.

À 65 ans, Erdogan a sous-estimé la capacité de résistance de ses opposants. Dénigrés, privés de tribune médiatique, menacés de poursuite en justice, ses adversaires ont réussi l'impossible en parvenant à faire entendre leur voix à travers le pays. Une victoire que le CHP, principal parti de l'opposition, doit en partie au Front commun scellé avec le « Bon Parti » (nationaliste), mais aussi à des promesses plus en phase avec la société. « À l'inverse de l'AKP, l'opposition a fait campagne sur des questions concrètes. L'enjeu d'un scrutin municipal, ce sont le fonctionnement des égouts, les transports en commun. Son succès, l'opposition le doit aussi aux erreurs d'Erdogan. Du style de sa campagne à sa rhétorique belliqueuse, en passant par sa façon de diaboliser les opposants, il a eu tout faux », estime Selim Sazak, spécialiste de la Turquie au sein du think-tank américain Watson Institute.

Privilégiant un discours inclusif, Mansur Yavaş, l'heureux nouveau maire d'Ankara, s'est a contrario distingué par un ton posé et des formules nuancées. À Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, dont la victoire attend d'être officiellement confirmée, a lui aussi séduit ses électeurs par ses discours fédéra-



Recep Tayyip Erdogan (ici, lors d'une conférence de presse, dimanche, à Istanbul) a vu son parti perdre de nombreuses villes importantes lors du scrutin municipal. © PHOTOMARKET/AP

teurs. Sa première conférence de presse, qui s'est tenue lundi matin au QG du CHP, son parti, en est la meilleure illustration. À ses supporters qui se sont empressés de scander « Nous sommes les soldats d'Atatürk » (en référence au père fondateur de la République), il a aussitôt répondu : « Je serai le maire de tous les citoyens, quelles que soient leurs origines, leur affiliation ethnique ou leur religion. Je compte sur vous pour faire également preuve de respect. »

Le pari du parti de gauche prokurde HDP a également été payant : en faisant le choix de ne pas présenter de candidats, ni à Istanbul, ni à Ankara, il a permis d'éviter une dispersion des votes. En revanche, dans la région du Sud-Est à majorité kurde, la petite faction est parvenue à reconquérir l'essentiel des localités que les autorités d'Ankara avaient récemment placées sous tutelle du pouvoir. Dans la ville de Tunceli, un candidat communiste, Fatih Maçoğlu, a également provoqué la surprise en emportant l'élection.

Symbole d'un regain d'optimisme chez les partisans de l'opposition, certains internautes s'amusaient, ce lundi, à célébrer ce qu'ils appellent le « succès des sans-moustache » en faisant circuler la photo, visage parfaitement rasé, de trois maires nouvellement élus. L'opposition mesure néanmoins les limites de sa victoire. Si les deux villes symboliques du pays, Istanbul et Ankara ont été reprises à l'AKP, leur gestion s'annonce compliquée, le parti d'Erdogan y conservant la majorité des mairies de districts. Échaudés par la vague de répression qui frappe le pays depuis le putsch raté de juillet 2016, les anti-Erdogan savent également leur marge de manœuvre limitée. Ce lundi, la place Taksim en donnait la couleur, avec ce soudain renfort de barrières et de camions de forces antiémeute aux abords du parc Gezi. Un barrage particulièrement symbolique sur ce carrefour qui fut le théâtre des grandes manifestations antigouvernementales de 2013. ■

Municipales en Turquie: Erdogan et l'AKP perdent leurs fiefs

Le président turc a essuyé une défaite inédite: selon les résultats partiels des élections de dimanche, son parti s'achemine vers une défaite à Istanbul après avoir déjà perdu Ankara, la capitale.

Par
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Pour la première fois en dix-sept ans de pouvoir sans partage, l'AKP (Parti de la justice et du développement) du président turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a été défait aux municipales. Il perd la plupart des grandes villes dont la capitale, Ankara. A Istanbul, le candidat de l'opposition devrait également l'emporter. C'est au bout d'une longue nuit que le Haut Conseil électoral turc a fait (en partie) cesser la suspense. Sur la base de 99% des bulletins dépouillés, Ekrem Imamoglu, candidat du parti d'opposition nationaliste social-démocrate CHP, remporterait les élections municipales à Istanbul devant Binali Yildirim, lieutenant de Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Une gifle pour le Président qui a commencé sa carrière politique dans la capitale économique et culturelle du pays, dont il a été élu maire en 1994. Erdogan a fait d'Istanbul la vitrine de sa nouvelle Turquie, multipliant les projets pharaoniques. L'Etat a dépensé sans compter pour en faire une métropole de rang mondial. La devise veut que «qui contrôle Istanbul, contrôle la Turquie». Perdre la ville et une majorité de ses 15 millions d'habitants c'est perdre le cœur économique du pays et les réseaux

clientélistes de ces vingt dernières années.

Par l'argent qu'elles distribuent dans les projets d'aménagement, les appels d'offres et autres contrats économiques, les villes sont centrales dans le financement de la vie politique. «A l'issue de ces élections, l'opposition va contrôler les villes qui concentrent 70% du produit national brut de la Turquie», souligne ainsi Sinan Ülgen, président du Centre d'études des politiques étrangères et économiques d'Istanbul. Les

résultats de scrutin local sont à lire à l'aune de la profonde crise économique qui frappe le pays. Depuis la chute de la lire turque (-28%) cet été, le pays est en récession. Le chômage est en hausse (13,5% en décembre) et l'inflation continue de tourner autour de 20%. L'Etat a dû ouvrir des stands de produits alimentaires à petits prix à Istanbul et Ankara pour aider les foyers modestes. «Humiliant», disaient certains, contraints de faire la queue des heures pour un sac d'oignons.

Divisée. En plus d'Ankara, l'AKP perd plusieurs grandes villes du sud du pays comme Adana, Mersin et Antalya, passées à l'opposition. Dans le Sud-Est, le parti prokurde HDP est revenu en force. Il a repris les métropoles de

Diyarbakir, Mardin, Van et six autres provinces.

A Istanbul, toute l'attention est rivée sur les quelques dixièmes de point séparant les candidats. Dimanche soir, Binali Yildirim proclame sa victoire. Son adversaire dénonce alors «une manipulation» et affirme être en tête. Au milieu de la nuit, il finit lui aussi par revendiquer sa vic-



Des partisans du parti d'opposition nationaliste CHP à Istanbul, lundi. PHOTO YASIN AKGUL. AFP

toire. Pour sa part, la presse turque est divisée. Les chiffres provisoires donnent l'«alliance populaire» de l'AKP et du MHP ultranationaliste en tête à l'échelle nationale avec 51% des suffrages. «L'alliance populaire a gagné, la victoire de la Turquie», titre le très prorégime *Yeni Safak*. Le quotidien d'opposition nationaliste *Sözcü* titre: «Ankara est passé au CHP après vingt-cinq ans, à Istanbul c'est comme un poisson d'avril.» *Birgün* (gauche) écrit: «Aucune pression ou intimidation n'a gagné, seul l'espoir.» En début de matinée lundi, le Haut Conseil électoral a fini par donner Imamoglu en tête avec plus de 20 000 voix d'avance (sur 8 millions) sur son adversaire. Yildirim a admis lundi que son adversaire «semble avoir reçu 25 000 voix de plus», mais conteste cependant environ 200 000 votes.

Défiante. S'exprimant dimanche soir pour le média *Dokuz8Haber*, le journaliste prorégime Fehmi Koru déclarait: «Supposons que l'AKP a gagné Istanbul, quelle différence cela fait-il de ne gagner qu'avec une marge aussi étroite. Une victoire à la Pyrrhus? Ça ressemble tout à fait à une défaite. Il est clair que les attentes de l'AKP ont été déçues.»

Erdogan est désormais confronté à une série de défis.



Une économie en crise, de multiples tensions en Syrie et au Moyen-Orient, sans compter les frictions avec les Etats-Unis ou l'Union européenne. Ne manquait qu'un électorat qui manifeste une certaine défiance. Lors de son discours au siège de l'AKP à Ankara dans la nuit de dimanche à lundi, le Président a refusé de s'avouer vaincu. Il a promis des réformes économiques et assuré que son parti ferait le bilan des raisons qui l'ont amené à perdre certains endroits.

Quant à savoir si le mandat d'Imamoglu s'annonce calme, il n'y a guère de doute. Le porte-parole du CHP, Faik Öztürk, a constaté que des «véhicules [de] la municipalité métropolitaine d'Istanbul ont été alloués aux arrondissements gagnés par l'AKP». Celui-ci contrôle la majorité des districts de la métropole et le gouvernement central pourrait être tenté de tarir le robinet des financements étatiques. ◀

Political quake at ballot box stuns Erdogan

ISTANBUL

A disciplined opposition shows Turkey's longtime leader he's not invincible

BY CARLOTTA GALL

Step by step over the years, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey sought to ensure nobody could challenge him. He marginalized adversaries. He purged the army, the police and the courts. He cowed the press. He strengthened his powers in the Constitution. And he promised Turks a bright economic future.

So it was a huge surprise when the outcome of weekend municipal voting showed that Mr. Erdogan's party had not only lost control of Ankara, the nation's political center, but also Istanbul, the commercial center, his home city and a longstanding core of support.

The results amounted to the most momentous political earthquake to shake Mr. Erdogan in nearly two decades of basically uncontested control at the helm of Turkey, a NATO ally and linchpin of stability in the region.

What was different this time was the rapidly tanking economy and a highly disciplined opposition.

It deployed monitors to not only scrutinize the vote tallies but also to sleep on sacks of sealed counted ballots to guard against possible tampering by members of Mr. Erdogan's governing Justice and Development Party, the A.K.P.

"We think they were not able to rig the election," said Ilayda Kocoglu, 28, vice president of the Istanbul branch of the opposition Republican People's Party, or C.H.P., who slept on some sacks herself. "They were not expecting us to be that organized, or that resolved."

The results do not mean that Mr. Erdogan, whose term as president lasts for four more years, will change his behavior, which includes promoting Islamic religious values over secularism, closer ties to Russia and chillier relations with NATO.

But the election showed Mr. Erdogan has weaknesses.

"It's a catastrophe for him," said Asli Aydintasbas, a senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "We now know he is not invincible."

Turkey's weakened economy, which had rapidly expanded for years under Mr. Erdogan, was at the top of voters' concerns, despite Mr. Erdogan's exhortations that the problems were not of his making.

The country tumbled into a recession in March. Unemployment exceeds 10



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, whose party was on track to lose control of Ankara and Istanbul. A weakened economy was a top voter concern. BULENT KILIC/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

percent, and up to 30 percent among young people. The Turkish lira lost 28 percent of its value in 2018 and continues to weaken. Inflation has reached 20 percent.

Ms. Kocoglu said she and her colleagues understood within an hour of the closing of polls Sunday night that they were watching Turkey's biggest change since Mr. Erdogan took power. Even the most remote parts of the Istanbul metropolitan area showed a defeat for Mr. Erdogan's mayoral candidate.

Results from the High Election Council had still not been fully released, and Mr. Erdogan's party had not conceded defeat in Istanbul. But on Tuesday morning, with all the votes counted, the tally showed the opposition candidate, Ekrem Imamoglu, ahead with 48.79 percent of the vote, against 48.51 percent for the A.K.P. candidate. On Monday night, an A.K.P. spokesman said his party was lodging objections about discrepancies between voting tallies at polling stations and the counting centers in Ankara and Istanbul.

At a late-night news briefing in Istanbul, Mr. Imamoglu said he was trusting in Turkey's institutions more than the A.K.P. to confirm his victory. "I don't expect this from the party," he said. "For years to come A.K.P. will not accept my win."

Opposition mayors in Turkey's two most important cities give the Republican People's Party high-profile opportunities to show how it can govern effectively, with control of municipal services from garbage collection to mass transit. And Mr. Imamoglu has promised that as mayor of Istanbul, he would audit the books, a prospect that could create new problems for the A.K.P. should he uncover evidence of corruption on the party's watch.

The Republican People's Party, long criticized for a lack of organization, for

once was well-prepared for the election.

Mr. Imamoglu, 49, a former district mayor, mobilized thousands of volunteers to observe every ballot box in the Istanbul metropolitan area and record the count on a specially designed application, giving the party an independent tabulation.

"We were able to compare our numbers with theirs," Ms. Kocoglu said.

A decisive moment came at 9 p.m. Sunday when Mr. Erdogan gave his first speech of the evening, claiming victory for the A.K.P. over all in the municipal district elections.

The election commission suddenly stopped releasing election results for Istanbul, as did the semiofficial Anadolu news agency, which is widely followed on election nights as the source favored by the government for results.

The president's camp had already seen which way the vote was going and had stopped the count, said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara director for the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a research institute. "They stopped it to think what they could do," he said. There was even discussion of some kind of intervention, he said.

Ms. Kocoglu said: "We were very afraid."

By 11 p.m. Sunday, Mr. Erdogan appeared in Ankara and conceded the loss of at least one city to the opposition — a huge setback by itself.

Then people inside Mr. Erdogan's party headquarters posted screenshots taken from A.K.P. computer monitors showing the opposition candidate in Istanbul leading the race.

Mr. Erdogan's own supporters were apparently leaking the information, said Ms. Aydintasbas at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Mr. Erdogan has become increasingly aloof over the years, surrounded in his vast presidential palace by a smaller and smaller circle of aides and ministers.

Yet political analysts were in little doubt that he made the decision to allow the true results for the Istanbul vote to be released Monday morning in order to protect his own electoral legacy.

"Erdogan is not a crazy person, he is intelligent," Ms. Kocoglu said.

Ms. Aydintasbas said Mr. Erdogan, who has always drawn legitimacy from the ballot box, would have seen it was impossible to alter the result.

"There was no real way," she said. "They did not find a way of doing it without losing legitimacy."

U.S. Troops Leaving Syria, but Some May Stay Longer Than Expected

By Eric Scmitt | April 3, 2019
nytimes.com

WASHINGTON — Now that the Islamic State has been driven from its last sliver of territory in Syria, hundreds of American troops — not just their equipment — are leaving the war zone, just as President Trump ordered in December.

But in the latest twist to the on-again, off-again American withdrawal, the Pentagon plans to cut its combat force in northeastern Syria roughly in half by early May, or to about 1,000 troops, and then pause, American officials said on Friday.

The military will then assess conditions on the ground and reduce the number of forces every six months or so, until it reaches the 400 troops in Syria that Mr. Trump approved in February. They will include 200 in a multinational force in the northeast and another 200 at a small outpost in southeastern Syria, where they will seek to counter Iran's influence throughout the country.

The pause is another important shift from Mr. Trump's initial order to pull out all 2,000 American troops from Syria immediately, and has not been previously reported.

Commanders and Pentagon officials had said in February that they would most likely have to draw down to the smaller residual force by late April or early May. But under the latest plans, the Pentagon may not have to reach that lowest troop level until the fall of 2020, said the officials, who discussed the sensitive strategy on condition of anonymity.

The longer timetable would give the Trump administration more time to negotiate with European allies who had said they would not leave troops in Syria if the United States withdrew all its forces.

It also would allow more time for Washington to work out details of a safe zone south of the Turkish border. The area is still vulnerable to both a resurgence of the Islamic State and an incursion by troops from Turkey, which wants to make sure Kurdish fighters cannot launch terrorist attacks across its border.

Military officials cautioned on Friday that the withdrawal timetable remained fluid and that final force levels were subject to change given a range of factors, from allied troop contributions to new directions from Mr. Trump.

Col. Patrick Ryder, a spokesman for the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff, declined to comment on specific withdrawal plans.

"We continue to implement the president's direction to draw down U.S. forces to a resi-



American forces have begun to pull back from Syria, but under the latest planning, the Pentagon may not draw down to its lowest troop level until the fall of 2020. Credit: Delil Souleiman/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

dual presence in a deliberate and coordinated manner," Colonel Ryder said in an email. "This work is ongoing and, for operational security reasons, we will not discuss specific U.S. troop numbers or drawdown timelines."

The American military started withdrawing equipment from Syria in January, just weeks after Mr. Trump's order to wind down operations. But the number of troops actually increased to around 3,000 in February to help protect the final process of pulling out.

Officials said it has only been in recent days that the current number of American troops fell below the level of the slightly over 2,000 personnel who were in Syria when Mr. Trump issued his order in December.

"Armed forces are being withdrawn," James F. Jeffrey, the American special envoy for Syria, told reporters on Monday. "We had to reinforce initially to bring in more combat power, and now we're going back down toward what the final number will be."

Mr. Jeffrey and other United States officials warned that even before an American-backed Kurdish and Arab militia ousted the last extremist fighters from the eastern Syrian village of Baghuz last Saturday, the Islamic State had already reverted to its insurgents roots — carrying out guerrilla attacks, bombings and assassinations.

"This is not the end of the fight against ISIS," Mr. Jeffrey said, using another name for the Islamic State. "That will go on, but it will be a different kind of fight."

"The fight is fresh in Syria, and ISIS elements are in shock from having lost this terrain," Mr. Jeffrey added. "In Iraq, they've had more time to reconstitute. But again, they're reconstituting in small groups operating in the shadows as a low-level insurgency. They're not holding terrain, they're not controlling populations."

The American-led military command in Baghdad said in a statement on Friday that allied and Iraqi security forces had carried out air and ground operations against pockets of Islamic State fighters just across the Syria bor-

der in northern and western Iraq this week.

And American commandos continue to hunt Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the elusive Islamic State leader who is believed to be hiding in the area along the Iraq-Syria border or the Sunni-dominated region of western Iraq. "Finding the top leadership of ISIS or other terrorist groups is always a priority," Mr. Jeffrey said.

In another sign of the open-ended mission, the Defense Department has requested \$300 million in its proposed budget for fiscal 2020 — the same amount as a year ago — to continue supporting the Kurdish-led militia called the Syrian Democratic Forces, according to Lt. Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a Pentagon spokeswoman. The militia has been the primary ground force combating the Islamic State in Syria.

The Pentagon largely intends to use the money to pay militia forces that will continue to carry out mop-up operations against hundreds or even thousands of Islamic State fighters who remain at large or who have formed sleeper cells in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, officials said.

The remaining American forces will also continue to train the Kurdish and Arab militia.

Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress in testimony this week that the residual force would "continue to train, advise, assist for our Kurdish partners on the ground."

Mr. Jeffrey noted other priorities for the administration in Syria now that offensive actions against the Islamic State have wound down: humanitarian, reconstruction and stability operations. So far, the international coalition has provided \$325 million for postconflict stability and reconstruction efforts in northeastern Syria, he said.

Administration officials say they are also working with Turkey on a so-called safe zone in an area just south of the Turkish border in northeastern Syria. "We're working for a solution that will meet everybody's needs," Mr. Jeffrey said. ●

Report from Rojava: What the West Owes its Best Ally Against ISIS

Debbie Bookchin / April 4, 2019,
<https://www.nybooks.com>

QAMISHLI, SYRIA—As the de facto chief negotiator of the liberated region called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Ilham Ahmed, the Kurdish co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, has much on her mind. In recent months, she has traveled in the US and Europe, negotiating the future of a domain that is home to an estimated 5 to 6 million people, including a substantial portion of Syria's 6.2 million internally displaced persons, and, now in addition, thousands of families implicated in Islamic State terrorism who are today living in refugee camps. As Ahmed continues delicate talks with the world's superpowers over the status of this territory, its future is, to a certain degree, in her hands.

With determination in her eyes and a furrowed brow, her face bears witness to this formidable responsibility. But riding in her black armored utility vehicle through plains lush with green spring grasses and grazing sheep, south toward Deir al-Zour province for the official announcement last month of the defeat of ISIS' so-called caliphate, Ahmed allowed herself a moment to muse about a lesson from history. In the year 612 BCE, she told me, the Guti, ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia whom Kurds sometimes identify as forebears, banded together with the Medes and other tribes to throw off their oppressor, the Assyrian King Zuhak.

"All agreed to light the torch of freedom on that day, March 21, the same day we declared the end of battle [against ISIS]," she said, recounting the legend of Nowroz, the Kurdish new year—a celebration of rebirth and renewal that has come to symbolize popular resistance. "At that time, there was a confederation of tribes, in the same way as today there is agreement between Kurds, Arabs, and Syrians over injustice, over oppression," she went on. "The injustice of ISIS has been defeated by all the groups of this region. We have a confederal agreement. Same circumstances, different dates. Same geography, same results."

Confederation, said Ahmed, is vital to the stability of the Autonomous Administration (commonly known by the acronym NES). The region, which now encompasses one third of Syria and some 30 to 40 percent of its population, is also known more informally as Rojava, from the Kurdish word for West, referring to its location as the western-most part of greater Kurdistan, the ancestral homeland of the Kurds that includes parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This entity dates from the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2012, when the Kurds began



Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images
A member of the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces next to an SDF flag signaling their victory over the Islamic State's final stronghold of Baghouz, in Deir al-Zour province, Eastern Syria, March 24, 2019



Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images
Relatives of an SDF fighter killed by an ISIS terrorist attack in Manbij mourning at a burial ceremony in Kobane, Northern Syria, March 27, 2019

to implement what would become a new form of political organization based on self-governing, confederated communities. "The project," as the Kurds sometimes refer to this region and its government, has pioneered a pluralistic, multi-ethnic political system—unique in the region—in which Arabs, Syrians, Turkmens, Kurds, and other ethnic groups share all positions of power and govern their communities autonomously while participating in a broader democratic network. They view their model as the only hope for lasting peace and stability, and seek to work with Damascus to achieve recognition for the NES within a federated Syria.

As I traveled through the region, members of minority communities told me that, for the first time in decades, they were truly collaborating instead of being pitted against each other by the divide-and-rule policies of the dynastic Assad regimes. The Rojava project is based on a vision of economic, political, cultural, gender, and educational equality that they hope will transform Syrian society. Women's rights, ecological awareness, and grassroots democracy are the three main pillars on which their "social contract" rests. Despite these convictions, NES leaders say that they don't have the resources to stem a resurgence of ISIS without outside help. Unless the Coalition partners that formed to defeat ISIS including the US, Britain, and other leading nations provide the military, financial, and, above all, diplomatic support necessary to ensure political stability, the Islamic State movement will return in the region and from here, will export its terrorism to the West.

"If the political problems of Syria are not solved now, then Daesh will come back stronger than ever before," said Sherwan Darwish, a spokesman for the Manbij Military Council, using the Arabic term for ISIS. "The future is

even more dangerous than right now." The MMC, as it is known, is the military force that began protecting the Manbij region after its liberation from ISIS in August 2016, when Turkey insisted that the Kurdish forces withdraw from the region. Manbij is one of seven cantons that make up the NES. The other six are Afrin, Jazeera (sometimes given as Cizre), Raqqa, Tabqa, Deir al-Zour, and Euphrates, which includes the border town of Kobane. Among the challenges facing Ahmed and her colleagues is that despite holding this large land mass, the NES has no internationally recognized status, hence her busy diplomacy these past months.

Her mission is set against a complicated geopolitical contest for control and influence over Syria, particularly between the Damascus-based regime of Bashar al-Assad and Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. NES officials have their own list of security concerns that apply to their territory: the establishment of ISIS sleeper cells, the continuing spread of jihadist ideology, economic instability, and the need for a legal process and repatriation for imprisoned foreign fighters for ISIS. On top of that, there are daunting humanitarian challenges: the tens of thousands of internally displaced persons living in refugee camps, vast infrastructure needs, and a program of rehabilitation for Syrians who aided ISIS or adapted to its rule in towns that were occupied by the Islamic State before the Syrian Democratic Forces, the US-backed militia of Kurds, Arabs, and Syrians, fought to reclaim the region.

Neighboring Iraq has become an object lesson in how territorial reconquest can provide a false sense of security. Since "victory" was declared in December 2017, ISIS sleeper cells have launched hundreds of attacks: assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings—some in towns and districts never held by the group. And already, a sleeper cell killed seven Kurdish soldiers ➤

➤ at a Manbij checkpoint just days after the official defeat of ISIS in Syria.

Although they face a similar threat of jihadist terrorism and guerrilla tactics, Rojava's leaders believe their region could become a model for stability in the Middle East—if they can get outside support. Iraq's centralized government has implemented anti-terror laws that have undermined the capacity of local communities to deal with lesser infractions and has empowered sectarian militias that have aggravated civilian populations with their heavy-handed counter-terrorism operations. In contrast, in Rojava, such communities are encouraged to resolve local matters themselves, using a model they have found successful in which "women's houses," started by the influential women's organization Kongra Star, sort out domestic, family, and economic disputes in communities across the region. This process, more akin to arbitration, prevents tens of thousands of legal proceedings every year. And officials here say that they aim to reintegrate Syrians who cooperated with ISIS, rather than warehouse them in prisons.

Many of the roots—such as tribal chauvinism, religious fundamentalism, economic inequality—that fed the growth of ISIS in Iraq and parts of Syria outside of the NES region, are largely absent in Rojava, officials argue. But to ensure that those elements don't surface, Ahmed said, "We need an organized campaign against the cult of ISIS. This will require personnel, financial and material support." First of all, she said, the Coalition should use its influence in Iraq to end that country's embargo that has starved the NES region of the equipment it needs to supply industrial needs—mills to process the abundant wheat that farmers grow across Jazera's red clay plains, for example, or machinery to refine oil from the region's wells. From asphalt to medical products, everything is in short supply. Even basic items like desks for schools are hard to come by because of their cost, though education is crucial in ridding people of what leaders here call the "ISIS mentality."

The US and European countries could also use their diplomatic influence with Turkey to end its military aggression that threatens the region's sovereignty and security. At the same time, Ahmed said, the NES seeks to remain part of Syria, but wants Damascus to acknowledge its autonomy in a new Constitution. In an effort to appease Turkey, the US maintains that its relationship with the SDF alliance of Kurdish, Arab, and Syrian militias, led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), has been purely "transactional." But this five-year collaboration has had huge military significance for Western security interests in the region.

Since the battle of Kobane in 2014, the Kurds have relied on US and Coalition air support to beat back ISIS and stave off other hostile actors. At a cost of 11,000 lives and thousands more wounded, the SDF pushed ISIS first from Kobane, and then from town after town, across northern Syria. It's time for the Western powers of the Coalition to repay their debt to their SDF allies in the fight against ISIS by recognizing the NES diplomatically.

Fawza Youssef, another senior NES leader, was even more blunt than Ahmed. NATO powers

should admit that Turkey "has become a dangerous source of instability in the region by sponsoring terrorism," she told me, pointing to the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army militias that had recruited fighters from jihadist groups and overran the NES canton of Afrin a year ago. Besides terrorizing the local civilian population with kidnappings, rapes, torture, ransoms, and the bombing of important infrastructure like a water treatment plant, this Turkish-sponsored incursion forced as many as 350,000 people, mostly Kurds, to flee of which 170,000 are now living in outdoor refugee camps. Turkey's claim that it was combating the threat of terrorism along its border is vigorously disputed by the NES, which says its forces have never fired a hostile shot in Turkey's direction and that Turkey has been the aggressor. They have described the district's resettlement by Free Syrian Army families as forced demographic change, essentially ethnic cleansing, a charge that has been backed by independent groups like the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Meanwhile, it was the SDF that liberated the ISIS "capital" of Raqqa in October 2017, finally cornering the last zealots on the eastern border of Syria in the small town of Baghouz in January this year. The victory in Baghouz last month came after jihadist holdouts and their families—some 10,000 people in all—streamed out of the town over a period of weeks. There were long delays as the SDF tried to manage the process of disarming and imprisoning the fighters, and sending the women and children to the al-Hawl refugee camp, which now holds more than 72,000 people.

The fate of these ISIS fighters and their families is another grave challenge facing the NES. No one can account for exactly how many of the Burka-covered women are citizens of other countries, but Nuri Mahmoud, a YPG spokesman, said the number was high even before the fall of Baghouz. Grabbing a sheet of paper from a drawer in his desk, he pointed to a prior count of 584 foreign jihadist women and 1,248 children in camps, while the tally of foreign fighters in SDF-controlled prisons was already 795, from forty-six different countries. Those numbers don't include an estimated 20,000 Iraqis who had joined the Islamic State and are now being interned in NES, or the thousands of ISIS holdouts, mostly foreign fighters, who emerged from Baghouz. Given the camp conditions, all these jihadists and their wives, now numbering many thousands, pose a severe security risk—not just locally but for the world, NES officials said, especially in light of Turkey's threats to invade other parts of the NES region.



Debbie Bookchin
A crowd of thousands celebrating
Nowroz, the Kurdish New Year, in
Kobane, Northern Syria, March 21, 2019



Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images
Women associated with ISIS foreign
fighters walking under the supervision of
an SDF fighter, al-Hawl camp,
Northeastern Syria, March 28, 2019

Coalition countries have so far refused to accept the repatriation of their foreign fighters, and NES officials have largely given up pressing them on the issue. Instead, they argue, the fighters should be tried by an international tribunal in Rojava. In that way, the world can bear witness to their crimes and see their extremist ideology exposed. But a judicial process of this order will require resources and funds the NES does not have.

"The mentality of Daesh would get an international audience," Mahoud said. "Sunni Arabs, who now believe it represents Islam, would see the difference between Daesh and real Sunni Islam." An international tribunal would also show that the Coalition and its partners had observed international human rights conventions, NES leaders point out, which would give legitimacy to the adjudication and imprisonment of ISIS fighters.

While NES officials were pleased when President Trump walked back his decision to withdraw all US troops from the region, now agreeing to leave a force of about 400, they want to see Washington use its clout to press for a negotiated peace in Syria—one that gives the Kurds and other ethnicities from the NES region a seat at the negotiating table.

"The US always says the decision is up to the Syrians, but we know very well that it's not like that," Ahmed said. "So they should have a vision for Syria and they should be transparent about their vision regarding Syria and also the political project being implemented here." In Rojava, American military might already helped strengthen a society in which "people were taking care of their own affairs," added Mahmoud. "This is something that never happened in Afghanistan and Iraq."

A YPG commander named Polat Can, who dropped by Mahmoud's office at that moment, chimed in: "We have to build a future together. It's all the world's job and mission—especially your country's." ●



Pompeo: There will be 'devastating' consequences if Turkey attacks Syria

By Darryl Coote April 4, 2019 <https://www.upi.com>

April 4 (UPI) -- U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned Turkey of "devastating" consequences if it attacks Syria.

Pompeo gave the warning to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu Wednesday in Washington during the first day of the two-day NATO Ministerial, State Department Spokesman Robert Palladino said in a statement.

"Secretary Pompeo expressed support for ongoing negotiations regarding northeast Syria, while warning of the potentially devastating consequences of unilateral Turkish military action in the region," Palladino said in the statement.

The warning comes as Turkey has repeatedly threatened to attack the Kurdish-led American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces as it believes the Islamic State fighters are also far-left Kurdish militants who are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Turkey has been fighting.

America, on the other hand, has supported the SDF in its fight against the Islamic State, even delaying the withdrawal of troops from Syria in order to ensure their protection.

Turkey's Foreign Affairs Ministry, however, balked at Palladino's description of the conversation between the two men, saying it was "obviously prepared before the meeting" was held.

"[It] contains matters that were not even raised during the said meeting," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Sami Aksoy said, adding that similar issues have occurred in the past.



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo testifies on the Department of State budget request for FY2020, during a House Appropriations Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. on March 27, 2019. Photo by Kevin Dietsch/UPI | License Photo

"Our alliance naturally requires that such statements are prepared with greater care, while avoiding to include matters that were not raised during meetings," he said.

Following the meeting with Pompeo, Çavuşoğlu said via Twitter that it was "constructive," without elaborating.

Earlier in the day, Turkey criticized U.S. policy in Syria, saying it didn't know what it was.

"No. And this is the problem," Çavuşoğlu said when asked about the United States' Syrian policy, Politico reported.

"I don't want to make comments about the internal methods of your country, but again, different positions, different statements coming from different institutions and departments in the United States," he said. "The State Department and defense, actually, as well as the military on the ground, [U.S. Central Command] and all that. Different positions. There is no clear strategy, this is the problem."

Çavuşoğlu said during the NATO summit that Washington and Ankara have created a joint task force to sort out this issue and he plans to meet this week with both Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton. ●

Iraqi Kurdish fighters dealt setback in Pentagon budget

The Pentagon is set to slash salaries for the Iraqi peshmerga in its new budget.



Jack Detsch
April 2, 2019
www.al-monitor.com/

The Donald Trump administration seeks to slash salaries for Iraq's peshmerga forces by more than half in next year's budget.

The Pentagon's budget blueprint for the fiscal year beginning in October cuts stipends for the Kurdish fighters from \$290 million down to \$126 million. The money covers salaries, food and fuel as well as equipment spread out among 12 Kurdish brigades "to increase peshmerga pressure" on the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS), according to the budget.

The Defense Department is framing the cut as a move to have Baghdad increase its contribution as Iraq looks to integrate the Kurdish units into



the national military force. The Iraqi parliament approved a \$112 billion budget in January that partly covers peshmerga salaries in the latest sign of warming ties between Baghdad and Erbil.

The peshmerga remain "vital partners to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS," said Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a Pentagon spokeswoman. "We were pleased to see funding for Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) salaries in the 2019 Iraqi government budget."

Still, tensions linger since the Kurds voted to secede in a September 2017 referendum that prompted Baghdad to launch a military intervention. The Pentagon in turn briefly stopped paying peshmerga salaries after the vote.

Iraqi officials insist ties between the two sides are warming, and that potential disputes over oil and other resources won't impact the issue of salaries. Speaking at the US Institute of Peace in Washington on March 29, Iraqi parliamentary speaker Mohammed al-Halbusi, a Sunni politician from the western Anbar province, insisted relations between Erbil ➔

➔ and Baghdad are on the right track after both sides learned to compromise.

KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani told Al-Monitor in a recent interview that the bloc's relationship with Baghdad "is far better than it used to be" but said he still supports a provision of the Iraqi Constitution that requires a referendum on the disputed Kurdish territories. Barzani said the KRG had learned to be "pragmatic" in its talks with Baghdad rather than demanding 17% of the Iraqi state budget as called for under the constitution.

The peshmerga quit the counter-IS fight after the 2017 victory in Mosul, as central Iraqi forces occupied oil-rich areas of the semi-autonomous region following the disputed independence vote. Currently, the peshmerga prevent IS activity in the KRG's three provinces, the Pentagon said, keeping pressure on sleeper cells in northern Iraq.

"ISIS may have lost its so-called caliphate, but they are actively transitioning to underground clandestine activities, and they are believed to be moving into northern Iraq where they can begin their resurgence," Rebarich said. "Moving forward, the peshmerga will continue to have a vital role in applying pressure on ISIS sleeper cells within their areas of operation and in partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces."

Even as officials say the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil is improving, Iraqi Kurdistan has been beset by political woes that threaten efforts to modernize and unify the peshmerga.

The region's top two political blocs, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, both of which control their own peshmerga forces, have failed to reach a deal to form a KRG Cabinet since regional elections in September. Even as the threat of IS cells re-emerges in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and in Mosul, the two sides remain far apart on splitting oil revenues and other key economic issues.

The US military assistance aims to bridge some of Iraq's internal divisions by restocking peshmerga brigades with ammunition, vehicles and anti-tank weapons to get them in line with US military standards so they can conduct joint patrols with the Iraqi Security Forces, despite lingering difficulties on the ground. Some experts worry the latest proposed cut will create less incentive for the rival Kurdish forces to come together.

With less money in the KRG's pocket for salaries, experts expect the Ministry of Peshmerga to have little leverage to bring elite independent units of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan under Erbil's command.

"The war against IS and the \$290 million was not incentive enough," said Bilal Wahab, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "This is even less of an incentive." ♦

Jack Detsch is Al-Monitor's Pentagon correspondent. Based in Washington, Detsch examines US-Middle East relations through the lens of the Defense Department.



4 avril 2019

RÉCIT

«On est en train de recréer l'EI à Al-Hol»

La situation humanitaire est très dégradée dans le camp géré par les Kurdes et la Croix-Rouge où s'entassent des femmes et des enfants de jihadistes.

Par Luc Mathieu / 4 avril 2019
www.liberation.fr

Des camps surpeuplés, des autorités kurdes dépassées et une communauté internationale indifférente. La plupart des femmes et enfants français capturés ces derniers mois alors qu'ils s'échappaient des dernières zones contrôlées par l'Etat islamique ont abouti à Al-Hol, dans le nord-est syrien. Ils vivent dans une enceinte au grillage fatigué et aux tentes blanches alignées, séparés des Syriens et des Irakiens.

Il n'y a pas d'estimation précise du nombre total de personnes installées à Al-Hol. Selon le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (CICR), elles seraient entre 80 000 et 100 000, dont 10 000 étrangers, originaires d'une quarantaine de pays. A sa création dans les années 90, le camp n'accueillait que 5 000 réfugiés irakiens. «Vu les chiffres, les autorités kurdes et le CICR sont débordés pour enregistrer et établir l'identité de ceux qui arrivent», s'est alarmé mardi Peter Maurer, directeur du CICR, en visite dans le camp.

CHAOS.

L'afflux s'est intensifié ces trois derniers mois, alors que les combattants des Forces démocratiques syriennes, une alliance kurdo-arabe, avançaient face aux jihadistes de l'Etat islamique le long de l'Euphrate. Le califat de l'Etat islamique est désormais annihilé mais personne, ni les autorités kurdes ni la coalition internationale, n'avait anticipé qu'autant de personnes pouvaient sortir de ce qu'il restait du «califat» autoproclamé. «Les conditions de vie deviennent de plus en plus misérables. Il faut souvent attendre jusqu'à huit heures pour remplir des bidons d'eau. Et les colis alimentaires mensuels sont parfois retardés à cause des bagarres», raconte une proche d'une jihadiste française enfermée dans le camp. Il n'y a pas d'hôpital, seule une ONG dispense des soins basiques. Les maladies et la diarrhée se propagent. Le chaos est entretenu par les femmes les plus radicales, toujours ferventes partisans de l'Etat islamique. Il y a parmi elles des Françaises, qui se font enregistrer sous de faux noms étrangers pour éviter d'être éventuellement



Dans le camp de réfugiés d'Al-Hol, en Syrie.
Photo Véronique de Viguerie

rapatriées. Elles considèrent celles qui veulent rentrer comme des «mécrites» et n'hésitent pas à les agresser, parfois avec des couteaux, ou en menaçant de brûler leur tente.

«C'est une catastrophe, on est en train de recréer l'Etat islamique dans ce camp», dit Marie Dosé, avocate de plusieurs familles dont les enfants ou les petits-enfants sont partis en Syrie. Les plus vulnérables restent les orphelins, nés ou non dans le pays. Le CICR

estime qu'ils sont plusieurs centaines. Tous ne sont pas identifiés formellement. Certains ont été récupérés il y a des mois par des femmes jihadistes qui connaissaient leurs parents. D'autres l'ont été beaucoup plus récemment, pris dans le flot de ceux qui fuyaient les derniers combats. La grande majorité n'ont pas de papiers et aucune existence légale. «La situation dégénère. Il y a des enfants blessés, des bébés abandonnés. Certains ont été pris en charge par les femmes les plus radicalisées, ➤

➤ qui ne veulent pas les rendre. Elles peuvent aussi les déclarer sous de faux noms, ou simplement dire que ce sont leurs enfants», explique Marie Dosé.

NÉCESSITÉ.

Les autorités kurdes alertent depuis des mois sur la situation des trois camps du nord de la Syrie qui accueillent les femmes et les enfants. Mercredi, la France a alloué une aide humanitaire d'un

million d'euros, sous forme notamment de tentes et de biens de première nécessité. Mais Paris refuse toujours de répondre aux demandes kurdes de rapatriement de ses ressortissants. «Nous sommes face à une situation extrêmement complexe et dramatique mais personne ne semble prêt à mettre en place les structures et les processus pour aller plus loin que la seule aide d'urgence», a déploré mardi le directeur du CICR. ♦



Dans le camp de réfugiés d'Al-Hol, en Syrie.

Le Monde.fr 8 AVRIL 2019

Face à l'Iran, Trump multiplie les sanctions et cible les gardiens de la révolution

Le corps d'élite du régime a été placé sur la liste des organisations « terroristes ». Une décision qui masque mal l'impasse diplomatique dans laquelle Washington s'est placé.

Par Gilles Paris / 08 avril 2019
www.lemonde.fr

La « pression maximum » contre l'Iran a poussé Washington à franchir, lundi 8 avril, ce qui a été présenté comme un nouveau seuil dans l'arsenal déjà très étendu des sanctions qui pèsent sur la République islamique depuis des décennies.

Le président des Etats-Unis, Donald Trump, l'a assuré dans un communiqué en indiquant que pour « la première fois » une organisation « faisant partie d'un gouvernement étranger » est visée, en l'occurrence le corps des gardiens de la révolution, un organe militaire tentaculaire également ancré dans l'économie du pays.

Ce dernier a été placé sur la liste des organisations terroristes étrangères, suscitant l'indignation de Téhéran. Washington l'accuse d'exercer une influence jugée déstabilisatrice au-delà des frontières iraniennes, en Syrie, au Liban ou au Yémen. Son implication présumée dans les activités liées au programme nucléaire iranien, stoppé par un accord international que Donald Trump a renié unilatéralement en mai 2018, est également soulignée.

La décision américaine a suscité au contraire la satisfaction du premier ministre israélien Benjamin Netanyahu. A la veille d'élections législatives serrées, il a remercié sur Twitter Donald Trump pour avoir « répondu à une autre importante requête qui sert les intérêts de notre pays », après la reconnaissance uni-

latérale, en mars, de la souveraineté israélienne sur le Golan syrien, conquis militairement en 1967. Le Washington Post a noté que le terme de « requête » n'a pas figuré dans la réaction en anglais de M. Netanyahu.

CONTRAINTES SUPPLÉMENTAIRES

Le précédent de lundi est cependant relatif, selon un ancien du Trésor américain, Matthew Levitt, dans une note publiée sur le site The Iran Primer du United States Institute of Peace. Ce dernier a noté en effet que les gardiens de la révolution avaient déjà été ciblés en 2007 et en 2017, même si l'inscription de lundi ajoute des contraintes supplémentaires, en menaçant notamment les transactions commerciales avec des entités liées à ce corps militaire.

Notant que Donald Trump a assuré dans son communiqué que « les risques liés aux relations commerciales » avec les gardiens de la révolution « sont clairement définis », Matthew Levitt, chercheur associé au Washington Institute for Near East Policy, juge que « ces risques étaient déjà évidents ». « Le message n'est pas nouveau et la désignation n'ajoute pas beaucoup de pression supplémentaire », estime-t-il.

Les autorités américaines avaient envisagé depuis longtemps de franchir ce pas. Mais elles s'y étaient refusées jusqu'à présent compte tenu des conséquences possibles d'une telle décision. En mars encore, le New York Times avait affirmé que des responsables du Pentagone et de la CIA s'opposaient



Le corps d'élite des gardiens de la révolution à Téhéran, le 11 février. VAHID SALEMI / AP

à l'inscription des gardiens de la révolution sur la liste des organisations terroristes pour éviter des représailles contre les troupes américaines présentes notamment en Irak.

Très hostile aux sanctions pour avoir été placé sous un régime impitoyable après la première guerre du Golfe, en 1991, jusqu'au renversement de Saddam Hussein, en 2003, l'Irak est aujourd'hui tiraillé entre son alliance avec Washington et les liens entretenus notamment par des milices chiites avec le corps militaire iranien. La décision de M. Trump pourrait fragiliser ses approvisionnements en énergie compte tenu du poids des gardiens de la révolution dans l'économie iranienne. Bagdad dispose en effet d'une autorisation temporaire accordée par les Etats-Unis pour acheter de l'électricité à l'Iran qui expirera au plus fort de l'été.

IMPASSE

Le nouveau tour de vis de Washington intervient alors que Téhéran dénonce l'impact des sanc-

tions américaines sur l'organisation des secours face aux inondations meurtrières qui frappent le pays. Le 2 avril, le ministre iranien des affaires étrangères, Mohammad Javad Zarif, a ainsi affirmé sur son compte Twitter que le Croissant-Rouge iranien, qui dépend des autorités locales, « ne peut recevoir aucuns fonds » de l'étranger « en raison des sanctions américaines illégales ».

Ces nouvelles sanctions, qui ne seront pas les dernières selon le conseiller spécial du département d'Etat sur l'Iran, Brian Hook, masquent mal une impasse. Washington n'est en effet pas parvenu à entraîner derrière lui d'autres signataires de l'accord sur le nucléaire iranien de 2015. Les autorités américaines assurent ne pas militer pour un « changement de régime » à Téhéran, seulement pour un « changement d'attitude », mais après avoir avancé, en mai 2018, une liste maximaliste d'exigences que la République islamique a jugé sans surprise inacceptable. ■

As Islamism fades, Iran goes nationalist



Demonstrators burn a picture of President Trump during a protest last May in response to his decision to pull out of the international nuclear deal and renew sanctions.

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar

Forty years after the 1979 revolution, Islamism is exhausting itself as a legitimizing force for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Studies sponsored by the Iranian government show that resentment toward the state's religious symbols is at an all-time high.

According to the research arm of the Iranian parliament, around 70 percent of Iranian women do not strictly follow the official diktats for wearing a veil. Anticlerical sentiments have turned violent. Regardless of their ties to the government, clerics are routinely attacked and stabbed in the streets by angry anti-regime individuals.

Iran is responding by cautiously downplaying Islamism and emphasizing nationalism and foreign threats to win over disgruntled citizens. Iran's leaders acknowledged the societal shift away from Islamism by making unprecedented references to nationalism and showing their determination to incorporate patriotic sentiments into the state ideology during the 40th anniversary celebrations of the revolution in February.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly appealed to Iranians to back the government, even if they do not endorse its Islamist ideology, for the sake of their country and for their own security.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was established to pre-

serve the Islamic Republic and the ideals of the 1979 revolution, now portrays itself as the guardian of the nation and the symbol of Iranian power against foreign aggression. Images of the ancient Persepolis ruins and references to the pre-Islamic Persian past have become omnipresent in the state-controlled media.

The change in government strategy came as Iranians demonstrated a new yearning for nationalism, challenging the self-proclaimed religious political system. Impromptu grass-roots gatherings at the Tomb of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire known for his tolerance toward conquered nations and other religions, surprised observers and prompted crackdowns by security forces.

Iranian leadership's anti-Americanism is increasingly at odds with the Iranian people's long-held desire for an end to their international isolation. People have openly rallied against the regime's use of religion, anti-Americanism and its support of the Syrian government and proxy groups at the expense of their well-being. During countrywide protests in 2018, many Iranians shouted, "Let go of Syria, think about us!"

Popular pressure also played an important role in getting Iran to sign the 2015 nuclear deal. Iranians hoped that the deal would be a step toward forcing the regime to further open up to the world. In his book "National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy," President Hassan Rouhani acknowledges that the leadership paid close attention to the government's classi-

fied public surveys before making critical decisions with regard to the nuclear program.

Iran's supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards commanders made no secret about their reluctance to accept the deal and what could follow. In his campaign for re-election in 2017, Mr. Rouhani promised that after securing the nuclear deal, he would resolve other outstanding issues, implying establishing relations with the United States.

The election of Donald Trump, followed by his withdrawal from the nuclear deal and renewed American sanctions against Iran, has brought Mr. Rouhani's reformist momentum to a halt. Instead, a sense of betrayal by the United States and of a threat to the country's territorial integrity appears to be emerging among Iranians.

Iranian hard-liners have sensed the beginning of a change in the popular mood. Two weeks ago, Kayhan, a daily newspaper known for its close ties to the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards, declared "The End of the Western Illusion" as "the greatest achievement" of the last Persian year, which ended on March 20. Iranian elites who once galvanized society and received votes with the promise of better relations with the United States now simply repeat the angry anti-American rhetoric of their conservative rivals.

These days, Javad Zarif, Iran's once-smiling foreign minister and the chief nuclear negotiator, sounds more like the former hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Even Ali Akbar Salehi, the M.I.T.-educated head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and nuclear negotiator, recently said that everyone from the proponents to the opponents of the regime "and from the revolutionaries to the anti-revolutionaries have come to believe that the United States is our enemy."

In taking away Iran's nuclear leverage, reimposing the sanctions and heavily arming its regional rivals, the United States has intensified anxieties about national security in the republic. Consequently, a national security discourse that brings the elites and the masses together is being constructed, and the Trump administration is providing credibility for it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has survived not just because of its security apparatus but also because its leaders have been able to manage public sentiments and intra-elite conflicts. And Iran's leaders have found that President Trump's hostility toward Iran is helping to rally otherwise resentful citizens behind the regime and create a new cohesive Islamist-nationalist ideology.

This could have a demobilizing effect

on Iran's underground but still vibrant civil society and further boost the Revolutionary Guards' influence over foreign policy. There is less and less popular and elite opposition to Mr. Khamenei's claim that if the Revolutionary Guards did not fight terrorists in Damascus, it would be fighting them in Tehran.

It is likely that many will consider investment in the regime an investment in their own and their homeland's security. What was once considered regime security is increasingly seen as national security.

For four decades, the American and Iranian governments have simultaneously pursued a system of reward and punishment against Iranian citizens for opposite goals. Washington has hoped to foment public uprisings leading to regime change; Tehran has sought compliance and regime durability.

Sanctions and isolation together with regime repression have often bred popular discontent, turning elections into political movements, and students and women into courageous protesters. Tapping into these sentiments, President Barack Obama conditioned better opportunities for the nation on a nuclear agreement in his messages on Nowruz, the Persian New Year. President Trump set a new bar for Iranian citizens in his Nowruz message on March 20: regime change.

Washington's unreliable policy toward Iran is jeopardizing the Iranian people's favorable view of the United States. Sanctions may have passed their optimal point of channeling public grievances against the regime, beyond which they only alienate Iranian citizens from the United States.

The statements of American officials

that they target the Iranian regime and not the people are a bad joke. To ordinary Iranians, they are targeting the people.

American policies are effectively empowering the hard-liners and pushing Iranian citizens toward the regime. Exhausted by 40 years of state repression and international pressure, Iranian citizens may very well shift their anger from sponsors of the former to the latter and signal a reluctant preference for those who wear the garb of Persian nationalism and national security.

MOHAMMAD AYATOLLAHI TABAAR, an associate professor at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, is the author of "Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran."

The Arab Weekly April 7, 2019

US-backed forces hunt ISIS remnants in eastern Syria

The Arab Weekly staff

Tunis

With the declared defeat of the Islamic State's caliphate in eastern Syria, the United States focused on eliminating jihadist remnants to avoid a resurgence that could be more vicious than the group's initial rise to power.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said US-backed forces, supported by coalition warplanes, were seeking and attacking Islamic State (ISIS) pockets in Syria.

Among the remaining fighters in Syria are ISIS members unable to return to their home countries and Syrian citizens with few prospects outside of war.

SOHR said coalition air strikes targeted ISIS hideouts near Baghouz. It added that suspected jihadists had been captured in the former ISIS capital of Raqqa.

The US-backed alliance is "tracking down remnants of the terrorist group," Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) spokesman Mustafa Bali said. "There are groups hiding in caves overlooking Baghouz."

Coalition spokesman Scott Rawlinson told Agence France-Presse (AFP): "The Syrian Democratic Forces continue to deny [ISIS] a physical space and influence in the area and work to deny them the resources they need to return.

"In support of back-clearance operations, the coalition continues to conduct precision strike support in coordination with SDF."

He said anti-ISIS operations focused on "eroding" the group's "capacity to regenerate and collaborate."

US military officials, their Kurdish allies and members of the US Congress appear to agree that the threat ISIS poses is far from being eliminated.

By keeping its forces in the region and adjusting its strategy, Washington is moving to the next phase of the fight and helping the SDF preserve gains it had made.

SDF, with coalition air support, dislodged ISIS fighters from their last redoubt of Baghouz near the Iraqi border on March 23 during a months-long offensive. ISIS reportedly left behind many documents, including lists of names of jihadists, the military units they belonged to and the number of their children and wives.

SDF fighters also found military identification cards seized by jihadists following the battle, as well as copper coins that ISIS used as currency.



Decisive phase. Fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces stand atop a roof next to their unfurled flag in Baghouz, March 24. (AFP)

ISIS members, who retain a presence in the Syrian Desert and other hideouts, have claimed responsibility for attacks in SDF-held territory despite the setbacks.

On March 25, ISIS fighters killed seven US-backed personnel at a checkpoint in the northern Syria city of Manbij, which is controlled by a local council linked to the SDF. The assault is thought to have heralded a new stage in the battle against the jihadists' remnants in Syria.

"After the victory over ISIS, we have entered the phase of sleeper cells," Manbij Military Council spokesman Sherfan Darwish told AFP in March. "These sleeper cells are being activated and carrying out attacks but we will foil their operations."

Among the remaining fighters in Syria are ISIS members unable to return to their home countries and Syrian citizens with few prospects outside of war. The Pentagon estimated ISIS could have 20,000-30,000 members in Syria and Iraq.

Concerned that fighters could retreat, reform and attempt a violent comeback, the SDF appealed for sustained coalition assistance to help eliminate sleeper cells.

The SDF also reportedly fears a power vacuum following ISIS's collapse and the partial withdrawal of US forces could be exploited by Turkey, which, despite Washington's warnings, appears eager to move against the Kurds.

With large areas of eastern Syria turned into ruins during battles against ISIS, the SDF has been charged with restoring order and beginning reconstruction so civilians who fled the violence can return.

The ISIS caliphate, proclaimed in mid-2014 by fugitive leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, began its collapse in 2017 when offensives captured its main urban hubs of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

Quand les forces kurdes échangeaient des prisonniers avec Daech

Plusieurs djihadistes français auraient ainsi été libérés en contrepartie d'argent ou de combattants issus des FDS.

INÈS DAIF  @InesD_b ET
STÉPHANE KENECH  @stephanekenech
ENVOYÉS SPÉCIAUX AU CAMP DE ROJ (SYRIE)

SYRIE Le camp de Roj est une de ces prisons à ciel ouvert de l'extrême Nord-Est syrien. Une succession de toiles de tentes estampées UNHCR, au gré des saisons brûlées par le soleil ou affaissées par les flots. Quelque 370 familles de djihadistes, femmes et enfants arrêtés par les Kurdes et suspectés d'appartenance à l'État islamique y cohabitent. Dans une pièce isolée du camp des femmes, Delia et Sophia se replongent dans un événement singulier : « Six Françaises et leurs enfants ont été réunis dans la cour par les responsables du camp, puis ont disparu. En avril et pendant le ramadan, plusieurs dizaines de femmes d'autres nationalités ont connu le même sort », livre Delia, une Allemande. Malgré la présence des services de sécurité kurdes dans la pièce, elle confie en anglais : « Daech donne une liste de noms aux Kurdes pour les échanger. » Sophia, une Belge francophone confirme : « Une amie française et ses enfants sont partis dans la journée. Elle a rejoint Daech à nouveau. »

La question des prisonniers étrangers est au cœur des débats au sein des forces kurdes, qui ont combattu au sol l'organisation terroriste. « Nous devons gérer des détenus, hommes, femmes et enfants originaires de 49 pays différents. Les Occidentaux ne peuvent pas nous lâcher », explique Nesrin Abdullah, porte-parole de la branche armée kurde des femmes (YPJ) à Qamishli. En sus de la charge logistique et financière, se posent des questions de sécurité dans une zone toujours instable. D'autant que la pression est forte. « Affaibli, Daech cherche par tous les moyens à rapatrier ses membres. Certains émirs sont prêts à payer jusqu'à 100 000 dollars des passeurs pour récupérer femmes et enfants », affirme Mikzeen Ahmed, responsable politique. Les échanges de prisonniers, pourtant, restent un sujet tabou.

Sur la route menant à la frontière irakienne, la tribu sunnite des Shammar, une des plus importantes du Moyen-Orient, livre quelques précisions. En 2013, certains de ses membres ont rejoint l'Armée syrienne libre quand d'autres ont prêté allégeance à Daech.



Des hommes soupçonnés d'être des combattants de l'EI attendent d'être fouillés par des membres des Forces démocratiques syriennes, à Baghouz, en Syrie. BULENT KILIC/AFP

Puis, sous l'impulsion de son chef, le cheikh al-Hamiri, la tribu a conclu un accord avec la coalition kurdo-arabe (FDS) en juin 2014 pour combattre l'État islamique. Le cheikh al-Hamiri estime que « c'est un problème d'avoir des combattants étrangers emprisonnés dans notre région. Donc les FDS les échangent. Ce sont les chefs tribaux, comme ceux du Conseil civil de Raqqa, qui se chargent de la médiation ». Son fils, Bender al-Hamiri, qui commande à plus de 10 000 combattants placés sous la bannière de l'armée de Salahaddin, raconte : « Avant la chute de Baghouz, il fallait faire appel à un médiateur proche de Daech pour signer un cessez-le-feu sur une localité précise afin de sécuriser la zone d'échange. Puis les Kurdes se rendaient avec les prisonniers jusqu'à la ligne de front et le médiateur, à pied ou en voiture, réalisait l'échange. »

« Avoir ces Français prisonniers est un danger »

À ses yeux, le risque est acceptable. « S'il faut en relâcher dix pour récupérer une personne importante, ça vaut le coup », ironise-t-il. Ces procédés d'échange, vieux comme les guerres, ne risquent-ils pas de porter préjudice à l'Occident ? Pour ce chef de guerre, la réponse est implacable : « La France ne

peut ignorer ce sujet. Pour nous, avoir ces Français prisonniers est un danger. Alors le mieux est de les échanger. »

Pour réaliser ces échanges, les FDS ont fait appel à des intermédiaires venant des tribus sunnites affiliées un temps au groupe terroriste. Récemment, Dham al-Ani et Moussa al-Assad al-Sultan, deux jeunes de la tribu des Sheitat massacrée par Daech, ont été libérés, au même moment qu'un djihadiste français. Et cela à travers la médiation de Mohammed al-Jabr, négociateur qui expose sur Facebook son implication. Amar Abdalah, activiste originaire de Deir Ezzor qui a enquêté sur ces échanges, affirme : « Le djihadiste français a finalement été décapité en place publique à Hajin en septembre 2018. » Selon lui, certains prisonniers échangés et remis à Daech ont été exécutés pour s'être rendus à l'ennemi kurde. « Ce Français avait pour nom de guerre Abu Hassan al-Faransi, il avait une trentaine d'années et était d'origine africaine », précise-t-il.

Depuis quelques mois, nombre de négociateurs ont été assassinés, comme Ali Moussa et Ibrahim al-Ahmad, l'un des organisateurs du « deal de Raqqa » en octobre 2017. Plus au sud, à Deir Ezzor, le cheick Mohammed al-Bachir, de la tribu des Baqara, se sachant menacé par les terroristes, ne se livre qu'à

demi-mot : « Après avoir vu trois de nos hommes sur une vidéo qui circulait sur Internet, nous sommes entrés en contact avec Daech pour savoir ce qu'ils voulaient en contrepartie. Ils souhaitaient un camion de nourriture. » L'accord a pris forme sur Telegram, la messagerie cryptée. « Ça s'est mal passé. Alors que nous allions faire partir le camion, Daech nous a envoyé une vidéo de nos trois hommes en train d'être brûlés vifs. » D'après ce cheikh, les militaires des FDS ont de meilleurs canaux avec les terroristes que les tribus sunnites.

En remontant l'Euphrate, après la traversée de villages fantômes à peine contrôlés par les FDS pour rejoindre la

province de Raqqa, la question des échanges reste un sujet sensible et opaque. « Je suis au courant pour les djihadistes français, grâce à mes sources de Daech », explique Saïd, désormais réfugié en Turquie. Sous le califat, cet enseignant est incarcéré dans le tristement célèbre stade de Raqqa. Saïd se souvient : « Malgré les divergences d'opinions avec mes codétenus djihadistes, j'ai tissé des liens, notamment avec un Français qui se trouvait cellule 9. ». À sa libération, Saïd est contacté par quelques membres de l'EI : « Dès les premiers revers territoriaux, certains souhaitaient savoir comment sortir du califat. C'est à ce moment-là que j'ai eu vent des échanges. »

Près de 900 djihadistes de différentes nationalités ont été arrêtés par les FDS. « Ceux reconnus par les Français et les Américains comme dangereux et reliés à des dossiers d'attentats sont gardés. Les autres, qu'ils pensent être moins menaçants, sont utilisés pour les échanges par les FDS », explique encore Saïd. Il poursuit : « Il est toutefois difficile de s'assurer de leurs réelles identités. Beaucoup de djihadistes ayant la nationalité française mais qui sont originaires du Maghreb se font passer pour des ressortissants tunisiens ou marocains. » En espérant ainsi sortir du viseur des services occidentaux. ■

LE FIGARO

5 avril 2019

La fragile renaissance de Mossoul

Un an et demi après avoir été libérée de l'État islamique, la ville fourmille de projets mais affronte de lourds défis.

CHARLES THIEFAINE
MOSSOUL

IRAK Une étudiante au teint hâlé et coiffée d'un voile vert kaki entame d'un ton vivifiant : « ainsi, toujours poussé vers de nouveaux rivages... » La jeune Mossouliote poursuit la lecture, en arabe puis en français, du célèbre poème *Le Lac* d'Alphonse de Lamartine et termine sous les applaudissements du maire de Mossoul Zuhai al-Araji, du président de l'université Kosay al-Ahmadi, l'ambassadeur de France Bruno Aubert, du chef des opérations militaires Najim al-Jibouri et des dizaines d'autres acteurs engagés pour la reconstruction de la ville.

« C'est ici, dans le département de droit de l'université, que Daech confectonnaient des voitures piégées pour semer la mort. Nous y semons la culture aujourd'hui », lance triomphant, le doyen de la faculté. Ce 1^{er} avril, se déroule l'inauguration de l'Institut culturel franco-irakien. Un lieu symbolique de l'amitié entre la France et l'Irak souhaite Jérôme Chartier, vice-président au conseil régional d'Île-de-France. L'objectif de ce centre est d'accompagner des étudiants dans l'apprentissage du français. Des professeurs y donneront des cours de langue. Des événements culturels autour de la francophonie et des projections de films seront régulièrement organisés. Tout cela avec l'intention première de créer un espace d'échanges explique Martin Lafon, coordinateur du projet pour Acted.

Cette journée marque d'une pierre blanche la volonté bipartite de collaborer pour la reconstruction de la ville et de la paix à Mossoul, après plus de trois ans sous le joug de l'État islamique (EI) et autant d'années de guerre. Ce symbole

fort s'inscrit parmi divers soutiens et projets culturels supervisés par la France dans le nord de l'Irak : Expertise France, agence française d'expertise internationale, lance un projet de « revitalisation » du campus de Mossoul et de « professionnalisation » des étudiants, explique Fabrice Boussalem, directeur du bureau Irak de l'agence. Jérôme Chartier profite également de l'événement pour annoncer un possible jumelage entre les étudiants en droit de Mossoul et ceux de l'université Panthéon-Assas Paris-II. Plus largement, Emmanuel Macron a annoncé en novembre 2018, une aide de 2 millions d'euros destinée à la reconstruction de Sinjar, à l'ouest de Mossoul.

Chaque semaine, des cellules dormantes sont démantelées et des membres de Daech arrêtés

Ce fonds servira notamment à bâtir des infrastructures, écoles, hôpitaux et structures créatrices de revenus, selon l'Élysée.

De quoi réjouir le président de l'université. « L'action de la France, en matière de culture, à Mossoul est de loin la plus dynamique », explique-t-il, sourire en coin, lors d'une réunion dans l'un des anciens palaces de Saddam Hussein, revisité en salle de réception. Avec plus de 46 000 étudiants inscrits et 8 000 hauts diplômés, l'université est une véritable ville dans la ville dont le président ne manque pas de souligner le rôle et l'influence dans toute la région.

Cet espace de liberté contraste néanmoins avec les autres quartiers de Mossoul encore en proie à l'insécurité et qui demeurent ravagés. Plus d'un an et demi

après la libération, la vieille ville s'apparente toujours à un champ de ruines sous lequel mines et engins explosifs ont été disséminés. Des attaques sporadiques surviennent encore sans que la population ne sache qui sont les commanditaires. Le 28 février, un attentat à la voiture piégée a ainsi touché une rue commerçante à deux pas de l'université de Mossoul, faisant un mort et 14 blessés, ce qui a de nouveau fait frémir l'ancienne capitale de l'EI en Irak. Chaque semaine, des cellules dormantes sont démantelées et des membres de Daech arrêtés.

La ville doit mettre fin à la corruption qui gangrène les partis politiques. Un mandat d'arrêt a été émis contre l'ancien gouverneur de la province de Ninive, Nawfal al-Akoub, mercredi dernier, après sa destitution, avec ses deux adjoints. Ces décisions font suite au naufrage d'un ferry à Mossoul le 21 mars, causant la mort de plus de 100 personnes et dont l'ancien gouverneur est tenu pour responsable par les Mossouliotes. Plus concrètement, l'absence de gilets de sauvetage, la défectuosité du ferry et la montée des eaux seraient à l'origine du désastre, imputé à Nawfal al-Akoub : l'ex-gouverneur est inquiet pour des affaires de pots-de-vin alors que des fonds publics, alloués à la reconstruction, ont disparu.

Les autorités, pompiers, police et quelques volontaires, continuent de sillonner le Tigre à la recherche d'une cinquantaine de disparus. Les berges du fleuve, lieu de rencontres et d'amusements, avaient retrouvé un air de joie et de fête après la libération de la ville. Aujourd'hui à nouveau, les commerces sont fermés, les rues désertées et les habitants en deuil. ■

For Syria's Kurds, the Real Battle Is Just Beginning

By Kenneth R. Rosen
April 5, 2019
<https://www.newsweek.com>

It was early February, and the main thoroughfare through Hajin was a mess of concrete and rebar. Structures were toppled, and children played in the wreckage, surrounded by unexploded artillery shells poking from the earth like daisies.

The small town in the Euphrates River Valley in southeastern Syria had long been a Kurdish outpost and, until recently, a battlefield amid the death rattle of the Islamic State militant group. American and French munitions and warplanes, backing

Kurdish-led militias, repeatedly blasted ISIS forces here, reducing the extremists' self-declared caliphate to a tiny sliver of territory—and then to nothing.

But as Kurdish civilians began returning from displaced-persons camps, there was a deep sense among locals that victory was far from assured and peace far from secure. ISIS was not so much falling as transforming. Instead of an occupying army, it was becoming a stateless insurgency, directing suicide bombings, setting up roadside bombs and installing random checkpoints to trap unsuspecting civilians into pledging continued allegiance.

More concerning for the Kurds, though, was another development: the U.S. exit from Syria. Having declared ISIS defeated, President Donald Trump announced in December plans to withdraw the roughly 2,000 American troops that, for the past four years, had trained, armed and supported the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. The partnership not only fostered military victory but also lent unprecedented political clout to the Kurds, a historically marginalized minority. The SDF came to control about a quarter of Syria's territory amid the country's bloody civil war, with oversight of valuable farming and energy resources.



Destroyed vehicles are seen in the final ISIL encampment on March 24, in Baghouz, Syria. The Kurdish-led and American-backed Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) declared on Saturday the "100 percent territorial defeat" of the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. The group once controlled vast areas across Syria and Iraq, a population of up to 12 million, and a "caliphate" that drew tens of thousands of foreign nationals to join its ranks. (Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images) Chris McGrath/Getty

Kurdish leaders had hoped that this elevated status—and the U.S. alliance—would lead to a new model of self-governance, if not total autonomy, for their people in Syria. But now, with the impending U.S. withdrawal, those dreams are quickly dwindling.

The Kurds face existential threats from all sides. Turkey views the Kurds—and the SDF-affiliated militia known as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—as terrorists, and it backed a two-month offensive in the city of Afrin to prevent the Kurds from gaining a foothold in northwestern Syria, near the Turkish border. Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is also determined to shrink the group's territory, eager to retake lands that the Kurds adopted as they swept ISIS from city after city. For the most part, the presence of American troops has served as a deterrent.

Now, the Kurds see a simple equation: Either the Americans stay and stabilize the region, or they leave and put the Kurds in their neighbors' crosshairs. "There is no third option," says my driver Osama, who asked me not to use his last name for fear of retribution. "The war in Syria is like the Third World War."

Political confusion is not new to the Kurds. The Ottoman Empire largely ignored them until oil was discovered in what is today northern Iraq, due east of Syria's Rojava region. After World War I, Britain took over, and its feckless divisions of land left out the Kurds—a legacy that still haunts the region.

Tension has been most pronounced in Turkey, where, since the 1980s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, has waged an insurgency for autonomy. Like Turkey, both the U.S. and the European Union have long designated the PKK a terrorist organization.

But as the Arab Spring arose and Syria descended into civil war, allegiances began to blur. All sides soon found a common enemy in ISIS, which capitalized on the unrest and seized large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria, creating a rogue state the size of Britain. The YPG led the fight against ISIS in the region, and, in 2014, the U.S. approved plans to arm it and support its military campaign with airstrikes. Troops followed, mostly in advisory roles.

The U.S. presence in Syria, however, has always been shadowy, so much so that soldiers do not wear patches to denote their military



Female fighters from the SDF attend a demonstration in support of an imprisoned Kurdish militant leader on February 15 in the city of Qamishli. HECTOR B. PEREZ/AFP/Getty

➔ company insignia. (Their commanders denied requests for interviews.) The military is not there by U.N. mandate, and Congress never authorized occupation. Despite this, the U.S. built bases in the Kurdish north.

For the U.S., staying could be as bad as withdrawing. Not only are troops' lives on the line but the commitment could mean spending billions of dollars more on a conflict with no foreseeable end. It also runs the risk of a devolving situation, like Afghanistan, where U.S. troops have advised a nearly 20-year peacekeeping mission that only recently has seen movement toward promising peace talks. Moreover, an U.S. military presence in a country that does not sponsor it is a foreign policy more akin to colonization.

All of this has driven Trump's desire to, as he put it, "get out." The president's sudden announcement in December of plans for an immediate withdrawal shocked the Kurds, as well as his own administration; Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis resigned, as did the special presidential envoy to the international coalition fighting ISIS. The international backlash prompted Trump to reverse course, and in February he offered a compromise: a "peacekeeping" force of 400 troops—half to counter Iran, which supported Assad in the civil war, and half to back the Kurds in a "safe zone" on the Turkish-Syrian border.

Some experts see a continued U.S. presence as key, both for the Kurdish-led coalition forces, which have grown to an estimated 60,000 with American funding, and for a U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

In 2018, Turkish forces invaded Kurdish territory in northwestern Syria. When the SDF moved to fight them, ISIS staged a comeback. Even with U.S. air support, the militia was spread too thin.

"If the United States were to disappear tomorrow, just poof, the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition would collapse," says Max Markusen, associate director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington, D.C. "Turkey would invade. That's the first thing that would happen."

Then there's the threat of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an Al-Qaeda affiliate that has grown to hold 5 percent of northwestern Syria, oppo-

site the Kurds' territory. These small pockets of insurgents—similar to those in Afghanistan, as well as the ISIS affiliates in Africa and the Philippines—could be seeds for future conflict. Last fall, Jennifer Cafarella, a research director and Syria analyst at the nonprofit Institute for the Study of War, outlined the risk.

"The experience of the Syrian war will be as formative for Al-Qaeda as the Afghan jihad," she said. "Syria is the next Afghanistan."

For now, the Kurds seem to be exploring all options.

In December, Kurdish representatives turned to Assad in the hopes of forming an alliance, perhaps undermining and signaling the end of their fight for some sort of autonomy. They are also looking to Washington, which has sent conflicting signals in recent weeks.

In late March, The Wall Street Journal reported that U.S. military leaders were drafting plans to keep as many as 1,000 troops in Syria—the product of protracted talks and disagreement among American, European, Turkish and Kurdish leaders over how a Syrian "safe zone" would work. But in the hours after publication, General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared the report "factually inaccurate."

"We continue to implement the president's direction to draw down U.S. forces to a residual presence," he said in a statement.

Among the people, sentiment toward the U.S. is mixed. Some, like Abdullah Salim, a 30-year-old farmer from Hajin, express bravado about the ability of Kurdish forces to protect him, regardless of American help. "If ISIS returns or if Turkish invaders come here, the tribes of the area will push them back," he says. "And we will do the same if the Assad regime attacks us."

But others describe a more tenuous existence, dependent on U.S. troops. Warshin Sheko, a 27-year-old appliance salesman in Manbij, fled Syria during the civil war and lived in Turkey for four years before returning home in February. His town sits at the crossroads of regime territory, to the south, and areas controlled by Turkey, to the west and north. It is also the gateway into the independent region of Rojava, where the majority of Kurds live.



Trump shows a map of the last patch of ISIS-controlled territory as he departs the White House on March 20. Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post/Getty

"Our cousins were calling us and telling us that the conditions were fine and stable, and they were saying no one would wrong us," he tells me as he warms his hands over a gas stove in his shop. "But when they say that the Americans will leave, I, frankly, got very sad. I tell my cousins that we will see what happens. The situation is good now, as Americans are there, and that the area is stable, and that people have good jobs and are working."

Khamis Mohammed, a 42-year-old shop owner in Manbij, also maintains that America must stay to protect the Kurds. "As a fact, as long as America is here," he says, "Turkey cannot do anything."

ISIS, however, can. As the final battles for land played out in March, U.S. military leaders warned that the group was simply changing form as it lost its last speck of territory in Syria.

"What we are seeing now is not the surrender of ISIS as an organization but, in fact, a calculated decision to preserve the safety of their families and preservation of their capabilities," General Joseph Votel, the head of the U.S. Central Command, told lawmakers. "The ISIS population being evacuated from the remaining vestiges of the caliphate largely remains unrepentant, unbroken and radicalized."

A few days before I visited Syria, four Americans—two U.S. soldiers, a Defense Department civilian and a contractor—were killed in a suicide attack outside a Manbij restaurant frequented by Westerners. As many as 16 additional civilians died in the January 16 attack, which members of ISIS claimed, although the group had not been a presence in the city for more than four years.

Within a week, the restaurant was cleaned and open for business. Abu Omar, 30, watched the scene from a nearby storefront. "The bomb blast was a terrorist act, and it harmed the civilians and the environment more than it harmed the Americans, who are there to defend us and fight for us," he says. "We want to have a decent life where humans can live with dignity, and we want to have a quiet life where no suicide bombers kill our children." ♦



Women and children evacuated from the final ISIS holdout of Baghouz. DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty

Erdogan Is Weak. And Invincible.

Turkey's president has rarely been so unpopular. He's likely to dominate this week's local elections anyway.

By Steven A. Cook, / April 8, 2019
www.cfr.org

No one ever prospered by predicting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political demise, but on the eve of Turkey's local elections this weekend, he and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) seem weaker than ever. If he were not feeling political pressure, he would not be featuring the grotesque video of the Christchurch mosque massacre at campaign rallies, nor would he be accusing the opposition of supporting those who want to divide Turkey. His interior minister would not be loudly touting the fact that Turkey defied the United States when it invaded Syria and took over Afrin. Hammering away at Western Islamophobia, the perfidy of the main opposition party, and resistance to the United States are excellent ways to mobilize the Turkish electorate to support AKP candidates in the upcoming municipal elections.

The 81 cities and almost 1,000 towns whose mayoralties are in play on March 31 are crucial because controlling cities and towns means controlling the patronage that keeps the AKP machine going—why would any business leader continue to curry favor with the AKP if some mayor from another party is in charge? Heightening Erdogan's anxiety is the recent raft of awful economic news: The economy is in recession, inflation is at 20 percent, unemployment is at 13.5 percent (youth unemployment is 12 points higher), and per capita GDP has fallen. Even so, given Erdogan's political skills, the AKP's willingness to rig the outcome, the weakness of the party's opponents, and the lack of courage among the would-be opposition, the ruling party will likely enjoy another victory.

Erdogan is a great politician. That should be obvious to anyone who has followed the man's political career. The way he used the footage of the New Zealand massacre at election rallies last week was a horrifying and cheap political tactic, but it was also brilliant. It allowed Erdogan to highlight and reinforce ideas about Muslim solidarity, Turkish leadership, and an unredeemable West that have long been part of his and the AKP's political repertoire. He clearly understands better than most that political appeals based on identity may have the power to overcome even bad economic news. Last year, as the government's economic mismanagement led to a precipitous slide in the value of the lira and analysts were predicting that Erdogan would have to go to the IMF for help, the Turkish leader blamed the United States and appealed to God, making it a nationalist and religious virtue to oppose the logic of the markets. The episode arguably strengthened Erdogan, at least in the short run. That's why a little more than a week before the 2019 elections, Erdogan asked Turks, "Why is the West silent? Why is the Western media silent? Because they ... prepared it [the terrorism suspect's manifesto] and handed it to him." He then warned New Zealanders and Australians that if they visited Turkey, they, like their grandfathers in World War I, would be returned in coffins.

Even if Erdogan's appeal for votes on the graves of 50 fellow Muslims does not work, there is every reason to believe that the AKP will do whatever it takes to ensure the outcome is in their favor. The most recent example of the party's electoral chicanery occurred in April 2017, when Turks were asked to approve constitutional changes giving Erdogan new powers. When it became clear that the Yes camp might lose, the party and its agents made sure that, in contravention of the AKP's own electoral reforms, uncertified ballots were counted. In the November 2015 general election—a rerun of elections held in June 2015, the results of which Erdogan did not like—international observers reported that while voting was problem-free, the AKP, its supporters, and the government engaged in intimidation and



People walk past by AK Party billboards with pictures of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and mayoral candidate Binali Yıldırım in Istanbul, Turkey, April 1, 2019. REUTERS/Murad Sezer/File Photo

even violence against the opposition. A year earlier, the opposition credibly charged that the ruling party tampered with the results of Ankara's mayoral election, influencing the race in favor of its candidate.

An often-overlooked aspect of the AKP's almost two-decades-long dominance of Turkish politics are the benefits associated with campaigning against a perennially bungling opposition. It is true that the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate for mayor of Istanbul is running close in the polls against the former prime minister and Erdogan yes man Binali Yıldırım. In Ankara, it looks even better for CHP's Mansur Yavaş. These races are outliers for a party that has suffered from the predation of the AKP, which has vastly altered Turkey's media landscape in its favor and used the power of the state apparatus to its advantage. At the same time, the party's leaders cannot seem to find a message despite the abundance of issues on which to attack the AKP and offer a better future for Turks.

In the summer of 2017, in what was no doubt a stroke of dumb luck, CHP party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu actually hit on an a potentially winning political issue when he began a March for Justice to protest the jailing of a party member and former journalist. As Kilicdaroglu wended his way from Ankara to Istanbul, he attracted tens of thousands of followers and significant media attention. And after 25 days and 280 miles, he triumphantly entered Turkey's largest and most politically important city—an AKP stronghold—to cheering crowds. Then, after Kilicdaroglu's supporters dispersed, absolutely nothing happened. Zero. Since no one is against justice, the march should have been the beginning of a campaign to restore the rule of law, due process, and end corruption, but Kilicdaroglu and his deputies could not manage it even after the success of his momentarily inspiring trek. As a result, the CHP, which was Atatürk's party, has become little more than a regional party centered on Turkey's Aegean coast that can reliably count on 20 to 25 percent total national support.

As for the other parties, the İyi Parti, or Good Party, was supposed to save Turkey from the AKP in the last round of general and presidential elections but significantly underperformed, gaining control of only 43 seats in Turkey's 600-seat parliament. The Peoples' Democratic Party has been the target of government repression for years. Most of its leadership is in jail for allegedly supporting terrorism, a politically expedient but reckless charge for the AKP to make given that the party grew out of the Kurdish community, though its base extends beyond Kurds.

Erdogan and the AKP also enjoy an advantage because the one group of people who might be able to challenge them have proved to be cowards. Periodically, stories bubble up from the Turkish rumor mill indicating that former President Abdullah Gul will emerge from retirement to challenge his onetime political partner, but the Turkey-watching community has learned to roll its eyes at these feints. Recent stories about a party potentially including Ahmet Davutoglu—who served as Erdogan's foreign-policy advisor, foreign minister, and prime minister—along with Ali Babacan, a former deputy prime minister and minister of state responsible for the economy, and other AKP stalwarts whom Erdogan purged might be welcome news to Turkish voters, if true. The problem is that Davutoglu and company will not commit to anything until they see the results of the →

→ local elections. Apparently, principles matter so long as AKP only wins by a small margin. In that case, they might as well not form a party, because they wouldn't even be needed.

Erdogan certainly seems weaker than at any other time in the last almost 17 years, but that does not mean he is at risk. He and the AKP have controlled Turkey for almost two decades, and as a consequence, they control the press, control state resources, and control the political process at every

level. So Turks can fairly ask themselves, "Is there an alternative?" The answer is a resounding no. The Turkish president is running hard and saying shocking things because he is an outstanding politician. He treats every election like it is his last and he is 10 points down in the polls with a week to go. It is tempting to wager on an AKP loss. Observers have been predicting the party will get its comeuppance or that it will split for at least the three elections. It may yet happen, but not this time around, and so the transformation of Turkey continues. ♦



... APRIL 6, 2019

Iran's Supreme Leader urges Iraqi PM to ensure speedy US troop withdrawal

ERBIL - Kurdistan24.net / April 06-2019

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has told Iraq's Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to ensure American soldiers leave the country "as soon as possible," Iranian state media reported on Saturday.

"You must make sure that the Americans withdraw their troops from Iraq as soon as possible because expelling them has become difficult whenever they have had a long military presence in a country," state media Mehr News Agency quoted Khamenei as saying.

The call was made in a meeting between Iran's top leader and the Iraqi prime minister who arrived in Tehran on Saturday, the first visit to the neighboring country since he took office in October of 2018.

Read More: In second foreign trip, Iraqi PM lands in Tehran, plans visit to Riyadh

His trip comes at the invitation of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who met with the Iraqi leader shortly after his arrival in Iran's capital.

The US' presence in Iraq has been a hot topic in recent months. Influential political figures, including leaders of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq – Shia militias that arose to fight the Islamic State – are now increasingly calling on US troops to leave the country.

An Iraqi foreign ministry official told Kurdistan 24 in a previous interview that the US military presence does not involve combat troops, but "only military advisors and trainers, who are helping our army."

American troops in Iraq – numbered at around 6,000 by Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi – have been and continue to provide training and counseling to Iraq's security forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga in the fight against the terrorist organization. ●



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (right) during a meeting with Iraq's Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, April 6, 2019. (Photo: Mehr News Agency)



Dégradations au Conseil de l'Europe: prison ferme pour 17 militants kurdes

Strasbourg, 4 avril 2019 (AFP)

DIX-SEPT MILITANTS KURDES ont été condamnés jeudi soir par le tribunal correctionnel de Strasbourg à des peines de prison ferme allant d'un mois à un an de prison pour de coûteuses dégradations au Conseil de l'Europe, a-t-on appris auprès de leurs avocates.

Les peines les plus sévères ont été prononcées à l'encontre de trois prévenus : l'un car il a été considéré comme "l'organisateur" du rassemblement qui a débouché sur les dégradations; les deux autres pour dégradations et violences envers des policiers, ont indiqué à l'AFP leurs avocates Florence Dole et Sendegul Aras au terme de près de neuf heures d'audience en comparution immédiate.

Les autres prévenus ont écopé de peines allant de un à six mois ferme, selon la même source.

Ils sont tous ressortis libres et devront éventuellement purger leur peine en Allemagne, a précisé Me Aras, qui parle d'un jugement "équilibré".

L'ensemble des prévenus, à l'exception d'un Français, vivent en Allemagne et ont été en outre interdits de territoire français pendant deux ans par le tribunal, a indiqué Me Dole.

Ils devront indemniser solidairement le Conseil de l'Europe, qui avait chiffré les dégradations à 296.000 euros, selon les deux conseils.

Ces peines sont inférieures aux réquisitions du ministère public qui avait réclamé d'un an à 18 mois de prison avec mandats de dépôt.

Les faits remontent au 25 février dernier. Une quarantaine de militants kurdes réclamant la libération de leur chef historique Abdullah Öcalan, emprisonné en Turquie, avaient été interpellés après des dégradations commises sur l'Agora, un bâtiment du Conseil de l'Europe qui abrite le Comité européen pour la prévention de la torture (CPT).

Cet organe se prononce régulièrement sur les conditions de détention de M. Öcalan, emprisonné dans un isolement quasi total depuis 20 ans sur l'île-prison d'Imrali, au large d'Istanbul.

De très nombreuses vitres, dont certaines blindées, avaient été endommagées, notamment par des jets de pavés et de fusées pyrotechniques. Selon l'organisation paneuropéenne, il s'agissait du troisième incident similaire depuis l'été 2018.

A la barre, la plupart des prévenus -- deux femmes et quinze hommes de 19 à 32 ans, dont sept comparaissaient détenus --, ont affirmé ne pas être venus avec la volonté de "commettre des dégradations" mais pour rendre visite aux militants kurdes qui ont entamé mi-décembre une grève de la faim devant le Conseil de l'Europe.

Affirmant encore avoir été émus par l'état de santé des grévistes, ils ont alors voulu entrer dans l'Agora pour dialoguer avec des représentants du CPT, ont-ils fait valoir.

"Le tribunal a rappelé que les peines sont sévères au regard de la gravité des faits et de la volonté manifeste des participants d'entrer de force dans l'Agora pour engager un bras de fer avec le CPT", a expliqué Me Dole.

Des milliers de Kurdes défilent traditionnellement chaque année en février à Strasbourg pour réclamer la libération d'Abdullah Öcalan, chef de la rébellion kurde du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) arrêté le 15 février 1999. ●



The rise and rise of the Turkish right

Halil M. Karaveli

Since March 31, the defeat in Turkey of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party, the A.K.P., and its ultranationalist electoral partner Nationalist Movement Party, the M.H.P., in municipal elections in Ankara, Istanbul and several other cities has led to premature commentary that Turkey is on the verge of change.

By wresting control of mayoral positions in Ankara and Istanbul, which were held by Mr. Erdogan's party for 25 years, the opposition coalition has shown that Mr. Erdogan is not invincible.

But it is no victory for liberal values. The opposition coalition of the Republican People's Party, the C.H.P., and its electoral partner, the Good Party — an offshoot of Mr. Erdogan's ultranationalist partner — is simply another version of the right-wing nationalism of the ruling coalition of the A.K.P. and the M.H.P.

The C.H.P., which is officially a social democratic party, has endorsed the imprisonments of elected Kurdish politicians and nominated ultranationalists, among them Mansur Yavas, the mayor-elect in Ankara, the national capital. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the C.H.P. leader, has said that he "loves" the ultraright nationalists. He has also said that the left-right divide has become irrelevant and that it was a mistake by the left in the past to focus on income redistribution.

The C.H.P. formed an alliance with the Good Party, whose leader Meral Aksener as interior minister in the 1990s oversaw a dirty counterinsurgency war against the Kurds. She has not offered any evidence that her views have become more moderate since. Both the M.H.P. and the Good Party are intensely opposed to changing Turkey's oppressive practices toward the Kurds.

Fundamentally, Turkey's democratic evolution has been hampered by the absence of a democratic leftist alternative. The authoritarian right has held sway since the Turkish republic was founded in 1923. The historical record shows us — Sweden a century ago or Spain, Greece and Portugal in the 1970s — that a strong democratic left is

crucial for democratization.

The Turkish state has been consistently ruthless in its oppression of the left. In 1921, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) had all 15 members of the leadership of the Turkish Communist Party killed, fearing a leftist challenge to his power. He banned trade unions and imprisoned leftist intellectuals of all stripes.

Mr. Erdogan has carried on Mr. Ataturk's legacy by maintaining a labor-hostile order. The A.K.P. government has banned strikes of nearly 200,000 workers. Twenty-two thousand workers have lost their lives in workplace accidents since the A.K.P. came to power.

Turkey's democratic travails have conventionally been explained through the supposed clash between Islam and secularism. Turkish democracy is generally — and inadequately — understood to have been undermined by the military allegedly staging coups to protect secularism and, in recent years, by the Islamist ambitions of Mr. Erdogan.

In fact, the history of Turkey has been shaped by class politics that are obscured by a misleading narrative that pits Islamization against secularism. Closer inspection reveals that Turkey's secularists and Islamists represent the two shades of the same right-wing ideology, which includes a commitment to unrestrained capital-

The opposition parties challenging President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offer another version of the right-wing nationalism of his party and its nationalist partner.

ism, hostility to labor, conservatism and nationalism.

Mr. Ataturk's secular reforms laid the foundations of a modern capitalist society, but for his successors it has made sense to use Islam to protect capitalism. With the onset of the Cold War, Turkey's ruling, ostensibly secular elite opted for Islamization to check leftist politics, and religious education was reintroduced in 1946.

The rise of socialist student and labor movements in the 1960s and of a democratic left in the 1970s prompted the military to step in to crush the left. Gen. Kenan Evren, who took power in



Mansur Yavas campaigning for mayor in Ankara, Turkey, in March.

1980 after a coup, called upon the people to "firmly embrace our religion" to ward off the threat of socialism. His junta made religious education mandatory, opened new religious schools and continued to populate the state bureaucracy with members of religious fraternities, who were reliable anti-socialists.

The military junta also imposed a neoliberal order that the business class had been calling for; it banned trade unions and incarcerated their leaders and activists, together with hundreds of thousands of other leftists.

Mr. Erdogan rose to power promising to serve the same capitalist interests. He embraced the neoliberal economics of the generals and was endorsed by the secular, westernized business barons who did not mind his religious conservatism.

The Islamic conservatives recast the class conflict as a cultural conflict between the people and the elite. They won by championing the religious culture of the masses, but privileged the interests of the economic elite after coming to power.

Mr. Erdogan's populism notwithstanding, income inequalities have grown under Mr. Erdogan. The richest 1 percent of the population has increased its share of the national wealth by 43 percent, putting it in possession of 54 percent of the country's wealth.

Conservatives — secular or Islamic — have won every Turkish election since 1950 except once. That exception was in 1977, when the democratic left led by Bulent Ecevit, a progressive populist who called for social justice and respected popular religiosity, won over 40 percent of the votes. Mr. Ecevit's call for social justice alarmed the business elite and the military that feared that a Communist revolution was in the making.

The present regime in Turkey has its ideological roots in the right-wing coalition of the 1970s, when the secular conservatives, ultranationalists and Islamists came together to defeat the ascendant left. This was when Mr. Erdogan began his political career in the Islamist National Salvation Party.

The paramilitary gangs of the ultranationalist M.H.P. abetted by the secu-

rity forces killed thousands of leftist supporters, students, intellectuals and labor activists between 1975 and 1980. Last month, President Erdogan paid tribute to this heritage when he ordered a university in the city of Adana renamed after Alparslan Türkeş, the founding leader of the M.H.P., who led the bloody campaign against the left in the 1970s.

Mr. Kilicdaroglu, the C.H.P. leader, endorsed this decision, a stunning step considering that the right-wing death squads commanded by Mr. Türkeş had

attempted to kill Bülent Ecevit, the democratic leftist C.H.P. leader, in the 1970s.

But Turkish social democrats have simply never recovered from the devastating blow of the 1980 coup to challenge right-wing ideology; instead, they have concluded that they must shift to the right to appeal to the people.

If the democratic left had not been crushed, Turkey would most likely have followed the same democratic path as Greece, Spain and Portugal.

Turkish social democrats today would do well to revisit the example of the 1970s.

They need to speak for social justice and freedom, instead of aligning with right-wing nationalism, if they want to make a difference.

HALIL M. KARAVELI is the author of "Why Turkey is Authoritarian: From Atatürk to Erdogan."

The Arab Weekly April 7, 2019

Viewpoint

Two rays of hope in post-election Turkey

► **Imamoglu may save the country, which for years posed as the outcast from the ship of democracy.**



Yavuz Baydar

The state of local elections in Turkey can be summed up by the remarks of the observer delegation of the Council of Europe: "These elections are a chance for the full reinstatement of the principle of direct democratic mandate in Turkey."

The repetitious vote count has, as expected by realistic observers of the country, caused turbulence and severe anxiety.

Uncertainty is the reason undue furore may lead to a misreading of what the results mean. Assertions such as "Turkish democracy is the winner in these momentous local elections" may prove to be jumping the gun.

Kurds have become the game-setters for the outcome of the elections, which means a change in the asymmetry of power balances on the local level.

In an analysis for the Guardian, Sinan Ülgen, director of the Turk-

ish think-tank EDAM, falls into this trap by concluding: "Despite being saddled with big problems, Turkish democracy demonstrated its resilience and vibrancy and hinted at a future beyond populist and divisive politics."

The problem with such argumentation stems from the terminology. There was not much Turkish "democracy" to speak of before the elections and the uncertainty, which hints at a "hijack" of the Greater Istanbul Municipality by the alliance under the leadership of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, casts dark shadows over the term.

If anything, one could speak of "continued resistance of the opposition voter bases" to a system in which fairness and transparency of the ballot-box process are non-existent.

One can certainly not speak of "democracy" in an environment where the third largest party, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, is severely bruised by arrests, threats and harassment and with its leaders kept in prison.

Neither can one have trust in accountability of a voting process in which the rule of law has collapsed: There is no credible autonomy of state institutions, including the Supreme Electoral Council, which manifests convulsions under extreme political pressure by the executive.

It is, therefore, important to curb the enthusiasm and not mislead world opinion. It is true that opposition voters in Turkey

showed that the elections on March 31 were a crucial threshold before Turkey fell prey to consolidated authoritarian rule.

The 84% turnout was a healthy sign of a collective insight that the ballot box was the only leverage to pull the brakes for Erdogan and his like-minded supporters, nested in state apparatus and business.

It is also true that the mainstream opposition block, consisting of secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) and nationalist İyi Party, gained control of municipalities that signify embrace of the two-thirds of the GDP.

However, it is also true that Erdogan and his nationalist ally, Devlet Bahçeli, won nearly 52% of the nationwide vote on mayoral races and in city councils.

The ground on which Erdogan stands is not shattered but slightly shaken. Having displayed time and again a remarkable skill for survival, Erdogan may throw enthusiastic analysts another curveball. How? The answer is simple: The Turkish president has the "system," which has nothing to do with "Turkish democracy" as suggested. On the contrary, it was designed and implemented to serve his ambition for absolute power by the referendum on April 16, 2017.

Erdogan won it with 51% of the vote then and, despite much deeper challenges on economy and foreign policy, he may claim that the pro-Erdogan bloc is shaken but still solid. Since there are no elections scheduled until 2023, he will not be in a hurry to exercise powers over the local administrations given to him. His real challenge will be within his party: He may choose to go with full force to reassert his authority.

At the moment, we may sweep aside undue exuberance and suffice with saying that the mainstream opposition bloc has helped to slightly open the gate to "democracy." There is a little more light coming into the darkness caused by cruelty in the

country.

Let me finish by underlining two key factors, which offer strong opportunities for any future challenge to Erdogan's power.

One is the Kurdish vote. Without the tactical Kurdish voting, we would not see any loss at all for Erdogan's alliance in Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Mersin and the tourism hub of Antalya. Kurds have become the game-setters for the outcome of the elections, which means a change in the asymmetry of power balances on the local level.

The second has to do with a rising star: Ekrem İmamoğlu. Having emerged from "bottom up," which is unusual in the vertically run Turkish politics, İmamoğlu proves to be a tough nut to crack under the disguise of a soft-mannered man.

His performance as a contender for Istanbul as the candidate of the opposition bloc reminds us strongly of the late Turkish President Turgut Özal, who in the mid-1980s took Turkey out of military rule by embracing a large spectrum of political ideologies.

If he remains persistent and resilient to the political intrigues his party – the CHP – is known for, İmamoğlu is possibly the best outcome of Turkey's local elections, symbolising a chance for change in Turkey, albeit in slow motion.

İmamoğlu may save the country, which for years posed as the outcast from the ship of democracy.

Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

Les pasdaran «terroristes» : l'Iran s'unit et se radicalise contre Trump

Les puissants Gardiens de la révolution vont figurer sur la liste noire des Etats-Unis aux côtés d'Al-Qaeda ou du Hezbollah, réveillant la fibre nationaliste des Iraniens, y compris des plus modérés.

Par Pierre Alonso / 9 avril 2019
www.liberation.fr

Mardi matin, la République islamique a fait physiquement corps derrière ses Gardiens. Au Parlement, des dizaines de députés ont débarqué habillés de l'uniforme vert foncé des pasdaran. Même ceux qui se montrent habituellement critiques des conservateurs avaient enfilé le costume en signe de soutien.

Ce ralliement ostentatoire est l'œuvre de Donald Trump. La veille, le président américain avait annoncé de nouvelles mesures contre la puissance armée créée après la Révolution islamique de 1979. Déjà visée par des sanctions du Trésor américain, elle figurera désormais sur la liste des organisations terroristes du département d'Etat. Une première alors que seuls des groupes non étatiques (Al-Qaeda, ETA, etc.) ou para-étatiques (comme le Hezbollah) figuraient jusqu'ici sur cette liste noire.

Toutes les composantes du régime iranien ont fait bloc. Le Guide suprême, Ali Khamenei, a menacé à demi-mot : «Les Américains pensent intriguer contre les Gardiens [...], mais leur malveillance se retournera contre eux.» «Qui êtes-vous pour qualifier de terroristes les institutions révolutionnaires [iraniennes] ?» a enragé le président modéré Hassan Rohani, accusant les Etats-Unis d'être «à la tête du terrorisme international». Le général Mohammad Ali Jafari, principal intéressé en tant que chef des Gardiens de la révolution, a prévenu qu'ils «accroîtr[ai]ent leurs capacités offensives et défensives dans l'année à venir».

«Stupide» Dès lundi, le Conseil suprême de la sécurité nationale avait donné la ligne : «Cette mesure illégale et imprudente est une menace majeure à la paix et à la stabilité régionale et internationale.» Et annonçait que l'Iran «reconnai[ssait] le régime des Etats-Unis d'Amérique comme Etat soutien du terrorisme et le United States Central Command [responsable des opérations militaires au Moyen-Orient, ndlr] comme un groupe terroriste».

Les médias les plus conservateurs ont adapté leur vocabulaire sans attendre : «Quatre terroristes de l'armée de terre américaine tués en Afghanistan», a écrit l'agence Fars, proche des franges ultra, à propos de l'attentat contre la base aérienne de Bagram. Le quotidien Kayhan, dur parmi les durs, a carrement titré : «Le geste stupide de Trump autorise le meurtre de soldats américains». Les journaux réformateurs ou modérés ont eux aussi affiché un franc soutien à la garde prétorienne. «Moi aussi, je suis un Gardien [de la révolution]», revendique en une le quotidien Etema'ad.

Cette décision est une nouvelle étape de la croisade solitaire de Trump, qui a rétabli unilatéralement des sanctions en mai 2018, en violation de l'accord sur le nucléaire iranien. La France, dont le ministère des Affaires étrangères dit avoir découvert la mesure dans la presse, n'entend pas emboîter le pas au président américain, rappelant que l'UE a déjà pris des sanctions contre des «individus et entités» des Gardiens. «Nous appelons à éviter toute escalade ou déstabilisation de la région», a



Photo officielle diffusée mardi par le Parlement iranien des Gardiens de la révolution. Photo AFP. Ho. Iranian parliament

déclaré le Quai d'Orsay.

L'objectif est de «rendre les Gardiens de la révolution radioactifs», donc de les isoler de leurs éventuels partenaires à l'étranger, a justifié le coordinateur américain pour la lutte antiterroriste, Nathan Sales. Selon ses décomptes, l'administration Trump a imposé 25 séries de mesures de rétorsion contre l'Iran depuis deux ans. «Les Gardiens sont déjà ciblés par de nombreuses sanctions américaines et sont largement mis à l'index, nuance le chercheur à l'ONG International Crisis Group Ali Vaez. Cette décision pourrait néanmoins compliquer la vie de centaines de milliers d'Iraniens qui ont fait leur service militaire dans le corps des Gardiens de la révolution.» Ce corps d'armée contrôlant des pans entiers de l'économie iranienne, cette mesure pourrait également compromettre toute activité des entreprises étrangères, déjà très réticentes en raison des sanctions américaines liées au nucléaire.

«RÉSISTANCE»

Les pasdaran, et singulièrement leur branche chargée des opérations extérieures - baptisée Al-Quds -, pilotent la politique

régionale de la République islamique, notamment les interventions armées pour aider le régime de Bachar al-Assad en Syrie, le soutien au Hezbollah ou aux milices irakiennes et, dans une moindre mesure, aux rebelles houthis au Yémen. Les Etats-Unis ont exigé que l'Iran mette fin à ces politiques, en faisant l'une des douze conditions pour que Washington accepte de négocier un nouvel accord sur le nucléaire. Sans effet jusqu'ici.

La décision de lundi risque de tendre un peu plus, et pour des années, les relations entre les deux Etats, estime Ali Vaez : «Elle rend la diplomatie avec l'Iran presque impossible pour le président Trump et ce sera pire encore pour son successeur, qui rencontrera une forte résistance politique s'il veut retirer de la liste les Gardiens de la révolution en l'absence d'une volte-face fondamentale et peu probable de l'Iran dans sa politique régionale.» Le chercheur estime que le risque d'escalade est réel si les pasdaran, ou de proches alliés, ciblent les forces américaines déployées en Syrie, en Irak ou en Afghanistan. ♦



Syrie: 13 morts dans un double attentat à la bombe à Raqa

Beyrouth, 9 avril 2019 (AFP)

TREIZE personnes, dont une majorité de civils, ont été tuées mardi dans un double attentat à la bombe à Raqa (nord), ancienne "capitale" du groupe jihadiste Etat islamique (EI) en Syrie, a indiqué une ONG.

Neuf civils et quatre combattants des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), une alliance arabo-kurde soutenue par les Etats-Unis, sont morts dans l'explosion d'un engin puis d'une voiture piégée dans une rue très fréquentée de Raqa, a dit l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH).

L'attaque, qui a eu lieu près d'un poste militaire des FDS, n'a pas été revendiquée dans l'immédiat.

Les FDS sont venues à bout le 23 mars de la dernière poche du "califat" territorial de l'EI, à Baghouz, dans l'est de la Syrie.

Un résident de Raqa a déclaré avoir vu de la fumée noire s'élever au-dessus du lieu de l'attaque et entendu des sirènes d'ambulances.

"La panique et la peur règnent dans le quartier", selon ce résident qui a dit avoir vu des tâches de sang sur le sol.

Malgré la chute de leur "califat", des jihadistes de l'EI sont toujours disséminés dans le désert central de la badiya et dans d'autres secteurs en Syrie, et continuent de revendiquer des attaques dans les territoires contrôlés par les FDS.

Plus tôt mardi, une voiture piégée a visé une patrouille de la coalition internationale antijihadistes dans la ville de Shadadi (nord-est), mais l'attaque a échoué et seul le kamikaze a été tué, d'après l'OSDH.

Le 26 mars, sept combattants des FDS avaient été tués à Minbej par des jihadistes de l'EI.

Selon les FDS, une nouvelle phase a débuté contre le groupe ultraradical depuis la chute du "califat".

L'alliance arabo-kurde a appelé la coalition internationale emmenée par Washington à soutenir davantage ses opérations visant à éliminer les cellules dormantes de l'EI. ●

lepoint.fr

10 avril 2019

L'Irak propose de juger les étrangers de l'EI pour 2 milliards de dollars



Bagdad (AFP) - 10/04/2019
www.lepoint.fr

L'Irak a proposé de juger l'ensemble des jihadistes étrangers retenus en Syrie contre de l'argent, une solution qui permettrait à leurs pays d'origine de résoudre l'épineuse question des retours mais soulève l'inquiétude des défenseurs des droits humains.

Jusqu'ici, indique un responsable gouvernemental irakien à l'AFP, aucun des pays membres de la coalition formée contre le groupe jihadiste Etat islamique (EI) n'a répondu à la proposition de Bagdad qui porte sur près d'un milliard d'étrangers aux mains des Kurdes en Syrie.

Mais certains semblent déjà avoir fait le choix de s'en remettre à la justice irakienne. Cette dernière s'estime compétente sur l'ensemble des crimes commis sous le "califat" autoproclamé de l'EI, un temps à cheval sur un tiers de l'Irak et de grands pans de la Syrie voisine.

Bagdad s'apprête ainsi à juger prochainement 12 Français capturés en Syrie avant d'être transférés en Irak. Ils encourent la peine de mort, mais les trois Français déjà jugés à Bagdad ont été condamnés à la prison à perpétuité, qui équivaut en Irak à vingt ans de prison ferme.

PRÉCÉDENT DE GUANTANAMO

La détention de ces étrangers a un coût, font aujourd'hui valoir les autorités irakiennes, dont les prisons sont déjà peuplées de milliers d'Irakiens arrêtés au cours de la campagne contre l'EI et de plusieurs centaines d'étrangers, pour beaucoup condamnés à mort ou à perpétuité.

Bagdad propose donc, indique à l'AFP un responsable gouvernemental sous le couvert de l'anonymat, de réceptionner les jihadistes étrangers actuellement en Syrie "en échange de deux milliards de dollars".

Et, une fois jugés, Bagdad se réserve le droit de réclamer "plus d'argent pour couvrir les frais engendrés par leur détention", ajoute-t-il.

"Les coûts opérationnels" avoisinent les deux milliards de dollars, si l'on se base sur le précédent de la prison américaine de Guantanamo, explique à l'AFP un autre responsable, également sous le couvert de l'anonymat.

Les pays d'origine de ces jihadistes présumés "ont un problème, nous avons une solution", ajoute-t-il, alors que de très rares pays ont rapatrié des jihadistes présumés pour les juger tant la question de leur retour est sensible pour les opinions publiques.

Paris, par exemple, n'a pas jusqu'ici mis en oeuvre le plan très détaillé de rapatriement des jihadistes français de Syrie et de leurs familles, révélé par la presse et que le gouvernement a présenté comme une "hypothèse" de travail.

Selon l'un des responsables gouvernementaux qui a donné à l'AFP des détails sur la proposition de Bagdad à condition de protéger son anonymat, "52 pays" en tout sont concernés. Il était plus simple de s'adresser à la coalition plutôt qu'à chacune des capitales, fait-il valoir.

La coalition n'a, elle, pas répondu aux sollicitations de l'AFP.

De ces négociations pourrait naître un "tribunal spécial", ajoute l'un des responsables, alors que les Kurdes syriens ont déjà appelé à

créer une cour internationale spéciale et que l'ONU enquête sur les atrocités commises par l'EI, possiblement un "génocide", crime le plus grave du droit international.

"RISQUE DE TORTURE"

Cette option se heurte toutefois à la question de la peine de mort, refusée par les pays de l'Union européenne, dont des dizaines de ressortissants sont actuellement détenus par les Kurdes de Syrie, pointe du doigt l'un des responsables irakiens.

Au-delà de la sévérité des verdicts, des procès en Irak ne donnent "aucune garantie pour des procès équitables" et présentent "de vrais risques de torture", affirme de son côté Belkis Wille, de l'ONG Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Si les pays d'origine décident toutefois de s'en remettre aux tribunaux à Bagdad, "ils devraient beaucoup plus s'impliquer pour faire progresser le système judiciaire irakien", plaide cette militante auprès de l'AFP.

Mieux, dit-elle encore, "les pays qui ont un système judiciaire et des techniques d'investigation efficaces devraient rapatrier leurs ressortissants et les interroger".

L'Allemagne, par exemple, a ouvert mardi le premier procès pour "crime de guerre" et "meurtre" d'une de ses ressortissantes ayant rejoint l'EI en Irak, pour avoir laissé mourir de soif une fillette yazidie, avance Mme Wille.

"C'est un exemple parfait de la façon dont il faut et dont on peut traiter ceux qui ont été impliqués dans de graves crimes", assure-t-elle. ●



... APRIL 9, 2019

SDF leader says ready for talks with Turkey if they leave Afrin

Wladimir van Wilgenburg / April 09-2019

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24.net) – The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are ready for talks with Turkey if they agree to leave Afrin and end Ankara's threats on northeastern Syria, a Kurdish commander said on Monday.

General Mazlum Kobane, the Commander-in-Chief of the SDF, made the comments during a speech at a ceremony near Kobani to celebrate the end of the so-called Islamic State's military defeat.

Turkey occupied Afrin following a three-month-long military campaign, which began in January 2018 and ended in March.

General Kobane said the civil and military administration of northeast Syria "is ready to open negotiations with Turkey" only if they withdraw from the former Kurdish-held enclave.

"The second condition is that Turkey ends its threats against northeastern Syria," he added, according to a report published by the local Hawar News Agency (ANHA). "This will allow the national forces in Syria to find peace in the next phase after the defeat of ISIS."

However, Kobane underlined that the SDF has the legitimate right to defend itself if attacked by other forces, especially Turkey which has repeatedly threatened to launch an attack against the Syrian Kurds in the east of the Euphrates.

Some analysts believe making peace with adversaries is the best route the Syrian Kurds can take to ensure their long-term interests are protected. Nicholas A. Heras, a Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, told Kurdistan 24 the SDF "has to be pragmatic" in dealing with its allies, the United States, and those that threaten it, like Turkey.

The SDF "cannot afford to have Turkey continue to be a predatory



Mazlum Kobane, the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), delivers a speech at a ceremony to mark the end of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate near the city of Kobani, April 8, 2019. (Photo: Hawar News Agency)

actor seeking to run [them] down," Heras noted. "It also cannot afford to upset the US team that is trying to make Turkey happy."

"The SDF needs to show the US team that it can be a serious partner for peace and stability in Syria, even if that means playing nice with Turkey."

Senior leaders from the self-administration in Syria's northeast, as well as former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, and officials from the US-led coalition attended the three-hour-long ceremony in Kobani.

In another part of his speech, General Kobane reserved praise for the Kurdistan Region's Peshmerga forces "who stood next to their brothers in the fight against terrorism."

In 2014, at the height of the Islamic State's insurgency, Peshmerga from the Kurdistan Region fought alongside Syrian Kurdish forces to hand the extremist group one of its first significant defeats.

Kobane also highlighted the role of the US-led coalition as well as international volunteers who joined the SDF and People's Protection Units (YPG) to fight the Islamic State.

"All this cooperation lead to the defeat of ISIS." ●

basnews

April 10, 2019

Kurdish Oppositions Welcome US Designation of IRGC as "Terrorist"

Basnews English / ERBIL – 10/04/2019

<http://www.basnews.com>

Four Iranian Kurdish opposition parties gathered within The Cooperation Center of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties and have welcomed the US' decision to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

"After 40 years since the foundation of the IRGC, this move by the US, despite the fact that it was overdue, is viewed as positive by the oppressed peoples of Iran, especially the people of [Iranian] Kurdistan," the cooperation center wrote in an official statement.

The Cooperation Center of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties included the two main branches of Iranian Kurdistan Democratic Party and the two main branches of the Communist Party of Iranian Kurdistan.

The statement notes that similar moves were expected by the EU countries as the majority of terrorist attacks by the IRGC have taken place on their territories over the past four decades.

The Kurdish opposition parties point out that the IRGC is in control



of economic, political and military spheres in Iran and it resorts to every means so to extend the "dark rule of the Islamic Republic [of Iran]".

"It must be remembered that terrorism cannot be eradicated and the region shall not enjoy peace as long as the Islamic Republic of Iran exists," the statement concluded. ◆



French Mayor: Paris wants to establish good relations with Erbil, rest of Kurdistan

ERBIL April 13-2019
Kurdistan 24.net

Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani received a French delegation on Saturday where both sides discussed bilateral ties between Paris and Erbil.

The French delegation led by the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, had arrived in the Kurdistan Region capital on Thursday.

Related Article: French Mayor lands in Kurdistan to discuss Erbil-Paris cooperation, deliver humanitarian aid

The visit is Hidalgo's second trip to the autonomous region. The first was in September 2014 with then-French President Francois Hollande, four months after the emergence and spread of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq.

During her meeting with Prime Minister Barzani on Saturday, the French mayor expressed her city's "desire to establish good relations with Erbil and the rest of the provinces in the Kurdistan Region," a statement on the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) website read.

According to the KRG statement, Hidalgo said some of the areas of cooperation between Paris and Erbil include clean energy, culture, transportation, and communication.

She also reserved praised for the Kurdish Peshmerga who "defended the whole world [against the so-called Islamic State] to pre-



Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, speaks to Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani at his office in Erbil, April 13, 2019. (Photo: KRG)

serve the common universal values of coexistence, tolerance, and peace."

Prime Minister Barzani welcomed Paris' support and thanked France, in general, for helping the Kurdistan Region during the war against the extremist group, "because without such assistance, victory would not have been achieved."

One of the key members of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State, France has

provided military and humanitarian support to the Kurdistan Region over the past few years. Indeed, its military advisers continue to train Peshmerga forces in the region.

Barzani also reiterated the Kurdistan Region's determination to protect the culture of coexistence, peace, and tolerance, reassuring Hidalgo that the KRG would "defend these principles by all means." ●



Iraq's Solution To Stranded Kurdistan Crude

By Tsvetana Paraskova - April 15, 2019,
<https://oilprice.com>

Iraq is set to build an oil refinery of 150,000 bpd processing capacity in the northern city of Kirkuk, according to Iraqi Oil Minister Thamer Ghadhban.

The ministry said that it had "put the final touches" on building the refinery in Kirkuk, which will have a capacity of 150,000 barrels per day, Ghadhban said in a statement on Monday after visiting Kirkuk, according to Reuters.

Several Iraqi ministers visited Kirkuk this weekend to meet the governor of the province and discuss new projects and plans that have stalled, some of which were in the oil and electricity sectors.

Oil minister Ghadhban stressed the importance of Kirkuk to the Iraqi federal government.

Last November, Iraq resumed oil exports from the Kirkuk province, a year after it had stopped oil flows from the area due to a dispute with the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region.

Around 300,000 bpd of crude oil previously pumped and exported in the Kirkuk province to the Turkish port of Ceyhan were shut in when the Iraqi federal government moved in October 2017 to take control over the oil fields in Kirkuk from Kurdish forces after the semi-autonomous region held a referendum that Baghdad didn't recognize. However, the only export outlet of the Kirkuk oil is the oil pipeline of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Iraqi federal government and the KRG had been in talks for



months to try to reach an agreement on resuming Iraqi exports from Kirkuk.

Weeks before the resumption of the Iraqi oil exports from the Kirkuk province, the Kurdistan region said that it had upgraded its oil export pipeline, boosting its capacity to 1 million bpd from 700,000 bpd, to accommodate future production growth from the region.

"This extra capacity will accommodate future production growth from KRG producing fields, and can also be used by the federal government to export the currently stranded oil in Kirkuk and surrounding areas," KRG's ministry said in a statement on November 4. ◆

REUTERS

Syrian Kurdish official: Damascus talks going nowhere, Russia to blame

April 12, 2019 QAMISHLI, Syria (Reuters) -

EFFORTS TO FORGE a political deal between Kurdish-led authorities in northern Syria and the Syrian government are at a standstill and President Bashar-al Assad's ally Russia is to blame, a Syrian Kurdish official said.

The Kurdish-led authorities revived efforts to negotiate a deal with Damascus earlier this year in the wake of a U.S. decision to withdraw its forces from their areas, hoping Moscow would mediate an agreement that would preserve their autonomy.

The picture has shifted significantly since then, however, with Washington deciding to keep some troops in Syria and the Syrian government directing new threats of military action at Kurdish-led forces if they do not submit to its rule.

Badran Jia Kurd, a Syrian Kurdish official involved in the political track, said the talks had gone nowhere. "The Russians froze the initiative which Russia was supposed to carry out and it did not begin negotiations with Damascus," he said.

"Russia is still claiming that it is working on that initiative but to no avail," he told Reuters late on Thursday.

Unlike the insurgent groups that have fought Assad across much of Syria, the main Syrian Kurdish groups are not hostile to him and say their objective is to preserve autonomy within the state.



Badran Jia Kurd, top Kurdish official, talks during an interview with Reuters in Qamishli, Syria March 11, 2019. Picture taken March 11, 2019. REUTERS/Issam Abdallah

But Damascus opposes the level of autonomy they seek. The Syrian defense minister last month said the state would take back the Kurdish led-region by force if its leaders did not submit to the return of state authority.

The presence of U.S. forces has provided the Kurdish-led region with a de facto security umbrella that has shielded it from Assad and neighboring Turkey, which views the main Syrian Kurdish groups as a security threat.

Jia Kurd said Russia had put its interests with Turkey ahead of pressing for a deal between Damascus.

Russia had "not played its role after meeting the Turkish side many times and this is what led to the blocking of the path of dialogue with Damascus and Russia bears the historic responsibility," he said. ●

Marianne

19 avril 2019

Soutien de la France aux Kurdes de Syrie contre Daech : jusqu'à quand ?

Par Alain Léauthier
Publié le 19/04/2019
www.marianne.net

Emmanuel Macron a reçu ce vendredi 19 avril une délégation des forces arabo-kurdes engagées en Syrie contre le groupe Etat islamique (EI) et l'a assurée de la poursuite du soutien de la France dans cette lutte.

Ce pourrait être une rencontre banale mais dans un emploi du temps serré au boulot, la petite heure d'entretien qu'Emmanuel Macron a eue ce vendredi 19 avril avec une délégation à haut niveau des Kurdes syriens ne l'est pas tant que ça. Il s'agissait officiellement de les remercier de leur rôle déterminant aux côtés de la coalition internationale dans la victoire territoriale remportée sur l'Etat islamique et célébrée le 29 mars, lors de la reddition de l'ultime réduit tenu par les djihadistes. Il en est sorti un communiqué dans lequel l'Elysée réaffirme son soutien aux Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS, alliance arabo-kurde) « dans leur lutte contre



le terrorisme », l'attachement à la sécurité de la Turquie et à une « solution politique inclusive au conflit syrien, dans le cadre de la résolution 2254 du Conseil de sécurité de l'Onu ».

Rien de très nouveau en apparence, alors même que le territoire que les Kurdes syriens auto-administrent dans le nord-est du pays reste sous la double menace des forces de Damas d'un côté et de l'armée que la Turquie a massée tout au long de la frontière de l'autre. Lors d'une conférence de presse tenue peu après, la délégation a fait état d'un soutien financier de la France, peut-être sous forme d'un crédit, afin de répondre aux besoins humanitaires sur place sans que l'on sache exactement s'il s'ajoutera au million d'euros promis début avril

par le ministre des Affaires étrangères, Jean-Yves Le Drian, pour les camps de réfugiés.

LA QUESTION DES DJIHADISTES

Selon Badran Jia Kurd, un haut responsable du Rojava (l'entité kurde autonome), venus notamment d'Irak, ces derniers se compteraient par dizaines de milliers mais nombre d'entre eux ont déjà pris le chemin du retour. Reste l'épineuse question des combattants djihadistes, près de 6.000 représentant 54 nationalités, sans compter les membres de leurs familles, 15.000 « civils », tous sous contrôle des FDS, assistés par des membres des services français et américains. Jusqu'à présent, la plupart des pays concernés n'ont guère manifesté l'intention de les rapatrier, malgré les appels du

« pied répétés des Kurdes. « Dans ce contexte, a expliqué Abed al Mihbach, co-président du Rojava, la solution la plus rationnelle serait la création d'un tribunal pénal international sur notre sol afin de les juger. Après tout, c'est là qu'ils ont commis leurs crimes et porté préjudice aux habitants ». Des démarches ont été entreprises en ce sens auprès de la « communauté internationale »... sans grand succès apparemment.

Plus largement, le sort du Kurdistan syrien reste pour l'instant une équation avec beaucoup de questions et bien peu de réponses. Face à l'annonce du retrait américain voulu par Donald Trump, les responsables kurdes ont proposé aux Russes de jouer les médiateurs, tant auprès d'Ankara que de Damas, afin de trouver une issue politique à la crise. Mais de l'aveu même de Khaled Issa, le représentant du Rojava en France, Moscou, où il se trouvait il y a encore un mois, fait actuellement la sourde oreille. Et nul ne sait combien de temps encore la France maintiendra une présence militaire, au demeurant pas réellement dissuasive, si d'aventure la Turquie se décide à passer à l'action pour « sécuriser » sa frontière comme elle a maintes fois promis de le faire. « Nous n'accepterons et ne négocierons jamais ce qui ne serait rien d'autre qu'une invasion et une violation de l'intégrité du sol syrien », a répété Abed al Mihbach. Jusqu'à quand ? ♦

Shirin Ebadi : « En Iran, lorsqu'un avocat défend un manifestant, il est arrêté à son tour »

Prix Nobel de la paix en 2003, l'avocate dénonce la condamnation de sa consœur et amie Nasrin Sotoudeh à douze ans de prison à Téhéran

ENTRETIEN

L'avocate iranienne Shirin Ebadi, Prix Nobel de la paix en 2003 et exilée hors de son pays depuis 2009, était au barreau de Paris, jeudi 11 avril, pour défendre sa consœur et amie Nasrin Sotoudeh. Emprisonnée depuis juin 2018 à Téhéran, cette militante des droits humains a été condamnée en mars par un tribunal révolutionnaire à des peines qui représentent trente-huit ans d'emprisonnement et 148 coups de fouet. Dans les faits, M^{me} Sotoudeh devra passer au moins douze ans derrière les barreaux.

Pourquoi Nasrin Sotoudeh a-t-elle été condamnée à une peine si sévère ?

Ce gouvernement exerce une pression maximale sur les avocats indépendants : c'est une dictature qui ne tolère pas la liberté d'expression. La raison profonde d'une telle sévérité contre M^{me} Sotoudeh est l'absence d'indépendance des tribunaux et l'influence directe qu'ils subissent du ministère du renseignement.

Pourquoi la justice lui reproche-t-elle d'avoir défendu deux femmes qui s'étaient dévoilées en public ?

D'après la loi instaurée au lendemain de la révolution islamique de 1979, toute femme se déplaçant en Iran, qu'elle soit musul-

« Tout régime qui se sent fragilisé devient plus violent, et Téhéran est particulièrement faible »

mane ou non, est tenue de porter le voile islamique. Les femmes se sont exprimées contre cela dès la révolution, de bien des manières. En 2018, plusieurs jeunes filles, de leur propre initiative, ont retiré leur voile et l'ont érigé au bout d'un bâton en signe de protestation, silencieuse et pacifique. Il y a eu des représailles très violentes : l'une d'elles a fait l'objet d'une peine de vingt ans de prison.

Nasrin Sotoudeh a accepté de défendre deux d'entre elles, affirmant qu'elles n'avaient commis aucun délit, mais seulement exprimé une opinion. Elle a été condamnée à douze ans de prison pour avoir accepté ces dossiers : sa défense a été assimilée à une promotion de la « débauche ».

Quel regard portez-vous sur la répression qui frappe depuis un an les militants des droits humains ?

Quatre autres avocats sont aujourd'hui sous les verrous et

une soixantaine font l'objet de poursuites, qui peuvent un jour ou l'autre les conduire en prison. Jour après jour, les attaques du régime s'intensifient, par des arrestations et le vote de lois de plus en plus restrictives. Dernier exemple en date, dans la phase d'instruction d'atteintes supposées à la sûreté de l'Etat, les accusés ne peuvent désormais avoir recours qu'à des avocats approuvés par le pouvoir judiciaire. Ils sont dix-huit à Téhéran. Les avocats indépendants n'ont pas le droit de les défendre, et ceux qui ont protesté devant le Parlement contre cette loi ont été arrêtés.

Cette répression est-elle accélérée par la crise économique et les sanctions américaines ?

La grave situation économique et la hausse du chômage incitent la population iranienne à organiser des protestations quotidiennes. C'est le résultat de la politique étrangère coûteuse de l'Iran – son soutien au Hezbollah libanais, à Bachar Al-Assad en Syrie et aux rebelles houthistes au Yémen –, de la corruption, très élevée et courante dans le pays, et des sanctions économiques américaines [réimposées de pleine force en mai 2018, après le retrait américain de l'accord international sur le nucléaire].

Mais le régime considère que seules les sanctions sont à l'origine de la crise : il met de côté les autres aspects. Et lorsqu'un avo-

cat défend un manifestant arrêté dans ces protestations pacifiques, il est arrêté à son tour.

Washington met-il en danger les défenseurs iraniens des droits humains en affirmant vouloir les « soutenir » ?

Quoi que fassent les Américains, ces défenseurs des droits sont en danger, de toute façon. Tout régime qui se sent fragilisé devient plus violent, et Téhéran est particulièrement faible. Je suis contre les sanctions économiques américaines, mais n'oublions pas les manquements immenses du régime et ses mauvaises politiques.

Pourquoi avez-vous décidé d'appeler, en 2018, avec notamment Nasrin Sotoudeh, à un référendum sur la nature du régime en Iran ?

Le peuple iranien exprime par ses manifestations son refus de voir perdurer le régime. En réaction, le gouvernement procède à des arrestations, il dit que ces personnes sont incitées par les Américains et que le peuple, en réalité, veut qu'il reste en place. Alors, que faire ? Laisser les gens se faire emprisonner ? Laisser peut-être une guerre civile éclater ? L'issue la plus juste et logique, c'est le référendum. Si le peuple en formule le souhait de façon unie, il peut obtenir une consultation populaire. ■

PROPOS RECUEILLIS PAR LOUIS IMBERT

REUTERS

Turkey's Erdogan to discuss possible operation in Syria with Putin - RIA

April 8, 2019 / MOSCOW (Reuters) -

TURKISH PRESIDENT Tayyip Erdogan said he planned to discuss a possible Turkish military operation in Syria when he visits Moscow for talks with President Vladimir Putin on Monday, Russia's RIA news agency reported.

Erdogan has vowed to crush U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters east of the Euphrates in Syria and said last year that preparations were complete for an operation.

Turkey, Washington's main Muslim ally within NATO, considers Syria's YPG Kurdish militia an enemy and has already intervened to sweep the fighters from territory west of the Euphrates in military campaigns over the past two years.

"Our preparations on the border are finished, everything is ready for an operation. We can begin it at any moment. I will discuss this issue among others face-to-face (with Putin) on my visit to Russia," Erdogan was cited as saying. ●



14 AVRIL 2019

Irak: découverte d'un charnier kurde datant de l'époque de Saddam Hussein

Par RFI le 14-04-2019, notre correspondant à Erbil, Noé Pignède
<http://www.rfi.fr/>

En Irak, un charnier contenant des dizaines de corps a été découvert dans le désert de Samawa au sud de la capitale Bagdad. Des victimes de l'Anfal, des massacres qualifiés de « génocide » par les Kurdes, perpétrés par le dictateur Saddam Hussein en 1988.

« Les Irakiens ne doivent jamais oublier les crimes commis par Saddam Hussein ni permettre le retour de son parti au pouvoir ». C'est ce qu'a déclaré ce dimanche le président irakien Barham Saleh.

Le chef de l'État, lui-même issu de la minorité kurde, avait fait le déplacement dans le désert de Samawa pour assister à l'ouverture de quatre fosses communes. À l'intérieur : deux cents corps, des victimes de l'opération Anfal orchestrée par Saddam Hussein en 1988.

À l'époque, l'Irak est en guerre contre l'Iran depuis près de 8 ans, mais les peshmergas kurdes se battent aux côtés de l'armée iranienne. Alors pour les punir, le dictateur irakien décide d'éradiquer la minorité kurde. S'ensuivent des bombardements à l'arme chimique, des exécutions



Des membres irakiens de la Défense civile et des responsables recouvrent, dimanche 14 avril, les ossements d'une fosse commune de Kurdes découverte à l'ouest de la ville de Samawa, en Irak.
REUTERS/Essam al-Sudani

et des déportations massives. En quelques mois 180 000 personnes sont tuées et la quasi-totalité des villages kurdes rayés de la carte.

À l'époque, les Occidentaux ferment les yeux, ils soutiennent Saddam Hussein dans sa guerre contre l'Iran.

Depuis la chute du régime baassiste en 2003, plusieurs charniers ont été exhumés dans le sud l'Irak, mais selon les responsables kurdes, des milliers de disparus se trouveraient encore dans des fosses communes, enterrés près de la frontière irako-saoudienne. ●

L'EXPRESS .fr 19 AVRIL 2019

Macron reçoit des Kurdes syriens et les assure du soutien de la France

Le chef de l'Etat a reçu ce vendredi une délégation des forces démocratiques syriennes. Il l'a assuré du "soutien actif" de la France dans le combat contre l'EI.

Par L'EXPRESS.fr avec AFP, 19 avril 2019

Emmanuel Macron a reçu ce vendredi une délégation des forces arabo-kurdes engagées en Syrie contre le groupe Etat islamique (EI). Le chef de l'Etat a garanti à ces représentants des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS) "la poursuite du soutien actif de la France dans la lutte contre Daech, qui continue de représenter une menace pour la sécurité collective, et notamment dans la gestion des combattants terroristes faits prisonniers et de leurs familles", a précisé la présidence dans un communiqué.

Durant l'entretien, Emmanuel Macron a indiqué qu'un soutien financier serait alloué "pour répondre aux besoins humanitaires et de stabilisation socio-économique des populations civiles en



Syrie". Selon des membres de la délégation, Emmanuel Macron s'est engagé à maintenir des forces françaises aux côtés des FDS et à soutenir financièrement la reconstruction et les services publics dans l'administration semi-autonome kurde.*

SÉCURITÉ DES ZONES SOUS CONTRÔLE KURDE

"Le président de la République a confirmé le sou-

tien militaire (français)", a déclaré Abd al-Mehbache, coprésident du conseil exécutif de l'administration autonome du nord et de l'est syrien, sans plus de précisions. La France ne communique pas sur sa présence militaire en Syrie mais s'est dite prête à contribuer à la sécurité des zones sous contrôle kurde si les Etats-Unis maintiennent aussi des soldats sur place.

Après avoir annoncé le retrait des 2000 soldats américains présents dans le nord-est de la Syrie en décembre, le président américain s'est finalement résolu à en maintenir 200 sous la pression de ses généraux et de ses alliés. "La lutte contre le terrorisme demande plus de temps et d'efforts", a martelé Abd al-Mehbache en pointant l'existence de "dizaines de cellules dormantes" de l'EI et "des mentalités (favorables à cette organisation) dans les zones libérées" par les FDS.

Les Kurdes syriens réclament aussi la création d'un tribunal international pour juger les milliers de djihadistes, notamment étrangers, qu'ils détiennent - 6000 ainsi que 15 000 membres de leurs familles selon Abd al-Mehbache - une idée accueillie tièdement par la communauté internationale alors que leur administration semi-autonome ne constitue pas un Etat souverain.

"CRÉDIT POUR LES SERVICES ET



⇒ LA RECONSTRUCTION"

Emmanuel Macron a aussi confirmé un "crédit pour les services et la reconstruction (...) afin d'assurer la paix et la stabilité dans la région", a ajouté Abd al-Mehbache, sans plus de précisions. Le 1er avril, le chef de la diplomatie Jean-Yves Le Drian avait annoncé un million d'euros d'aide humanitaire pour les camps de déplacés du nord-est de la Syrie, notamment celui d'Al-Hol où s'en-

tassent des milliers de femmes et d'enfants étrangers affiliés à l'EI.

Le président français a également rappelé "l'attachement de la France à la sécurité de la Turquie et à une désescalade le long de la frontière syro-turque", selon l'Elysée. La Turquie menace de lancer une offensive pour éloigner de sa frontière les miliciens kurdes des Unités de protection du peuple (YPG), qu'elle considère comme des "ter-

roristes".

Les FDS ont annoncé le 23 mars la fin du "califat" autoproclamé en 2014 par l'organisation ultraradicale sur les territoires alors conquis en Irak et en Syrie. Depuis, ces forces, qui contrôlent une partie du territoire au nord de la Syrie, continuent à traquer les djihadistes dans l'est du pays. ♦

Le Monde.fr 12 AVRIL 2019

Un Français dans les rangs kurdes

Le journal de guerre d'un jeune Français, militant internationaliste, qui a combattu l'Etat islamique aux côtés des Kurdes de Syrie et raconte l'âpreté des combats.

Par Elise Vincent / 12 avril 2019
www.lemonde.fr

LE LIVRE. Dans le flot des livres consacrés ces dernières années à la guerre en Syrie et à la lutte contre l'organisation Etat islamique (EI), celui d'André Hébert, *Jusqu'à Raqqa*, publié aux Belles Lettres, devrait à coup sûr sortir du lot à long terme. L'ouvrage est le témoignage inédit d'un ex-combattant. Mais un type de soldat relativement méconnu du grand public, puisqu'il s'agit d'un des rares Français s'étant rendu sur zone pour prendre les armes et rallier les rangs des forces Kurdes face aux djihadistes.

André Hébert est un pseudonyme. Derrière il y a un jeune homme de 27 ans, aujourd'hui de retour en France, qui travaille, et a décidé de faire part de son expérience, comme un « prolongement de la lutte » qu'il a menée sur le terrain. *Le Monde* a pu le rencontrer. André Hébert est toutefois un méfiant, et afin d'éviter tout moyen de remonter jusqu'à lui dans sa nouvelle vie, il ne dévie que rarement des éléments biographiques égrenés au fil de ses 256 pages d'écriture : un récit appliqué, structuré, et étonnement limpide de son expérience au milieu de la poussière et des morts.

Tout juste apprendra-t-on, donc, qu'il est issu d'un milieu « bourgeois », selon ses termes. Qu'avant de partir en Syrie, il était déjà depuis un certain temps militant à la gauche de la gauche, soit, comme il l'écrit dans son livre, « marxiste », « révolutionnaire » et « internationaliste ». « Je n'ai aucun désir d'être objectif », prévient-il d'emblée dans le livre pour justifier son ralliement à la cause kurde. Toutefois, « j'ai toujours été militant non encarté, attaché à mon esprit critique (...) je ne tiens pas non plus à écrire un ouvrage de propagande. »

DES CONDITIONS DURES, ÉPROUVANTES

André Hébert a ainsi fait deux séjours sur zone : le premier entre juillet 2015 et avril 2016, le second de juin à décembre 2017. A chaque fois, il

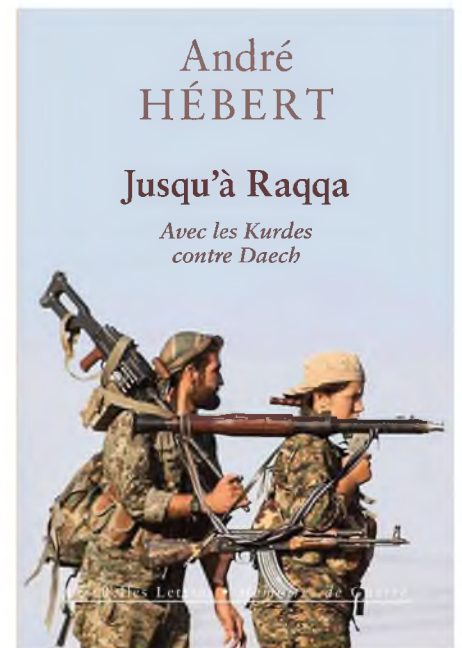
s'est retrouvé les armes à la main dans des petites unités, au plus près des djihadistes de l'EI. Les conditions étaient dures, éprouvantes, infâmes même parfois, avec un équipement rudimentaire : il ne le cache pas. Il admet d'ailleurs s'être à chaque fois préparé à mourir, et s'être, bon an mal an, plié à l'exercice d'enregistrer une vidéo qui aurait pu être diffusée par les services kurdes en cas de décès. Mais le sort en a décidé autrement.

L'intérêt du témoignage d'André Hébert est finalement là. Dans cet envers du décor qui n'a que très rarement pu être raconté au long par les journalistes occidentaux en raison des trop grands risques sécuritaires sur le terrain. C'est donc le quotidien âpre, les nuits courtes, le sifflement ordinaire des balles, les explosions de véhicules piégés, qu'André Hébert décrit presque à la façon d'un « reporter ». Le jeune homme ne cache rien de la peur qui rôde, des états d'âmes ou des horreurs même parfois qui rendent fous ses colistiers.

Il y a d'ailleurs beaucoup de morts de « camarades » dans *Jusqu'à Raqqa*. Notamment celles d'autres Occidentaux engagés aux côtés des Kurdes, dont André Hébert tient à saluer la mémoire en égrenant leurs noms en début de livre. Des morts sales et anonymes, souvent : là après avoir sauté sur une mine, ici transpercé par une balle de sniper, voire en raison d'erreurs de frappe de la coalition ou d'une mauvaise coordination sur le terrain. Tout arrive par temps de guerre, semble admettre, fataliste, le militant.

SUSCITER LE « SOUTIEN » ENVERS CES KURDES

Son ambition, à travers ses lignes, il l'avoue, est en réalité moins de cacher la difficulté des combats, que de susciter le « soutien » envers ces Kurdes qui ont combattu pied à pied contre Daech. Une façon de sensibiliser, au passage, la légitimité de leurs revendications d'autonomie. Bataille après bataille, André Hébert décrit donc autant les victoires que les défaites de ces soldats de l'ombre. A grand renfort de cartes, il se veut



presque pédagogue sur le processus d'enrôlement, la formation – rudimentaire – et les stratégies militaires mises en œuvre face à un ennemi souvent très bien armé.

Son histoire est aussi particulière car, entre ces deux séjours sur zone, André Hébert s'est retrouvé interdit de sortie du territoire. L'apprentissage des armes dont il a bénéficié au sein des Unités de protection du peuple (YPG), branche armée du Parti de l'union démocratique (YPD), émanation du parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), classée comme organisation terroriste par l'Union européenne, a un temps inquiété les services de renseignement français. Cette expérience aurait pu être utilisée « dans le cadre d'actions violentes de l'ultra-gauche révolutionnaire », justifiait le ministère de l'intérieur, en décembre 2016, dans une décision que nous avons pu consulter.

Finalement, après avoir pris un avocat et fait appel, André Hébert a pu retrouver son passeport et s'envoler une seconde fois pour la Syrie. Une décision administrative que le jeune homme se fait fort de mettre en avant aujourd'hui, pour illustrer les contradictions françaises et internationales dans leurs alliances sur zone. Ce livre se veut la preuve que les Kurdes ont été des maillons essentiels de la victoire contre l'EI. Aux yeux du jeune activiste, tout abandon à leur sort serait donc d'un insupportable cynisme. ■

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Jusqu'à Raqqa. Avec les Kurdes contre Daech, d'André Hébert, Les Belles Lettres 256 pages, 21 euros.

Iraqi airstrikes kill 20 Islamic State jihadists in Iraq's Kirkuk

by Mohammed Ebraheem Apr 16, 2019

Kirkuk (IraqiNews.com) – Twenty jihadists of the Islamic State militant group were killed Tuesday in air raids by the Iraqi Air Force in the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, a military source was quoted as saying.

"Iraqi warplanes, backed by the U.S.-led international coalition, hit a gathering of Islamic State militants in Daquq district in eastern Kirkuk, leaving 20 jihadists killed," the source told Alghad Press website.

"Most of the slain Islamic State terrorists came from Syria and were implicated in several terrorist

attacks against security forces and civilians in Kirkuk," the source said.

He added that two more IS jihadists were killed while trying to infiltrate into Kirkuk coming from the Syrian city of al-Baghuz.

Iraq declared the collapse of Islamic State's territorial influence in November 2017 with the recapture of Rawa, a city on Anbar's western borders with Syria, which was the group's last bastion in Iraq.

IS declared a self-styled "caliphate" in a third of Iraq and neighboring Syria in 2014. A government campaign, backed by a U.S.-led international coalition and paramilitary forces, was launched in



An Iraqi soldier waves the "V" victory sign following a great triumph over the Islamic State group. File photo

2016 to retake IS-held regions, managing to retake all havens, most notably the city of Mosul, the group's previously proclaimed capital. ■



April 13, 2019

Liberating Afrin: Next priority for Syria's Kurds?



By Paul Iddon
13/4/2019
www.rudaw.net

Several times in recent months the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has said it will shift its focus from the fight against Islamic State (ISIS) to the liberation of Turkish-occupied Afrin in Syria's northwest.

On March 28, SDF commander Ferhat Abdil Sahin, more commonly known by his nom de guerre Mazlum Kobane, announced the group is "preparing and making arrangements in order to liberate Afrin".

"Because this is a military matter, everyone should know that when the time is suitable the liberation phase will begin," he said.

In February, the SDF also announced "the liberation of Afrin and the return of its original inhabitants to their homes" is a post-ISIS priority for the group.

Turkey invaded Afrin in early 2018 and garrisoned it with its Syrian militiamen proxies. According to UN reports, these militias have persecuted Afrin's Kurdish inhabitants. More than 100,000 Kurdish civilians were displaced by Turkey's incursion, many of whom are living in squalid conditions in displaced person camps in neighbouring Shahba canton. Many are afraid to return home.



Protesters rally outside the UN compound in Erbil calling on the international community to halt Turkey's invasion of Afrin, January 2018. File photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which originally controlled Afrin, is also using Shahba to wage an insurgency against Afrin's occupiers.

The Turkish-backed occupiers of Afrin have resettled thousands of Syrian Arabs from elsewhere in the country in a clear bid to permanently dilute its Kurdish-majority demographic.

Mutlu Civiroglu, a Syrian and Kurdish affairs analyst, said there is a strong desire among Kurds to see Afrin retaken.

"People of Rojava [Syrian Kurdistan] generally, and people of Afrin especially, are strongly pushing

the SDF leadership to liberate their region from Turkish control," he told Rudaw.

A significant number of senior SDF leaders come from Afrin where they "have lost family members and homes as a result of Turkey's invasion," Civiroglu said.

"There is an enormous desire among Kurds to get back what they lost."

Civiroglu also noted that Afrin is Syria's predominant Kurdish region demographically. This was also true historically when it was referred to by terms such as 'the area of Kurdish mountains'.

"It's an important area strategi-

cally given its proximity to both the Mediterranean Sea and Aleppo," he said. "Afrin has very fertile ground, an industrialized centre, and a well-educated population."

"It's very important for the Kurds for these reasons. That's why there is a strong desire among Kurds to kick Turkey out."

There are several obstacles, however. Civiroglu says Afrin's liberation will depend heavily on what regional and international powers do next.

Although the Kurds held out for 58 days against the Turkish invasion – which Ankara initially boasted would take little more than a week to complete – the conquest of Afrin was more-or-less inevitable given the Turkish military's technological edge over the Kurds, particularly its large and powerful air force, which the Kurds had no real capability to counter.

Furthermore, Russia's decision to green-light the Turkish invasion after the YPG refused to hand over the territory to the Syrian regime left Afrin's airspace wide open for Turkish jets throughout most of the campaign.

"What happens in Afrin depends on what Russia is going to do next since Turkey's actions in Syria are determined by Russian approval," Civiroglu said. "So long as there are no major disagreements between Turkey and Russia in the future, the Afrin situation is unlikely to change."

Although the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad often issues statements condemning the Turkish presence, Damascus does not have the power to challenge Turkey and Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow claims to stand in defence of Syria's territorial integrity, but has protested ⇒

⇒ little over Turkey's occupation of both Afrin and the nearby Jarablus/AI-Bab area.

Kobane, in an interview for Al-Monitor, charged that "Russia played an adverse role in Afrin" by opening the airspace to Turkey and withdrawing its military police on the eve of the invasion.

"This led to a breach of confidence with the Kurdish people," he said. "Russia needs to redress its mistake in Afrin if the wounds are to

be healed."

Despite these obstacles, Civiroglu is certain "no Kurd will ever accept the fact that part of their ancestral homeland has been taken from them".

Furthermore, Kurds in Syria are deeply disturbed by how badly the occupation has affected Afrin, which he notes was hitherto "one of the most stable parts of Syria" throughout the county's long civil war.

"Afrin was home for thousands

of displaced persons from Aleppo, Idlib and Homs," he said. "Gender equality was observed, with many senior positions held by women. Kurdish Alevis, Christians and Yazidis lived in harmony with Kurdish Muslims. There were also several Arab villages."

"Now, we see women are removed from social and political life, forced to cover-up. ISIS-like groups are in control of the city, people are kidnapped and tortured for ransom,

their properties stolen. This is horrifying."

"What happened in Afrin has worried Kurds and minorities alike in other parts of SDF-controlled areas in Syria who fear they will suffer a similar fate if Turkey launches any future operations." ■



April 15, 2019

Back to square one? KDP struggles to reconcile PUK, Gorran demands

By Rudaw.net 15/4/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Almost 200 days have passed since the Kurdistan Region held its parliamentary election. Despite several so-called "breakthrough" deals between the three biggest parties, the Region appears no closer to forming a new government.

Months of fruitless meetings between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Change Movement (Gorran) have blighted the process as the rivals bicker over lucrative positions in government.

Disagreements over the presidency were once a serious obstacle, with rivals disputing whether the post should have executive or purely ceremonial power.

Relations between Gorran and the KDP soured in 2015 when Gorran tried to rein in the powers of then-president Masoud Barzani.

Gorran wanted the prime minister to wield executive power instead and for the president to be elected by lawmakers rather than the public.

Relations between the two parties have since warmed and the post of deputy president was promised to Gorran.

However, a new deal promising a second deputy president to the PUK – Gorran's main rival in Sulaimani province – has placed the KDP-Gorran détente in jeopardy.

If the deal between the KDP and Gorran cannot be reconciled with the deal between the KDP and PUK, a new government will remain elusive.

Farid Asasard, a member of PUK leadership, told Rudaw if Gorran insists upon taking the deputy presidency, "both agreements have to be altered and the distribution of posts has to be re-discussed, which is not easy and time is against it."



Kurdistan parliament has not convened since October 2015 because of political disagreements between the KDP and Gorran, the first two largest parties in the Kurdistan Region. The Kurdistan Region parliament in Erbil. File photo: Farzin Hassan / Rudaw

Kwestan Mohammed, a member of Gorran's General Assembly, told Rudaw the party is ready to give the PUK the post of second deputy president, "but in return we shall be given Peshmerga Ministry or Interior Ministry [because] the second deputy will not leave any role for a deputy from Gorran."

However, Jaafar Sheikh Mustafa, commander of PUK forces in the Ministry of Peshmerga, has said he will not follow orders from Gorran officials if they are given security posts.

The parties have therefore reached an impasse. Voters are outraged at the continued delay.

"I see the KDP as a man with two spouses. He does whatever he can to please both wives, just to avoid people's talk and embarrassment," one Facebook user commented on Rudaw's recent coverage.

The KDP, which dominates the new parliament, does not want to

harm its newly mended relations with Gorran. At the same time, it wants to please the PUK, which had boycotted the parliament, disrupting government business.

Others were critical of parties which had left the previous parliament rather ineffective.

"Over the past three years, the majority of blocs in the Kurdistan parliament were considering the post of the Kurdistan Region president an extra thing and rejecting the establishment. Now, they are engaged in an overheated fight over even its deputies," a Facebook user commented.

As the dominant military force in Sulaimani and Halabja provinces, the PUK's demands cannot be ignored. Any government excluding the PUK would wield little authority in the Region's east.

The PUK's Asasard blamed the KDP for the dispute.

"The issue is that the KDP entered talks in a bad way, and it hastily

made a deal with Gorran as a reaction against the PUK. Now, the KDP itself has to resolve the issue even if it costs them a post because the PUK has made its deal and is waiting for these two parties," he said.

Aso Ali, another member of PUK leadership, said: "The delay of government formation has nothing to do with the PUK. We are awaiting the KDP and Gorran [to make a final agreement] so that we can sign our agreement with the KDP."

Two weeks ago, KDP leader Masoud Barzani warned further delays to government formation would not be tolerated.

"Now we have reached a stage where we can't wait and there is no justification for doing so. The time for waiting has ended," Barzani told a ceremony inaugurating a book fair in Erbil on April 3.

This strong message from Barzani was immediately followed by an initial deal between his party and PUK but it did not produce concrete results.

Reaching a compromise, the KDP submitted a bill with Gorran in late March to amend the controversial presidency law. According to the bill, the president will no longer be elected through a public vote but by lawmakers.

The bill has been through two readings, according to Hevidar Ahmed, a KDP lawmaker in the Kurdistan Region parliament, but the parties would rather not proceed without the PUK.

"KDP supporters, voters, and cadres keep asking furiously why the KDP is compromising," Ahmed said in an op-ed for Rudaw.

The best option for the KDP is to "meet most of the demands of the PUK and Gorran – which is more than their size [entitles them to] – to make them participate in the government," Ahmed added. ■

US slaps terrorist label on Iran's IRGC amid rising tensions

One of the countries that could be affected by the US move is Iraq, which has been trying to have good relations with both Tehran and Washington.



By Thomas Seibert
Sunday 14/04/2019
theArabweekly.com

bringing Iran to some sort of a negotiating table, just as he did with North Korea," Azizi added via e-mail.

ISTANBUL - The decision by the United States to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a foreign terrorist organisation raised tensions in the Gulf region and could lead to a military confrontation, analysts said.

The move by US President Donald Trump, announced April 8, marks the first time Washington has branded part of a foreign government a terrorist group, meaning anyone who deals with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) could face prosecution in US courts.

"The IRGC is the Iranian government's primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign," Trump said in a statement.

Washington has long seen al-Quds force, the IRGC's foreign arm, as a terrorist outfit but the latest action to widen the designation to the entire IRGC marks another step fuelling hostility between the two countries.

The United States withdrew from the 2015 international nuclear agreement with Iran under Trump and has pressured Tehran with crippling economic sanctions. The United States said its "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran was designed to force Iran to end its aggressive policies in the Middle East. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told a Senate committee "that President Trump will continue to ratchet up the pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran so that [its] behaviour will change." Critics said the administration's real aim is regime change.

Arash Azizi, a writer on Iranian affairs, said neither Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei nor Trump was looking for a military escalation but "Trump seems to be playing a dangerous

game of brinkmanship, aimed at

He pointed to "elements in the Trump administration, chiefly [national security adviser] John Bolton, who have always sought a violent regime change in Iran, including via military attacks. They seem to be getting the upper hand as the terrorist designation of IRGC has long been one of their demands."

Maysam Behraves, an Iran expert at Lund University in Sweden, said he did not expect a "major confrontation" between the Iran and the United States because of the IRGC designation. "Since it fuels already heightened tensions, it can trigger small-scale clashes that could lead to military confrontation," Behraves wrote in response to questions. "Another risk at a more systemic level comes from the increasingly closing windows of diplomacy, which helps set both sides on a collision course in the future."

News reports said US military leaders advised against Trump's decision to put the terrorist label on the IRGC because of concerns over retaliatory attacks by Iranian forces against US troops in the Middle East. However, the White House decided there was no real risk, Politico, a Washington publication, quoted a former administration official as saying.

Behraves agreed with Azizi in that hard-line presidential aides in the United States were after an escalation with Iran. "Trump doesn't seem to be adequately aware of all the consequences of some of his decisions other than its impact on his domestic electoral profile and relations with allies but his hawkish advisers, such as Bolton and Pompeo, are well aware of the implications and war with Iran seems to be what they're seeking," he wrote.

IRGC commanders have repeatedly said US bases in the Middle East and US aircraft carriers in the Gulf, a



Heightened pressure. Members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps march during a ceremony in Tehran, last February. (AP)

crucial shipping route for global oil trade, are within range of Iranian missiles. Tehran has also threatened to disrupt oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz if the United States tries to strangle Iran's economy by halting its oil exports.

The United States has a considerable military presence in Gulf countries near Iran, with an estimated 46,000 US troops as well as air force and naval units in the region from Iraq to the United Arab Emirates. The aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis arrived in the Persian Gulf in April. US troops are also active in Afghanistan, Iran's eastern neighbour.

Tehran responded to the US decision against the IRGC by naming the US Central Command (CENTCOM) a terrorist organisation and the US government a sponsor of terror. The Iranian armed forces' general staff, Iran's most senior military body that also oversees the IRGC, said it would "use all its means to fight" CENTCOM.

An IRGC commander warned the US Navy to keep its distance. "Mr Trump, tell your warships not to pass near [IRGC] boats," ISNA news agency reported a tweet from Mohsen Rezaei as saying. Khamenei said America's "vicious move" against the IRGC would fail.

One of the countries that could be affected by the US move is Iran's western neighbour Iraq, which has been trying to have good relations with both Tehran and Washington and which hosts US troops as well as Iran-backed militias.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi said he had tried to prevent Washington from condemning the IRGC. The decision "could have negative repercussions on Iraq and the region," he said. Any escalation "would make us all losers."

Azizi said the Iranian leadership would probably try to avoid provoking the United States. "At the same time, elements in the IRGC will be clamouring for at least some punitive attacks on US forces in the region," he wrote.

Iraq was a place where such attacks could happen. "Such moves would be much more dangerous in the Gulf, where things could escalate quickly," Azizi said.

Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States and a partner of Iran and Russia in the Syrian conflict, was also critical of the US decision but Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia applauded Trump's move. ♦

Thomas Seibert is an Arab Weekly contributor in Istanbul.



Jonathan Randal: After Such Knowledge, America and the Kurds

Laurie Mylroie / April 15-2019
www.kurdistan24.net

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24) – Jonathan Randal is a highly regarded foreign correspondent, who wrote for The Washington Post and The New York Times. After a career spanning 45 years, Randal is now mostly retired—but not entirely, as Kurdistan 24 spoke with him last week, while he was visiting Kurdistan to update his book, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan*.

Yadgar Fayege sat down with Randal in Erbil to discuss that book, as well as his view of contemporary events affecting the Kurds.

After Such Knowledge includes Randal's astonishing experiences in the spring of 1991, as the US allowed Saddam Hussein to crush the uprisings that followed the Gulf War. Although President George H.W. Bush had famously called on "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people" to "force Saddam Hussein, the dictator to step aside," what Bush really wanted—and expected—was a military coup.

Randal was in Iraqi Kurdistan at the time, he explained, at Bush's "specific request." With Iraqi forces driven out of Kuwait, on February 28, Bush, unilaterally, called for a ceasefire. Within days, widespread, popular revolts began in the Shi'a south and the Kurdish north.

Over the following month, the US watched as Saddam's forces ruthlessly suppressed the uprising in the south, and then toward the end of that month, began to turn north. On March 26, as Saddam was shifting his attention northwards, the White House essentially gave him the green light to suppress the uprisings.

As Randal's own paper, The Washington Post, reported, out of Washington, three days later, citing a senior US official, "Bush believes 'Saddam will quash the rebellions,'" and then "the Ba'ath military establishment and other elites" will blame him for the vast destruction "and install a new leadership."

Of course, that was nonsense.

Randal was then in Kurdistan. "I watched in horror," he told Kurdistan 24, "as Saddam's army was allowed by the United States government to come back into Kurdistan and crush the rebellion and kill a lot of innocent people."

Fearing that Saddam would use chemical weapons, as he had done previously, virtually the entire population of Kurdistan fled to the Iranian and Turkish borders, believing that Saddam would be inhibited from using poison gas, where the world would see it. The weak and the vulnerable died in the cold and the mud.

With journalists, including Randal, reporting on the humanitarian catastrophe that Bush had unleashed, he was soon forced to reverse course, and he initiated "Operation Provide Comfort."

That, along with the second Iraq war, is how, 28 years later, Jonathan Randal could be sitting comfortably in a fashionably appointed house in Erbil, discussing his book with Yadgar Fayege.

Denouncing the Bush administration's "unconscionable behavior" in 1991, Randal explained the motivating factor behind his book, "I wanted to set down the record of what I still consider to be American treachery."

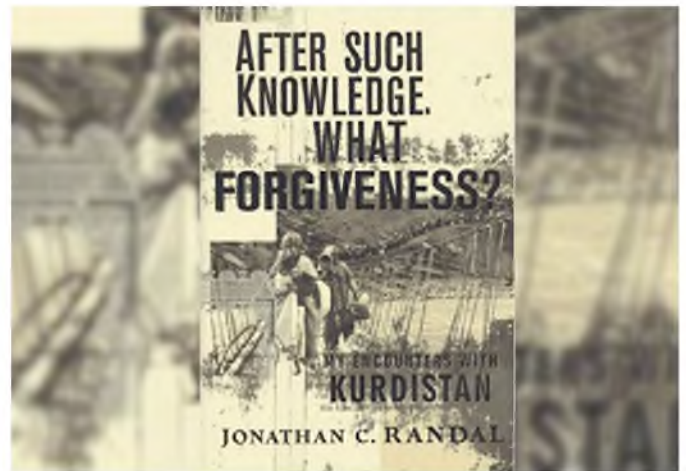
Particularly sad for a people who are basically pro-American, the Kurds of Iraq have a history of being repeatedly betrayed by Washington.

In 1975, as Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger endorsed the Algiers accord between Iran and Iraq, in which Iraq ceded to Iran control of half their riverine border, the Shatt al-Arab, and both sides agreed to cease support for the other's domestic opponents. Saddam ended his support for the Baluch rebellion in Iran, and the Shah dropped his support for Iraq's Kurds.

Explaining Kissinger's decision, Randal said, "It was simply off-



Jonathan Randal, a highly regarded foreign correspondent, who wrote for The Washington Post and The New York Times.
(Photo: Kurdistan 24)



The cover of Jonathan Randal's *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan*.

hand," adding that Kissinger didn't know or care about the Kurds and "called them a hill tribe, which is what the British called people in British-India."

US support for the Kurds had begun in 1972, in an off-hand manner. Kissinger and President Richard Nixon had just left Moscow, and they stopped in Tehran to see the Shah, who "was working on Nixon to help the Kurds," Randal explained.

This was no friendly gesture from the Shah to the Kurds, however. The Iranian ruler, as Randal explained, only "wanted to use the Kurds against Baghdad, against Saddam."

"I don't think Kissinger and Nixon thought two seconds about it," he said. "It was simply: the Shah asked them for a favor."

But, as Fayege protested, "He was national security adviser." And as Randal responded, "That is precisely the point."

And when US support for the Kurds ended in 1975, after Gerald Ford had become president, it was just as casual a decision.

Asked about 2017—when the US opposed the independence referendum and then turned a blind eye, as Iraqi forces attacked ➡

the Peshmerga in Kirkuk and other disputed territories in an operation masterminded by Qasim Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Randal explained that decision had been significantly different.

It “would seem to me, a much more complicated affair,” he said. “There were policy considerations that were extremely complicated for the Kurds and for the United States.”

Randal also suggested that US President Donald Trump bears responsibility. He “may have some virtues,” Randal said, “but analysis and careful research is not one of them.”

However, one can scarcely excuse those most responsible for the conduct of US foreign policy, including the National Security Advisor, H. R. McMaster, and the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, widely considered to be one of America's worst secretaries of state in recent time.

Tillerson left Iraq policy in the hands of relatively low-level bureaucrats, and their primary reason for opposing the Kurdistan Region's independence referendum, as they told Kurdish officials, was to ensure the election of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi—a calculation that failed spectacularly.

Indeed, Ryan Crocker—a former US ambassador to Iraq, an old Middle East hand of long experience, and Gen. David Petraeus' diplomatic partner during the “surge” in Iraq—in late September, before the assault on Kirkuk, criticized the strident US opposition to the referendum. Congressmen, including Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer, called on the US to recognize its results, as did John Bolton, then a private citizen, and now Trump's National Security Adviser, having replaced McMaster last April.

With different advisers, Trump might have made a different decision.

Randal worked in many countries over his long career, but he noted that the resources available to him had never been as rich as they were in Kurdistan, where he developed good relations with Kurdish leaders, including Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the late Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK.)

“I have never-ever, as a journalist, had access of a kind I've had with the Kurds,” he stated. “I don't think anybody directly lied to me. I



don't think anybody withheld anything from me.”

“I can remember times, when I wanted to go to the other side, and I would get a written note allowing me to pass” through checkpoints, said Randal, referring to demarcation lines that existed between different parts of the Kurdistan Region controlled by the KDP or PUK, whose disputes culminated in armed clashes, a dark chapter in Kurdish history.

In a part of the world where repression of journalists is commonplace, the Kurdistan Region's respect for the profession remains a true marker of Kurdish values. Although occasional instances of breaches and violence occur, journalistic freedom is nevertheless incomparable with neighboring states.

“The Kurds have this incredible ability to tolerate access to their enemies,” Randal explained. “We never were told that's none of your business” when he was in Kurdistan, along with other international correspondents. ●

Kosar Nawzad contributed to this report

Editing by Nadia Riva



APRIL 20, 2019

Four Turkish soldiers killed in clashes with Kurdish rebels

Rawa Barwari April 20-2019

ERBIL (Kurdistan24.net) – Kurdish rebels killed four Turkish soldiers and wounded six others on Friday at midnight near the Kurdistan Region border, Turkey's Defense Ministry said in a press release.

Clashes erupted during a Turkish army operation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an armed group the NATO member country outlaws along with its Western allies for leading a four-decade-long rebellion against the Turkish state over Kurds' demands of self-rule and cultural rights.

The Turkish forces expanded the scope of the operation with the help of airstrikes and mortars in the snow-clad mountainous region of the Hakkari province, the ministry said, without providing further details.

There was no comment from the PKK regarding the clashes as of the time of publishing this report.

It was unclear if there were Kurdish casualties, but the Turkish army said they were working “to determine” that.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akara flew to Hakkari to attend a military funeral procession for the slain soldiers and conduct a meeting with his generals stationed in the Kurdish province.

Meanwhile, the Ankara-appointed governor's office in Hakkari banned all meetings, rallies, press conferences, sit-ins, and demonstrations for 30 days; a measure which Turkish authorities frequently implement since the failed coup to topple President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in mid-2016.

This latest round of violence is the largest



Turkish soldiers carry coffins of fellow soldiers killed in clashes with PKK fighters during a military funeral procession in the Kurdish province of Hakkari, Turkey, April 20, 2019. (Photo: Defense Ministry)

in the aftermath of the nationwide March 31 local elections in Turkey which saw Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lose control of capital Ankara and Istanbul, the country's commercial hub. ●

The Improbable Rise and Uncertain Future of Syria's Kurds

Ofra Bengio / April 15, 2019

<https://www.the-american-interest.com>

The Kurds' rapid rise in Syria has been remarkable by any standard. With the U.S. military now pulling back, can their experiment in autonomy last?

The phenomenal rise of Kurds in Syria onto the international stage took the world by surprise. "Out of nowhere," as the title of Michael Gunter's 2014 book suggests, the Kurds managed within a short span of time (2012-19) to take control of one-third of Syria and, with but modest help from others, to defeat the most dangerous jihadi force in the Middle East, the Islamic State (IS). Their success raises some intriguing questions: What internal dynamics within the Kurdish community enabled this success? What tactics and strategies did the Kurdish entity develop in order to achieve its goals in a swift-changing geopolitical landscape? And with the U.S. military now drawing down in Syria, what are the prospects for its survival?

CONSOLIDATING POWER

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, a tacit struggle for power erupted between two rival wings within the Kurdish camp. One is a conglomerate of some 20 small parties established during the late 1950s that has been supported by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) from across the border.¹ Relations started from the time of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in the early 1960s, but his son Mas'ud cemented them into an alliance under an umbrella organization in 2011.

The second is the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), established in 2003 as an offshoot of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK). During the Cold War the Soviet Union and its ally Syria supported the PKK, and precursor Kurdish groups, with a view to weakening Turkey and NATO.

Between 2012 and 2014, the two wings made some halfhearted attempts to join forces, but the PYD ended up marginalizing its more fragmented rivals to secure military, political, and administrative control. The PYD's relative cohesiveness, martial spirit, superior organizational capabilities, and ideological arsenal mattered, but its military force, the Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG), trumped all.

Initially the lines dividing the political and military wings were quite blurred. However, since the beginning of war a division of power has developed, with the PYD controlling the administrative system and diplomatic ties and the YPG lead-

ing the fighting on the ground.

The YPG proved its mettle from the beginning of the Syrian war. Its successes enabled the establishment in 2015 of an autonomous region composed of three cantons: Qamishlo, Qobane, and Afrin. By early 2019 it had managed to destroy Jabhat al-Nusra and defeat the Islamic State on the ground, but lost control of Afrin.

The PYD also imposed one party-rule in Syrian Kurdistan by announcing in 2014 a law forbidding Kurdish political parties that did not recognize its administration.² Later it was blamed for persecuting members of the other wing and imposing authoritarian rule in the region.³

In contrast to its policy of isolating rival Kurdish parties, the PYD initiated alliances with non-Kurdish groups and communities including Assyrians, Turkmen, and most importantly Arabs. The rationale was to enlarge its influence over areas with Arab demographic dominance that came under its control during the war, as well as to present an image of a pluralistic, democratic, and modern society. It was also driven by a desire to establish an anarchist-inspired polyethnic society that aimed at sharing power among all ethnic and religious communities and invalidating the notion of a larger nation-state.

In truth, however, the PYD remained the hegemonic power within the group of organizations, sharing power with its non-Kurdish allies in merely symbolic ways. Thus, after the establishment in 2015 of the military alliance—the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with Arab, Assyrian, and other forces—the YPG continued to be the decision-maker and dominant force on the battlefield. Similarly, the political system the SDF established in the areas under its control was the embodiment of PYD/PKK ideological tenets, and

In contrast to its policy of isolating rival Kurdish parties, the PYD initiated alliances with non-Kurdish groups and communities including Assyrians, Turkmen, and most importantly Arabs.

more precisely experimentation in the social-political concepts of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Ocalan was famously influenced by the writings of the Marxist-turned-anarchist Murray Bookchin. From him he drew ideas such as "democratic federalism," "social ecology," and the need to renounce the concept of a nation-state.



Indeed, following Bookchin's death in 2006 the PKK paid public tribute to him for helping to shape its ideology and theory of administration.

The leadership, too, was monopolized by pro-PYD Kurds. For example, TEV-DEM, the coalition governing the autonomous region, is headed by two Kurdish co-chairs: Gharib Hesso and Zelal Ceger, whose predecessors were also Kurds. Kurdish national culture set the tone, as well. For example, the SDF celebrated the liberation of the last IS basis in Baghouz on March 24 with the Kurdish national anthem "Ey Reqib."

The party discourse itself, which has been full of studied dissimulation, exemplifies the two opposite pressures operating on the PYD: namely, the need to retain and downplay its Kurdish identity at the same time. For instance, unlike Kurdish parties in Iraq or the other so-called nationalist Kurdish Syrian parties, the PYD has avoided the terms Kurdish or Kurdistan in its title to allay concerns from Damascus, Ankara, and potential non-Kurdish partners over the specter of Kurdish separatism.

Tellingly, the PYD chose the name "Rojava," which simply means "west" in Kurdish, for the name of its autonomous region, rather than Rojavaye Kurdistan ("west Kurdistan"), which would have put it in the context of other parts of Greater Kurdistan: Bakur in Turkey, Rojhelat in Iran, and Bashur in Iraq. Later, due to political pressure either from its Arab partners or the Syrian regime, it thought it more prudent to drop Rojava and use the term "Northern Syria," as for example in the document "The Social Contract of the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria." It then shifted to "North and East Syria" as the tide of battle moved that way. Ironically, while the PYD tended to avoid the term Rojava after 2015, most world media outlets continued to use it.

These fluctuations illustrate the challenges facing the PYD as a result of the shifting boundaries in the ongoing war and its need to adapt its

discourse and maps accordingly. Indeed, the PYD-led government kept publishing changing maps of the region, including a virtual one showing Kurdistan of Syria reaching the sea. However, following the Turkish occupation of Afrin in 2018 it had to drop this map, and with it the dream of an outlet to the sea. The PYD's name changes and vacillations in terminology—including a shift from terms like democratic autonomy to the less fear-provoking "self-administration"—have similarly been made in deference to its other partners in the SDF but, no less importantly, to President Bashar al-Assad, with whom it hoped to reach an agreement on postwar Syria.

These fluctuations notwithstanding, the PYD has stood on firm ground regarding other crucial issues. One important constant was that it has kept intact its links with the PKK, with all the positive and negative consequences entailed.⁴ At the same time it has been trying to nurture deep-rooted change on the societal level by engineering a gender revolution and administrative innovation, while also fostering Kurdish national identity in the education system.

Kurdish women have been leading a gender revolution in Syria simultaneously with the main one.⁵ In addition to their effective participation in the war against IS, women are represented in the various diplomatic and political echelons of public life. Their most important achievement has been the co-chairing arrangement anchored in the provisional constitution of 2016. Thus Article 12 states:

The Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria adopts the co-presidency system in all political, social, administrative, and other fields. It considers it a main principle in equal representation of both genders. The co-presidency system contributes to organizing and establishing the democratic confederate system of women as a special entity.

In many societies, women who come to the fore during wartime are sidelined when the war ends. For Kurdish women in Syria, however, the changes may be too widespread and deep to be uprooted when the guns go silent.

Another area of deep changes is in the education system. In contrast to pressures for blurring Kurdish identity in the public discourse, Kurdish activists felt freer to introduce a heavy dose of Kurdish nationalism in Kurdish textbooks. In this they hoped to thwart the regime's continuous attempts to Arabize the Kurds. Examining several textbooks for small children, one is struck by their overwhelming emphasis on Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism as a whole.

To give but a few examples: One textbook presents a map of Greater Kurdistan carrying the original names of Kurdish cities and places instead of the official ones given them by the governments as part of their longstanding de-Kurdification policies. The term Kurdistan is repeated time and again, and the same is true for famous national Kurdish poets such as Ahmad Khani or Cegerxwin.

Pan-Kurdism is also carefully interwoven into the texts. For example, one textbook includes a poem about the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad, which existed for a few months in 1946 in Iran. Another mentions the 1988 massacre in Halabja in Iraqi

Kurdistan, where some 5,000 Kurds were killed by the Iraqi Ba'ath regime's chemical attack.

The Kurdish language is another identity marker given much attention in the textbooks. Kurdish is glorified as "the sweet and beautiful language" and "the star of the world." Interestingly, no allusion whatsoever to Islam may be found; instead the stress is on Nowruz as a sacred day for the Kurds.

FOREIGN MANEUVERS

The long war in Syria forced the Kurdish leadership to wage war on several fronts, but simultaneously to leave as many channels as possible open for forming ad hoc alliances and maneuvering between potential partners. One major problem was that the more victories the Kurdish forces scored against IS, the more they antagonized Turkey, which came to view them as an existential threat. Initially, the PYD attempted to reach an understanding with Turkey, Syria's nemesis, when its leader Salih Muslim visited Ankara twice in summer 2013. The attempt failed: Turkey turned gradually from a passive into an active anti-Kurdish adversary. In two operations, in August 2017 and January 2018, the Turkish army and its proxies took control of Syrian lands—in Jarablus and Afrin, respectively—in hopes of eliminating the Kurdish dream of creating a contiguous autonomous region.

Sandwiched between two archenemies, Turkey and Syria, the PYD managed successfully to keep a channel open to the latter. Thus, from the start the leadership has maintained a tacit understanding with President Assad with regard to the administration of the region from which the Syrian army had withdrawn in 2012. This meant, for example, that Kurdish employees could continue receiving salaries from Damascus and thus avert a serious economic crisis. For its part, the regime maintained a token force in an enclave in Qamishlo, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region.

Ad hoc cooperation did not prevent occasional armed clashes between Kurdish forces and the Syrian army, as happened in April 2016 and September 2018. The latter clash signaled the strengthening of Damascus and its aspiration to reassume actual control over the autonomous region. Indeed, in the negotiations between the parties in summer 2018, Assad was reluctant to acknowledge the Kurdish demand for autonomy.

Confident of the Kurds' unique contribution to the rout of IS in Syria, the PYD initiated diplomatic moves early on to gain legitimacy for Kurdish autonomy. However, the position of its so-called allies—especially that of the two major players, Russia and the United States—proved inconsistent and frustrating.

The Kurds depended on Russia, which granted them some diplomatic space by allowing a Kurdish representation in Moscow, and by mediating between them and Assad. However, when put to the test, Russia's backing proved ephemeral. Moscow not only offered no tangible military support to the Kurdish forces fighting IS, but also granted Turkey a green light to occupy Afrin. Russia also dismissed talk of an autonomous region in postwar Syria. Thus, in the mediation talks between the Kurds and Damascus in early 2019, the Russian Foreign Ministry told the Kurdish representative that Russia was ready to "work together to protect the sovereignty and ter-

ritorial integrity of Syria"—not a word about Kurdish autonomy. Meanwhile, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the U.S. administration of trying to establish a Kurdish state in Syria's north.

For all of Russia's accusations, the American stance regarding a Kurdish entity was no less ambivalent than its own. For all of Russia's accusations, the American stance regarding a Kurdish

Kurdish women have been leading a gender revolution in Syria simultaneously with the main one.

entity was no less ambivalent than its own. The PYD itself had to adapt itself quickly to a new partner with which it had no earlier ties. The Kurds' need of American military assistance moved the PYD to soften some of its leftist ideological tenets. This flexibility combined with Kurdish military achievements prepared the ground for the ad hoc military cooperation between the parties initiated at the end of 2014.

Reluctant to send its own boots to the battlefield and leaning on Kurdish YPG fighters as the best proxies for defeating IS, the U.S. government was even willing at times to prioritize its relations with Syrian Kurds above those with Turkey. However, paradoxically enough, the YPG's victories stood once again to jeopardize the continuity of American support. The best illustration of this paradox was President Donald Trump's sudden declaration at the end of 2018 to withdraw all American forces from Rojava with the excuse that IS had been defeated. Obviously, both Turkey and Syria were enthusiastic about this sudden declaration, which carried an opportunity to get rid, each in its own way, of Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. This American capriciousness induced the Kurdish leadership to use various diplomatic channels in Washington and the world at large to curtail losses and safeguard Kurdish autonomy.

A decade ago Rojava was a nonentity, but within eight years the PYD/YPG managed to put it on the regional and international map. Yet its collapse could happen as quickly as its rise. The PYD's victories brought it a major enemy, Turkey, but no real friend. The U.S. government, its ad hoc ally, used it as a proxy for fighting IS but might now abandon it. Clearly, the U.S. administration was oblivious to the fact that the Kurds have paid dearly in this proxy war—around 11,000 killed and many more wounded, according to the Kurds' estimates.

For all its uniqueness, the short history of Rojava resembles that of many other minority communities in the Middle East by illustrating a major paradox: Rather than helping oppressed minorities, the backing of external powers in the region proved catastrophic for them. As ever, minorities are used as proxies only to be abandoned after having fulfilled their task. As ever, minorities are used as proxies only to be abandoned after having fulfilled their task.

A few examples suggest the trend. Great Britain used the Assyrians as proxies throughout its mandatory period in Iraq (1920-32) but

abandoned them in the Iraqi army's infamous Simele massacre in 1933. The Soviet Union used Iranian Kurds during World War II as a bargaining chip against the central government and even assisted them in establishing the Mahabad Republic, only to leave them to their devices at the end of that war. The United States used Iraqi Kurds as a balance against Baghdad and its patron the Soviet Union during the Kurdish-Iraqi war in 1974-75, but was instrumental in ending that war with catastrophic results for the Kurds.

Even though the SDF declared its final victory over IS in March, American zigzagging declarations and policies do not bode well for sustaining that victory. The big question mark is therefore whether the Kurds of Syria will be able to break the vicious circle of other minorities, or whether that typical fate will once again befall them.

Indeed, the real war for protecting their hard-earned autonomy has just begun. To succeed in their endeavor the PYD/YPG has to move on various levels simultaneously. Domestically, they have to lower the public profile of their relations with the PKK, soften their monopoly on power, and reconcile with the other major Kurdish wing in Syria as well as with its patron across the border in northern Iraq. Such policy may also increase Kurdish socio-political cohesiveness overall and gain the backing of an influential Kurdish diaspora in the ongoing battle for diplomatic support in the West.

Regionally speaking, the PYD/YPG has yet to cope with its two major enemies, Turkey and Syria. Regarding Turkey, the PYD/YPG should continue to mobilize the support of its allies against possible Turkish encroachment and alternatively insist on taking part in a safety zone, should one be established. The AKP's weakened position following recent elections may be instrumental for a change of policy in Ankara, especially since the PYD/YPG have never carried out any terrorist attacks against this country.

As for relations with postwar Syria, the Kurds have already allayed Assad's fears by renouncing separatism and adopting the notion of autonomy within the Syrian state. Still, they find themselves on the horns of a dilemma between negotiating with Assad and adhering to Washington's warning to refrain from doing so. In the final analysis, they might be forced to come to terms with Assad, but American backing could be crucial for gaining a better deal for the Kurds.

On the international level, the Kurds should press home the idea that they are indispensable for keeping jihadi forces in the Levant at bay. Thus, they may use the West's need for them as leverage against their abandonment. The PYD/YPG may also argue that continuing to back them would serve strategic American interests in the region, such as balancing the deteriorating U.S. relationship with Ankara and putting obstacles in the

way of greater Iranian encroachment in Syria. If the Kurds can make that case, they may just be able to defy history and protect their hard-earned position. ♦

1 Harriet Allsopp, "Kurdish political parties and the Syrian uprising," in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Hurst and Company, 2017), p.289. Allsopp describes them as "the parties of 1957," as many were established that year.

2 See Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, "The Curious question of the PYD-PKK relationship" in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Hurst and Company, 2017), p.279.

3 Allsopp, p.297.

4 For further details, see Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, pp. 275-287.

5 Ofra Bengio, "Game changers: Kurdish women in peace and war" *Middle East Journal* (Volume 70, Number 1, Winter 2016).

Ofra Bengio is Senior Associate at the Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University. She is the author of several books on the Kurds, the latest being Kurdistan's Moment in the Middle East.



... APRIL 22, 2019

Syrian regime cannot attack Kurdish areas, Russia has no more influence: YPG Spokesperson

Hisham Arafat April 22-2019

QAMISHLO (Kurdistan24.net) – A top Kurdish official on Sunday slammed the Syrian regime and Russia for threatening to attack Syria's northeast.

"We don't believe that the [Syrian] regime has the ability to fight us, but it insists on carrying on with such threats all the time," Nuri Mahmoud, the spokesperson for the People's Protection Units (YPG), told Kurdistan 24.

The YPG, the military force of the self-administration in the northeast, including the all-women brigade known as the YPJ, have been the leading component of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which defeated the Islamic State east of the Euphrates in March.

Mahmoud further noted that they don't seek conflict with any faction in Syria, but rather a democratic Syria.

"We seek a country where all sides, groups, and factions can meet and agree on a solution for Syria," he said.

Mahmoud also criticized Russia's role in Syria, stating the country had no more influence.

"Russian policy [in Syria] has turned out to be very superficial. Regarding Syria, it has adopted short-term goals and has agreed with Turkey to turn the Syrian crisis into a business," he claimed.

"As such, we view Russia's influence and



Nuri Mahmoud, the spokesperson of People's Protection Units (YPG), speaks to Kurdistan 24 regarding recent threats made by the Syrian regime and Russia on the Kurdish areas in northern Syria, Qamishlo city, Rojava, Syria, April 21, 2019. (Photo: Kurdistan 24)

position in Syria as very weak. Threats Russia has made outside Syria have no influence, even on the Syrian regime."

He also pointed out to what he called Russia's "silent acceptance" of the Turkish-backed opposition forces seizing parts of northern Syria.

"The Russian military is present in Syria but it has no influence on Damascus. Mind you, Damascus' control is not that significant: There

is Al-Qaeda in Idlib, and there is the Turkish occupation in the northwest as well," he added.

"Although Russia is a Guarantor State and it claims to have been officially invited by the Syrian regime, the regime has been silent towards the occupation in Idlib, Afrin, al-Bab, Jarabulus and Azaz."

The Kurdish-led authorities revived efforts to negotiate a deal with Damascus earlier this year in the wake of a US decision to withdraw its forces from their areas, hoping Moscow would mediate an agreement that would preserve their autonomy.

The landscape has shifted dramatically since then, however, with Washington deciding to maintain some troops in Syria and the Syrian government directing new threats of military action against the Kurdish-led forces if they do not submit to its rule.

Unlike the insurgent groups that have fought President Bashar al-Assad across much of Syria, the main Syrian Kurdish groups are not hostile toward him and affirm their objective is to preserve autonomy within the Syrian state.

Damascus has opposed the level of autonomy the self-administration seeks. The Syrian defense minister last month said the state would take back the Kurdish-held regions by force if its leaders did not submit to the return of state authority. ●

JUSTICE. UN TRIBUNAL PÉNAL INTERNATIONAL POUR JUGER LES DJIHADISTES DE L'EI À KOBANÉ



Seve Aydin-Izouli / 17 Avril, 2019
Avocate au barreau de Paris

www.humanite.fr

Rappel des faits. Les forces kurdes qui luttent sur le terrain demandent aujourd'hui le recours à la juridiction internationale pour juger les criminels de guerre et crimes contre l'humanité.

Les Kurdes du Rojava ont demandé à la communauté internationale la création d'un tribunal international à Kobané afin de juger, sur place, les djihadistes de l'EI, parmi lesquels se trouvent les ressortissants de pays européens que leurs pays refusent de récupérer.

Cette demande n'a toutefois pas reçu des autorités françaises l'enthousiasme espéré, celles-ci invoquant des difficultés d'ordre politique et juridique pour sa mise en œuvre. Pourtant l'idée de faire juger les terroristes de l'EI au Kurdistan syrien a été suggérée, pour la première fois, par la France elle-même. Elle y voyait un moyen de se soustraire à ses obligations de rapatrier ses ressortissants djihadistes et de les juger devant ses propres tribunaux. En proposant cette solution, qui émanait de surcroît de la ministre de la Justice Nicole Belloubet elle-même, le gouvernement français savait pertinemment que ce projet était irréaliste et irréalisable: les Kurdes du Rojava ne constituent pas un État, ni même une entité nationale et internationalement reconnue. Ils n'ont pas les moyens juridiques, politiques, logistiques et financiers pour assumer cette lourde mission, que la France avec toute sa grandeur peine à accomplir.

Après la décision américaine de retirer ses troupes de Syrie et l'exhortation du président Trump faite aux Européens de récupérer leurs ressortissants djihadistes détenus par les Kurdes, la France s'est dite prête à faire rapatrier 250 personnes. Toutefois, l'opération a été stoppée, selon une révélation de Libération du 5 avril 2019, par une décision du président de la République Macron, prise à la dernière minute.

Ce n'est pas la première fois que la France se

montre désemparée dans cette affaire. Son indécision et son incapacité à gérer cette crise sont aussi exaspérantes qu'incompréhensibles, s'agissant d'un pays qui compte parmi les plus grandes puissances mondiales.

Les Kurdes placés devant le fait accompli et contraints de gérer seuls des milliers de djihadistes avec leurs familles, sans moyens adéquats, ont trouvé dans la création d'un tribunal international une alternative permettant de sortir de l'impasse et de placer les grands États face à leurs responsabilités.

La proposition kurde n'apparaît ainsi pas dépourvue de toute cohérence et utilité. La communauté internationale avait déjà créé des tribunaux spéciaux pour faire face à des situations particulières de violations massives et graves des droits de l'homme et du droit humanitaire, qualifiées de crimes de guerre et de crimes contre l'humanité.

Certes, la mise en œuvre d'un tel tribunal soulève un certain nombre de difficultés ayant trait, par exemple, au respect de la souveraineté de la Syrie, au vote d'une résolution contraignante par le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, à la rédaction du statut de ce tribunal, à la loi applicable en combinaison avec le droit pénal international, aux moyens logistiques pour assurer un procès équitable conforme aux exigences du droit international, aux lieux de détention des personnes poursuivies puis à l'exécution des peines prononcées...

Mais, au-delà du fait que la création d'un tribunal international est, en l'état actuel du refus de la plupart des pays occidentaux de rapatrier leurs nationaux, la seule solution envisageable, elle présente certains avantages.

Elle permettrait d'abord de suppléer à la carence du Rojava en termes de moyens logistiques et matériels, notamment en mettant en place une juridiction spécialisée composée de magistrats professionnels, avec des avocats formés aux droits de la défense, des greffiers et l'ensemble des acteurs garantissant un procès équitable et aboutissant à des jugements ayant une force exécutoire et une reconnaissance officielle au niveau international.

La proximité du tribunal, qui siègerait symboliquement à Kobané, constituerait également un atout de taille pour une bonne administration de la justice. Cette proximité faciliterait la collecte des preuves matérielles, l'audition des accusés comme des témoins... Elle permettrait surtout aux dizaines de milliers de Kurdes yezidis et aux Syriens, victimes directes de Daech ou, par ricochet, des bombardements de la coalition internationale, de crier leur



colère et leurs souffrances, et de se faire ainsi entendre.

Cette proximité permettrait également de juger les coupables dans un délai raisonnable afin d'éviter les erreurs des précédents tribunaux internationaux, comme celui de l'ex-Yougoslavie ou du Rwanda, qui n'ont rendu leurs jugements qu'au terme d'une procédure déraisonnablement longue. La création d'un tribunal international représenterait par ailleurs une garantie d'impartialité et d'indépendance vis-à-vis des enjeux électoraux de la politique interne et de la pression intense exercée par l'opinion publique sur les juridictions nationales.

Enfin, elle permettrait de mettre fin à la détention arbitraire de plusieurs dizaines de milliers d'hommes, de femmes et même d'enfants, pour certains depuis plusieurs mois, sans qu'aucune décision judiciaire ni même administrative n'ait été prononcée, et ce, dans des conditions épouvantables, à la limite du supportable, y compris pour le personnel chargé de l'encadrement.

La communauté internationale doit assumer ses responsabilités face à cette situation extrêmement dangereuse: des milliers d'hommes et de femmes aveuglés par une idéologie extrémiste et accablés par un vécu lourd sont entassés, faute de moyens, comme du bétail dans les camps et les prisons du Rojava. Ce sont des bombes à retardement et il est impératif de les désamorcer en urgence, pas uniquement par une réponse pénale, mais aussi par une prise en charge totale.

Les Kurdes ont très courageusement combattu et vaincu l'EI aux côtés de la coalition internationale. Ils ont payé un lourd tribut pour faire triompher les valeurs universelles de liberté et d'humanité. Pourtant, les États membres de cette coalition, plutôt que de les soutenir et de leur permettre d'accéder à leurs droits légitimes, les laissent seuls, sans moyens, faire face à un problème gigantesque qui les dépasse de loin. Ces États ne peuvent plus continuer à se comporter comme si les Kurdes, qui sont un peuple ayant une cause juste à défendre, étaient de simples mercenaires, ou encore comme si le Kurdistan était leur déchèterie où ils pourraient y jeter impunément leur «poubelle» au lieu de la recycler chez eux.

La bataille contre les islamistes radicaux ne peut se gagner par la seule réponse pénale, pas plus qu'elle ne peut prospérer par la haine et le rejet. Elle ne se gagnera que par notre attachement à l'État de droit, à nos principes démocratiques, à notre humanité. ●

ANALYSE

Turquie : "Erdogan a réussi à imposer l'islam comme référent à tous les partis"

Propos recueillis par Martine Gozlan
Publié le 19/04/2019
www.marianne.net

Le président turc, qui veut faire invalider les élections à Istanbul, est-il vraiment indéboulonnable ?

La journaliste Ariane Bonzon, longtemps en poste en Turquie, consacre son dernier ouvrage à ce moment Erdogan qui s'éternise. Elle décrypte la situation.

Le parti d'Erdogan, l'AKP, a enregistré sa première défaite aux dernières élections municipales. Quelles sont les raisons de ce revers ?

ARIANE BONZON : D'abord c'est une défaite relative. L'AKP reste le premier parti politique de Turquie. En termes de suffrages, il se maintient à peu près au même niveau (44%) que lors des élections municipales précédentes et conserve la majorité des mairies d'arrondissement de la plupart des grandes villes – à Ankara et Istanbul en particulier – dont il a perdu la mairie. Le parti au pouvoir garde donc un fort pouvoir d'obstruction, y compris au niveau de la gestion des subventions et fonds municipaux.

En revanche, la perte d'Istanbul est un choc pour le président turc, car depuis 25 ans, il a bâti sa propre montée en puissance politique, économique, religieuse et idéologique, à partir de l'ancienne capitale ottomane. Istanbul est la référence, le marqueur essentiel de RT Erdogan. Le fait que son poulain ait été battu constitue donc un avertissement à son encontre, lui qui a fortement personnalisé la campagne électorale.

J'y vois un double rejet : rejet de la politique économique (ne pas oublier qu'Istanbul est la capitale économique) menée par le président turc, laquelle a conduit à la rupture du contrat social initial, fondé sur la croissance, entre son peuple et lui, et rejet de sa rhétorique polarisante (le Bien, le Mal, Eux et Nous) dont la campagne du Parti républicain du peuple (CHP), qui avait parfois des accents « Peace and love », a pris le contre-pied.

Cela dit, la réforme de la loi électorale, une série de manipulations et de fraudes, ainsi que la mobilisation des ressources de l'Etat en faveur du parti au pouvoir ont fragilisé la légitimité des élections depuis quelques années. Malgré cela, les électeurs turcs ne se sont pas résignés à l'auto-



cratie. L'aspiration démocratique est très vivace. Or l'AKP et Erdogan cherchent à invalider la victoire de l'opposition à Istanbul. Si de nouvelles élections devaient avoir lieu, le président et son parti risqueraient de perdre encore un peu plus de leur crédit et de leur légitimité...

Pour faire oublier la déception économique, Erdogan peut-il jouer davantage la fibre religieuse et faire inscrire la charia dans la Constitution ?

Il a mieux et plus consensuel : invoquer « l'im-périalisme économique américain et occidental », le « complot des puissances d'argent », des « taux d'intérêt », thèmes qui trouvent un écho tout à la fois chez les musulmans pieux et chez certains militants souverainistes de gauche.

En revanche, Erdogan et son parti ont un problème dont on parle peu, car difficile à appréhender, c'est l'éclatement de leur base religieuse. Le « parti de la félicité », pourtant islamiste, fondé par son mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, est passé dans l'opposition ; et nombre d'adeptes de la Cemaat (la communauté, le réseau de l'imam Fethullah Gülen) aussi. Si vous interrogez ces militants, ils vous expliqueront que Erdogan n'est pas un « vrai musulman ». Dès lors, celui-ci peut vouloir leur donner des gages. Cependant, la laïcité à la turque (le contrôle de la Mosquée par l'Etat et non la séparation de la mosquée et de l'Etat), lui fournit déjà tous les outils pour faire du sunnisme la religion d'Etat, ce qui ne lui donne pas vraiment besoin d'inscrire la Charia dans la Constitution. S'il le fait ce sera essentiellement pour des raisons de survie politique, bien plus que par conviction.

L'opposition laïque, appuyée par le parti kurde HDP, a-t-elle une chance de se reconstituer ?

Les références à la religion, à l'islam, ont désormais leur place dans les discours politiques de tous les partis, y compris dans l'opposition, au CHP comme au HDP, Parti démocratique des peuples, turco-kurde de gauche, favorable à l'autonomie kurde. C'est l'une des grandes victoires de l'AKP et de son chef : ils ont réussi à rendre incontournable pour tout candidat la référence à l'islam. Le CHP et l'HDP ont compris qu'ils ne



pouvaient plus « faire sans ». Pendant la campagne, on a vu Ekrem Imamoglu, candidat de l'opposition à la mairie d'Istanbul, prier sur le Coran, son épouse prendre la défense des femmes voilées ! Et depuis 2014, la branche locale du HDP, dans le sud-est kurde du pays, célèbre l'anniversaire de la naissance du Prophète, pour ne pas laisser ce terrain-là au seul parti islamiste radical kurde.

Dès lors pour constituer un front d'opposition laïque, il va falloir d'abord que les partis s'entendent sur l'usage des références religieuses dans le discours politique, et surtout se mettent d'accord sur ce que doit être la laïcité turque, ce qui n'est pas le cas actuellement. Mais on peut effectivement penser que le HDP serait le parti le plus à même de repenser celle-ci dans le sens d'une laïcité donnant à tous, sunnites, alevites, juifs, arméniens catholiques ou protestants, grecs orthodoxes, les mêmes droits.

Vous évoquez dans votre livre* les différents scénarios possibles. Si Erdogan devait perdre le pouvoir, écrivez-vous « les accusations de corruption ressortiraient et il risquerait la prison ». Or la corruption est un péché majeur pour nombre de peuples en colère, l'exemple algérien vient de nous le prouver. Jusqu'où Erdogan peut-il aller ? Quelle est la prochaine échéance électorale et y a-t-il une chance de le voir perdre ?

Ces accusations de corruption ont émergé en 2013 dans le contexte très particulier de la lutte entre les gulénistes et Erdogan. Ce qui était ➔

➔ en jeu c'était le contrôle de l'appareil de l'Etat au sein duquel les gulénistes avaient pris des positions clés (dans les ressources humaines et les départements informatiques, ainsi que dans la justice et la police en particulier). Si on n'a pas cela bien en tête, cette lutte à mort au sein du camp islamique, on ne comprend pas ce qu'il s'est passé ces dernières années en Turquie. Les preuves de corruption avancées étaient basées sur des écoutes et des documents secrets fournis semble-t-il par les gulénistes.

Pour l'instant, l'enquête judiciaire a été confisquée. Sera-t-elle ouverte si Erdogan venait à

perdre le pouvoir ? Ce qui est sûr c'est que ce dernier bénéficie désormais d'une immunité renforcée depuis la mise en place de la réforme constitutionnelle entérinée par référendum en 2017. Ce sera donc compliqué de relancer ce processus. Erdogan a 4 années devant lui sans échéance électorale, autrement dit cinq années pour remodeler la société, réécrire l'Histoire et fabriquer l'homme nouveau auquel il aspire, bref être prêt pour que 2023 marque non seulement le centenaire de la fondation de la république de Turquie par Mustafa Kemal mais le départ d'une nouvelle république à sa main.

Ceux qui voudraient le voir tomber avant 2023 ne peuvent compter que sur le Parlement. En effet, si 60% des députés constituent un front uni, ils peuvent s'auto-dissoudre et appeler à de nouvelles élections législatives. Ce qui appellera automatiquement des élections présidentielles, les deux scrutins sont liés. Et cela remettrait en cause le mandat d'Erdogan. Mais cela implique que près des deux tiers des députés s'unissent, or l'opposition ne constitue pas vraiment un front solidaire. La question kurde est une fracture profonde. C'est cela qui fait la force d'Erdogan et le maintient au pouvoir. ♦

LE FIGARO mercredi 24 avril 2019

La France commémore officiellement le génocide des Arméniens

Cette « journée nationale » était une promesse de campagne d'Emmanuel Macron.

MARIE-ESTELLE PECH [@MariEstellePech](#)

MÉMOIRE Si la France reconnaît le génocide arménien depuis 2001, Emmanuel Macron a décidé tout récemment que ce 24 avril serait dédié à la commémoration du génocide. Ce même jour, en 1915, 600 intellectuels arméniens furent assassinés à Constantinople sur ordre du gouvernement. C'était le début d'un massacre qui coûtera la vie à environ 1,2 million de personnes : les deux tiers des Arméniens de l'Empire ottoman. Cette date est celle qui avait déjà été retenue par l'Arménie et le Nagorny-Karabakh, région à majorité arménienne qui a déclaré son indépendance de l'Azerbaïdjan en 1991.

« Chaque année, à cette date, une cérémonie est organisée à Paris », peut-on lire dans le décret présidentiel. « Une cérémonie analogue peut être organisée dans chaque département à l'initiative du préfet. » En instituant cette commémoration dans le calendrier républicain, Emmanuel Macron a honoré une promesse faite lors de sa campagne en 2017, geste que les Arméniens de France, plusieurs centaines de milliers de personnes, at-

tendaient avec impatience. Pour la première fois, donc, le premier ministre Édouard Philippe honorera mercredi de sa présence un rassemblement parisien devant la statue du père Komitas, place du Canada, dans le VIII^e arrondissement de Paris. Ce fameux musicien arménien né dans la Turquie ottomane avait été fait prisonnier puis déporté par les Turcs pendant le génocide en 1915 avant de terminer sa vie en exil en France.

« Mon peuple a failli disparaître »

« Nous avons attendu tellement longtemps cette reconnaissance. Il s'agit pour nous d'un soulagement », confie Tchinar Arakelian, 59 ans, qui tient le restaurant de la culture arménienne, dans le IX^e arrondissement de Paris. Elle se rendra à la commémoration, même si l'histoire de son peuple massacré constitue un « fardeau très lourd ». Mais « il s'agit d'un devoir pour ma famille, pour notre histoire ». Cette femme « arménienne de Géorgie » vit en France depuis trente ans. La mémoire de son peuple ne lui a pas vraiment été transmise par sa famille, massacrée du côté de son père, « car elle n'en avait pas la force, elle a toujours été trop



triste pour nous la raconter », raconte-t-elle. Son mari, Mamikon, lui, trop ému, refuse d'évoquer le génocide. Loin de sa famille, il préfère prier en silence et fleurir de roses, le jour du génocide, les tombes des exilés aux noms arméniens finissant par « ian » d'un cimetière parisien.

À 40 ans, Léa, marseillaise, a choisi, avec l'accord de son mari, de transmettre son nom de famille arménien à ses enfants : « Mon peuple a failli disparaître de la surface de la Terre. Transmettre mon nom aujourd'hui très rare était essentiel pour moi. Je le dois à mes grands-parents venus de Turquie. » Elle participera à une cérémonie à Marseille ce mercredi avec ses deux garçonnetts au Mémorial du génocide des Arméniens, avenue du 24-Avril 1915. D'autres rassemblements sont prévus notamment à Nice, Orléans, Lyon et Valence et dans plusieurs villes d'Île-de-France. La question du génocide arménien est une source de tensions régulières entre la Turquie et les pays de l'Union européenne. Si selon Erevan, 1,5 million d'Arméniens ont été tués de manière systématique à la fin de l'Empire ottoman entre 1915 et 1917, Ankara reconnaît qu'un grand nombre d'Arméniens ont été tués par les Turcs durant cette période, mais conteste l'idée qu'il y ait eu une volonté systématique de les exterminer, rejetant de ce fait le terme de « génocide ». ■

What did Russia get from its KRG gamble?

Energy giant Rosneft struck major deals with Iraq's Kurdish region in 2017. Today, it has yet to cash in on them.

By Mariya Petkova / 15 Apr 2019
www.aljazeera.com

Erbil, Iraq - Two years after Iraq's new constitution in 2005 officially recognised the autonomy of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, Russia established formal relations with its regional government (the KRG) by opening a consulate in its capital Erbil.

By then, the United States, the United Kingdom, Iran and Turkey had become the main political and economic players in the oil-rich region, which holds proven reserves of some 45 billion barrels of oil (10th biggest in the world) and is estimated to have between 2.8 to 5.7 trillion cubic metres of natural gas (roughly as much as Algeria).

Although Russia boasted "historic" relations with the Kurdish leadership (Mustafa Barzani, the father of the former KRG president, Masoud Barzani, spent 12 years in exile in the Soviet Union), it seemed there was little space for it to play a major role in the autonomous region.

But when, in the early 2010s, Russian energy companies sent delegations to probe for potential oil deals, KRG's western partners became nervous. According to a former Russian diplomat who spoke to Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity, the UK's foreign office, in particular, was worried.

In a 2012 conversation with him, British officials expressed their concern that the Russian companies' entry into the Kurdish energy sector could stir trouble by giving the KRG political backing to go against the common consensus among the UK, US, Turkey and Iran that the Kurdish region should remain part of Iraq.

In 2012, Russian state-owned energy giant Gazprom signed a contract for exploration and oil production in two blocks in the Kurdish region and just a year later KRG's President Masoud Barzani went on a four-day visit to Moscow, meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller.

Four years later, the fears of the British Foreign Office proved justified. A series of energy deals that another Russian state-owned energy company, Rosneft, concluded in 2017 with the debt-laden KRG, saved it from economic collapse and helped it gain enough political leverage to pursue an independence referendum on September 25 of that year, against the advice of all of its close allies, including the US and the UK.

It was not the first time Rosneft, whose CEO Igor Sechin is perceived to be one of Putin's closest political allies, had come to the "rescue" of a foreign government in financial distress and under political duress. Over the past few years, it

has continued to invest heavily in crisis-stricken Venezuela, despite losing millions of dollars in the process. Rosneft's investment has effectively propped President Nicholas Maduro's government and secured Russia a loyal ally in the "US backyard". The Kremlin has long been accused of using state-owned energy companies as political tools.

In the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, however, Russian diplomatic gains appear much more limited because of political uncertainty, and regulatory and technical barriers. In fact, Rosneft is yet to turn a profit from the more than \$4bn it invested in oil and gas deals, sources have told Al Jazeera.

So, two years after the Rosneft deals were concluded, what did Russia get out of its KRG gamble?

'SAVING' THE KRG

In 2016, the KRG was suffering from a severe political and economic crisis. It was in the middle of fighting a war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS), which had become a source of insecurity and a significant financial burden. Its budget had taken a major hit after the 2014 slump in oil prices had dwindled revenues. And a dispute with Baghdad over the right to export oil independently had escalated and resulted in the cutting of payments from the federal budget.

As the Kurdish region was backtracking on major economic achievements of the post-2003 period, popular anger had grown exponentially. The economic recession and cuts to salaries had provoked angry mass protests across the region.

Having racked up a debt of between \$20bn and \$25bn (way above the size of its economy), the KRG was running out of options to save itself from bankruptcy. In March 2016, the KRG offered major oil assets to Turkey in exchange for \$5bn in debt forgiveness and cash, in addition to the \$1bn Ankara had already lent; major oil deals were also offered to US companies. Both the Turks and the Americans, however, appeared reluctant to take up what was on offer.

In June, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani headed to Russia to attend the St Petersburg Economic Forum - Putin's flagship investment event - where he met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss "developing relations [...] in the oil and gas sector".

Seven months later, on February 21, Rosneft joined Gazprom as a major investor in the Kurdish region by signing a deal worth \$2.1bn for pre-paid oil for 2017-2019 and becoming the first major oil company to pre-finance KRG oil. That cash injection was crucial.

According to Bilal Wahab, a fellow at the Washington Institute in the US, these funds helped avert a major financial disaster and international embarrassment for the KRG by enabling it to settle a dispute with Dana Gas and Crescent



Russia's President Vladimir Putin meets with Iraq's Kurdistan Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani on the sidelines of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 2, 2017 [File: Reuters]

Petroleum ahead of another hearing by the London Court of International Arbitration scheduled for the summer of that year. The Kurdish authorities paid \$1bn to the Emirati companies and restructured the remaining \$1.24bn it owed. The deal also provided some legitimacy to KRG's oil export operations, which Baghdad had long claimed were illegal without its formal permission, Wahab pointed out.

On June 2, Nechirvan Barzani once again attended the St Petersburg summit and signed a number of agreements with Rosneft, paving the way for three more deals, including projects worth \$400m for five exploration blocks in the Kurdish region's northwest.

On September 18, just a week before the independence referendum was scheduled to be held, the KRG announced it had signed a contract with the Russian company to develop a gas pipeline project in the autonomous region with a planned investment of \$1bn, according to Reuters news agency. The project envisions a pipeline with a capacity of 30 billion cubic metres a year to be linked to the Turkish gas network and eventually export Kurdish gas to Europe.

Then, in October, three days after forces loyal to Baghdad captured the oil-rich city of Kirkuk from the Kurds, the KRG announced it had sold its 60 percent share in the company that runs the region's oil pipeline to Rosneft as part of a major pipeline project worth \$1.8bn.

All these deals came in combination with an informal commitment for political support from Moscow, according to the former Russian diplomat. Although officially Russia declared a neutral position towards the referendum, the Kremlin unofficially made it clear it was going to stand by Masoud Barzani, he said. This gave enough confidence to the Kurdish leadership to proceed with the vote on September 25, despite serious warnings from Baghdad.

The fact that a number of deals were signed amid unprecedented uncertainty and insecurity in the Kurdish region, and right after Erbil lost control over oil-rich Kirkuk (which accounted for some 40 percent of its oil exports) demonstrated that Russia stayed true to its commitment. As a top KRG official told Al Jazeera, in that grave political and economic situation, "what saved us was Russia!"

Although it displeased the KRG's US and European allies, Russian support helped the region overcome international political isolation through this difficult period and start rebuilding its devastated economy. Rosneft's financial →

⇒ injection boosted its energy sector. The arbitration settlement allowed Dana Gas and Crescent Petroleum to start investing again in the Kurdish region and expand their gas production capacity.

The KRG also had enough leverage to start negotiations with Baghdad. In March, the Iraqi government sent money for the salaries of government employees in the Kurdish region for the first time since 2014; as a result, for the first time in many months, KRG civil servants received their pay in full.

RUSSIA'S ELUSIVE GAINS

While the KRG has been reaping the benefit of these deals, Russia and Rosneft's gains from this high-risk investment are yet to materialise in full. In fact, pursuing these and other deals in 2017 got the Russian energy giant heavily in debt at a time when the Russian economy was just emerging from a two-year recession. It had to borrow some \$17bn in that year alone and by 2018, its debt stood at \$55bn, which worried investors.

What appears to be the main accomplishment of the Rosneft investments in the Kurdish region is securing the gas pipeline contract in September 2017.

According to an official from the KRG's ministry of national resources, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Rosneft's entry into the Kurdish energy sector "is about gas, not oil".

"Russia just wanted to reserve the right to develop the gas pipeline [to Europe]. Nabucco failed, that's why Russia came. The Europeans are to blame," the official told Al Jazeera, referring to a pipeline project which was supposed to provide countries in Southeastern Europe with an alternative source of gas and decrease their dependency on Russian gas imports and which has since been scrapped.

Currently, Gazprom holds monopoly over Russian gas exports to Europe. According to Salih Yilmaz, an analyst with Bloomberg Intelligence, by securing a gas deal with the KRG, Rosneft seeks not only to increase gas exports under Russian control to Europe, but also challenge Gazprom.

"Bringing the Kurdish natural gas to Turkey [and then] to Europe is probably Rosneft's best bet for rivaling Gazprom's gas export monopoly, [which] Rosneft and peers have been lobbying the Russian government to end," Yilmaz told Al Jazeera.

Rosneft's acquisition of 30 percent of Egypt's Zohr gas field in the Mediterranean Sea - a deal which was closed in October 2017 just two weeks after the KRG one was signed - also reflects these ambitions. Although both companies are majority state-owned, they are perceived to be driven by divergent oligarchic interests within the Russian economic elite.

According to Yilmaz, the development of the gas pipeline project in the Kurdish region could take a couple of years under ideal conditions, but given ongoing tensions in the region and the fact that there is no immediate and urgent demand for such gas exports, it could take much longer.

"Right now, it's probably more of a good-to-have [project], so I suspect that it won't be done any time soon," he explained.

However, there is another major obstacle to realising this and the other deals Rosneft and the KRG have signed: Baghdad has rejected them since they were concluded without its approval.

The Iraqi government has long argued that the KRG does not have the right to unilaterally sell oil without its permission; Erbil has countered by pointing out that a provision in the Iraqi constitu-

tion allows it to exploit natural resources on its territory.

In the past, the central Iraqi government has successfully undermined KRG oil trade on a number of occasions, with courts in the US and Canada ruling in its favour and blocking attempted sales. It has filed lawsuits in both international and local courts seeking to block the KRG from exporting oil through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline. In the past, these regulatory challenges have kept major oil companies out of the Iraqi region.

The lack of a final agreement between Baghdad and Erbil on the question of energy resource development and revenue transfer has effectively rendered the status of Rosneft's deals uncertain. When asked about the official position of the Iraqi government on the Rosneft contracts, Asim Jihad, a spokesperson for the Iraqi oil ministry told Al Jazeera: "Successive federal governments have expressed their reservations, opposition, and rejection of the KRG's activities [exporting oil and concluding contracts] ... This government intends to solve this problem through serious dialogue."

But according to Hoshiyar Ali, the head of diplomatic relations for the Kurdish opposition Gorran movement, the newly-formed government of Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who has so far pushed for negotiations with the Kurds, is unstable and lacks a unified block of support in parliament. A potential collapse of his cabinet could derail the current efforts to reach an agreement with Erbil and undermine the Rosneft deals, he pointed out.

"To reach permanent agreement on the issue of oil specifically - that is, that Baghdad disputes all the deals that the KRG has signed with foreign companies - you have to have a law for oil and gas in Baghdad. Then [based on] the constitution we can work which side has what rights and of course, these deals would be either recognised by Baghdad or they would be rejected," Ali told Al Jazeera.

"There is this famous saying in the Middle East: The weak sign the contracts, the strong tear them apart," he added.

Although Kurdish media outlets have claimed that Russia is mediating between Erbil and Baghdad, a number of officials and close observers have confirmed to Al Jazeera that Moscow has rather limited political sway in Iraq, including in the Kurdish region. The US and Iran remain the main power brokers, flanked by Turkey and the UK. Even though the Rosneft deals "saved" the KRG, they were not enough to upset this balance of power that the two countries that led the 2003 invasion and Iraq's two most influential neighbours had tacitly agreed on.

The limit of Russian influence in Iraq was demonstrated by the temporary deal that Erbil and Baghdad struck in mid-November 2018 to restart the pumping of oil (50,000-100,000 barrels per day) from the Kirkuk oil fields through the Kurdish pipeline to Turkey. The US had pressed for the agreement in order to put an end to a deal Baghdad had struck with Tehran, while trying to avoid the use of the Kurdish pipeline. It had agreed to ship Kirkuk oil on trucks to Iranian refiners in the north in exchange for Iranian oil being delivered to Iraq's southern ports. Full compliance with the new set of US sanctions imposed on Iran, however, meant this deal had to be scrapped and Baghdad had to resume exports through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline.

According to the former Russian official, the Russians are very much aware that the status of

Rosneft contracts is still in doubt. The US mediation efforts between Baghdad and Erbil got them nervous, as they feared their interests may be undermined, he said.

The fact that the KRG lost control over oil-rich Kirkuk not only slashed its exports almost in half, and hence decreased the potential revenue for Rosneft from the share of the pipeline it owns, but also put under question the payment of its dues as a whole. In March 2018, Nechirvan Barzani told the media that one of the conditions for the KRG resuming the transfer of all funds from oil exports to Baghdad is the payment of tariffs to Rosneft for the use of the pipeline.

However, the November deal did not include a provision for the payment of tariffs to Rosneft. According to Delshad Shaban, the former deputy head of the oil and gas committee in the Kurdish parliament, the payment of tariffs is pending a final political deal between Erbil and Baghdad. As per its agreement with the KRG, the Russian company should be paid \$1.5 per barrel, in addition to \$1 per barrel for storage at the port and other extra costs, he told Al Jazeera.

Rosneft's deal for the five blocks in the northern part of the Kurdish region might also prove difficult to make profitable. According to Govand Sherwani, an oil expert and professor at Erbil's Cihan University, oil exploration in Iraq's Kurdish region is considered high-risk because there are just a few studies available of the area and there is no guarantee that a company investing hundreds of millions in a block would actually find oil. In fact, just before Rosneft signed this deal, major companies like Exxon-Mobil and Chevron, had started pulling out of exploration blocks that had yielded disappointing returns; between 2014 and 2016, 19 such blocks had been relinquished.

Only one of the deals Rosneft concluded in 2017 seems to have started generating some revenue. The KRG started transferring oil to the Russian company just two months after the \$2.1bn deal was signed, and as per the agreement is supposed to export between 15m and 25m barrels annually for period 2017-2019. Neither Rosneft, nor the KRG have released exact numbers on how much Kurdish oil has already been shipped, but according to Sergey Aleksashenko, a former Russian deputy minister of finance, between 50 and 65 percent of the \$2.1bn has been paid back in the form of oil.

Rosneft and the KRG's ministry of natural resources could not be reached for comment.

Overall, it appears that Rosneft's investment in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq has been a risky gamble and, like in Venezuela, whether it pays off or not, will depend on how the geopolitical situation evolves. In both places, the US appears to be the main player, whose actions could determine the outcome of Rosneft's deals.

If Washington decides to escalate its campaign against Iran, Iraq is one of the main battlegrounds where the Iranians could push back. And there is nothing easier than destabilising an already unstable government and mobilising once again pro-Iranian militias in the country. ♦

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US to ask Syrian Kurds to let Turkish forces through the door

The United States is requesting numerous concessions from its Kurdish allies in Syria, but the Kurds are pushing back.



Amberin Zaman
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www.al-monitor.com

The United States is pressing its Kurdish allies in Syria to ease their resistance to allowing Turkish forces to deploy on their side of the Turkish-Syrian border, well-informed sources told Al-Monitor. The Turkish forces would be a part of the proposed safe zone in northeastern Syria.

US officials are pushing for "a limited number" of Turkish forces to be allowed to deploy on the Syrian side of the border, along a stretch of territory running from the east of the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border, according to a senior official from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The source told Al-Monitor, "The subject has already been broached with us and we regard the presence of Turkish troops on our soil as extremely problematic and have made our position clear."

The source said that the Donald Trump administration's Syria envoy, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, was expected to travel to northeastern Syria in the coming days, when he is likely to renew demands that Turkish forces be allowed to enter northeastern Syria.

SDF commander in chief Mazlum Kobane is known to be viscerally opposed to any intrusion by Turkish forces. But Kobane is also a firm advocate of maintaining the partnership with the United States, which puts him in a bind. Another SDF official told Al-Monitor that the US demand would never be accepted.

Jeffrey said at an annual conference of Turkish American business lobbies in Washington that Turkey and the United States had yet to agree on the contours of a safe zone plan, though they continued to work on it. Jeffrey's comments, translated into Turkish on Turkey's NTV news channel, made clear that the United States understood Turkey's security concerns and that the sides were focused on a plan that would exclude the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Vaguely defined "locals" are supposed to replace the YPG. "Arabs in Arab-majority areas and Kurds in others," the second SDF official said, confirming knowledge of the plan.

The YPG is the driving force of the SDF, but it is also linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK has fought for Kurdish independence and now for self-rule inside Turkey since 1984. Turkey says the two groups are the same — terrorists — and pose an existential risk to Turkey's national security. Turkey is furious that the United States is continuing its partnership with the YPG. Hardly a day passes without a pro-government news outlet publishing "proof" of further American treachery.

US officials privately acknowledge there is little difference between the YPG and the PKK. Yet they cling to the fanciful notion that the YPG can be peeled away from the PKK and its commanders in Iraqi Kurdistan. Now Washington is reportedly telling YPG-linked Syrian Kurds in the SDF to "leave the YPG," while whispering vague promises of getting Turkey back to the negotiating table with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, whose moral authority over the movement remains unchallenged some 20 years after he was captured with the CIA's help.

More likely, the United States will do the leaving. Richard Outzen, senior adviser for Syria engagement at the State Department, spoke at a panel organized by a pro-government Turkish think tank, the SETA Foundation, in Washington today, saying, "The US policy is first of all that we are going to withdraw those troops. Now the modalities of how quickly that happens and what exactly we do in the wake of it, how much support we get from the international coalition [to eliminate residual IS presence] that will survive the withdrawal of our troops, the safe zone plays a big role in that."

Trump had announced in December that he was withdrawing all US troops from Syria in 30 days.

The withdrawal has been deferred but not rescinded following pushback from the Pentagon and notably Central Command that wants to preserve the alliance with the SDF and is leery of the risks posed by an ill-planned departure.

US pressure on the Syrian Kurds fits the broader pattern of Washington demanding concessions from the SDF on behalf of Ankara without Ankara delivering any concessions to the Kurds in return, sources with close knowledge of the deliberations between Ankara, Washington and the SDF told Al-Monitor.



Turkish army tanks are seen near the Turkish-Syrian border in Hatay province, Turkey, Jan. 28, 2018. REUTERS/Mura d Sezer

Kobane confirmed this in a recent interview with Al-Monitor, saying Turkey was never satisfied and kept asking "for more."

The status of the Arab-dominated town of Manbij is a case in point.

Turkey vowed to invade Manbij if the town's military and legislative councils were not purged of individuals Ankara deemed as linked to the YPG. In January, the Manbij councils were reconstituted with new members duly vetted to meet all of Turkey's demands. Yet Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to threaten to invade Manbij and expunge the YPG from the border.

Erdogan repeated these threats in a speech on the night of the March 31 local elections, dispelling all hope that it was just pre-electoral saber-rattling aimed at winning nationalist votes.

"Our target is now eliminating the terror structures in Manbij and east of the Euphrates," Erdogan said, "and making Syria a safe place for [Syrians] sheltering in our country to return to their homes." Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar recently inaugurated an Advanced Joint Operations Center on the border where the offensive will supposedly be coordinated.

Jeffrey and his team have used Erdogan's threats to wrest even more ground from the SDF and to push them to replicate the Manbij model east of the Euphrates River. "They are telling the SDF, 'We can't keep the Turks out so we need to let them in peacefully,'" a source familiar with the administration's thinking said. The Kurds get nothing out of it other than being told that each new concession will stave off a Turkish attack. "It's a bottomless and dangerous pit," the source said.

This policy of appeasement stands in stark contrast with Washington's vows to impose sanctions on Turkey over its acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 missile systems, as well as its continued detention of US nationals and Turkish employees of US diplomatic missions on spurious terrorism charges.

At the same time, Washington is pressuring the Kurds to not engage with the Syrian regime and instead to unite with Turkey against the regime so as to exert maximum pressure on President Bashar al-Assad in the hope that he will fall. This would fulfill the US administration's other goal of reducing Iran's influence. It could also wrest Turkey out of Russia's orbit, or so the thinking goes.

But critics say it fails to take stock of how Russia will react. Russia has made clear that it would not welcome further Turkish colonizing in Syria, specifically the kind that it oversaw when it allowed Turkish forces to overrun Kurdish-majority Afrin in January 2018.

In the meantime, Manbij is becoming more unstable. The Islamic State claimed responsibility March 26 for an attack that killed seven Manbij Military Council guards. Twin blasts struck the town April 11, injuring several residents. A suicide bomber killed four Americans in January, including two service members, and 10 others in Manbij. It was the single deadliest day for American forces in Syria. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack.

Fabrice Balanche, an associate professor at France's Lyon 2 University who has written extensively about Syria, told Al-Monitor, "The Manbij attack was a message of what could follow if the Americans stay. Russia, Iran, nobody will leave them in peace. And Turkish intelligence may choose to look the other way." ♦

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OPINION

I'm in prison. But my party still scored big in Turkey's elections

By Selahattin Demirtas
April 19, 2019
Washingtonpost.com |

Selahattin Demirtas is an ex-member of the Turkish parliament and a former co-leader of the Peoples' Democratic Party of Turkey. He is imprisoned in Edirne High Security Prison.

Turkey's recent local elections on March 31 sent several important messages to the country's ruling elite — and above all to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan, who rightly viewed the elections as a referendum on his rule, suffered a humiliating defeat. His party lost control of five of the largest cities in the country, including his home city of Istanbul, where he launched his political career.

In recent years, Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has moved further away not only from democracy but also from true Islamic values and morality. The president has brushed away criticism of the corruption, injustice and tyranny that have become associated with his party. He is now facing a heavy political price for his arrogance.

Thousands of members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) who should currently be participating in politics — including me — are in prison on political grounds. The security forces continue to harass and obstruct those members of our party who remain free. Many of us have been criminalized and deemed "terrorists" by government officials. And yet my party, which I co-chaired for many years, still showed its strength in these latest elections.

The HDP's electoral success, despite all the obstacles confronting it, is remarkable. This shows that the HDP and its many Kurdish supporters remain unbowed by the repressive measures of the state. Once again, HDP voters have expressed their determination to live together in a free, equal, democratic and peaceful Turkey.

Current developments in the Middle East (and especially Syria) show clearly what course Turkey must follow: We must strive for unity and social cohesion. We can achieve this end only by rallying around the principles of peace and democracy.

The only way to avoid the looming economic



A woman holds pictures of Selahattin Demirtas, the jailed former leader of Turkey's Peoples' Democratic Party, in Istanbul on March 24. (Kemal Aslan/Reuters)

crisis — especially soaring unemployment and rising inflation — is to urgently implement democratic political reform. The past record of the political establishment, centered around Erdogan, suggests that it does not have the will, capacity or courage to do so.

Erdogan's divisive policies toward the opposition, and especially the Kurdish people, are worsening the polarization of society. The vast majority of Turkey's Kurds want to live in peace with their fellow citizens; they have had enough of violence and war. Yes, it is true that the Kurds have a range of political, societal and cultural demands, all of which require greater democracy. We in the opposition have pledged to work for the fulfillment of these aims. It is, however, the president and the ruling party who bear primary responsibility for the failure to deliver on them.

Many activists, both inside and outside prison (including Leyla Guven, one of our party's members of parliament), are on a hunger strike. The sole demand of the strikers is an end to the absolute isolation of Abdullah Ocalan. Ocalan has been held in a prison on the island of Imrali for 20 years, under harsh conditions that do not even allow him visits from his lawyers or family members. The hunger-strikers know that Ocalan has a decisive role to play in the peaceful and democratic solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

It is well known that Ocalan has considerable influence among the Kurds in Turkey and Syria. It is also widely accepted that, in any potential peace process, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) will listen to no one but Ocalan himself. It is safe to say that no peace process can be ultimately successful

without Ocalan's participation — which is why, several years ago, Erdogan himself explored options for peace with the PKK leader. A significant portion of the Kurdish people regard Ocalan as a vital interlocutor.

Moreover, the results of the elections confirm that all the people of Turkey, not just those of our party, want to live together, peacefully and democratically. They are opposed to authoritarianism and one-man rule. We hope that Erdogan understands this. If he does not, the next elections could deal him a final blow.

All members of our party — including those in prison — will continue to work without losing our belief in democratic and peaceful resistance. We believe in a bright and democratic future for Turkey. We believe that these elections have shown the way forward. If the government continues its authoritarian course, however, I worry that deeper political and economic crises are on the way.

We urge the international community to encourage Turkey to choose the path of democracy and peace. We, the people of Turkey, should be able to show that we can solve our problems through discussion, despite our many differences. The history of Anatolia and Mesopotamia shows us many examples of unity amid diversity.

The members of the HDP and the Kurds of Turkey will always be ready for peace. I believe we will be successful. We will create a country with a strong democracy and economy by bringing together all factions of our society. The March 31 elections have shown us the way. ♦

En Syrie, les pénuries d'essence paralysent le pays

Les menaces de sanctions américaines, fin 2018, ont aggravé la situation

BEYROUTH - correspondant

La Syrie était en pays en guerre, c'est maintenant un pays à l'arrêt. Alors que les combats ont quasiment cessé, sauf dans la petite poche d'Idlib, dans le Nord-Ouest, la population doit faire face à une calamité d'un nouveau genre : la pénurie d'essence. Récurrent depuis le commencement de la guerre civile en 2011, ce problème s'est aggravé au début du mois, du fait de l'accroissement des pressions économiques américaines sur la Syrie, paralysant les transports et l'activité dans les zones sous contrôle gouvernemental.

Un flot de photos et de vidéos, prises à Damas, Alep, Homs, les grandes villes du pays, et diffusées sur les réseaux sociaux, montrent des scènes jamais vues en huit ans de guerre civile : des files d'attente de plusieurs centaines de mètres devant les rares pompes encore ouvertes, des avenues traditionnellement embouteillées quasiment vides de voitures en pleine journée, des rues encombrées d'ordures parce que les camions de ramassage ne peuvent plus démarrer, et des véhicules abandonnés sur le bas-côté des routes, avec plus une goutte dans le réservoir. « Cette crise est beaucoup plus sévère que les précédentes, affirme

Saeed Abu Zafer, un ingénieur d'Alep. Les rues sont désertes, c'est comme s'il y avait un couvre-feu. » « J'ai dû renoncer à aller au travail, car on ne trouve presque plus de taxis collectifs », raconte Mohamed Abu Ahmed, un instituteur. « La plupart des usines ont cessé de fonctionner et celles qui tournent encore, c'est parce qu'il leur reste un peu de fuel qui sera bientôt épuisé, témoigne Mohamed Nahhas, un économiste de Damas. C'est impossible de vivre sans essence. C'est comme si l'on était renvoyé à l'âge de pierre. »

L'origine de la crise remonte au 20 novembre 2018. Ce jour-là, le Trésor américain a publié un communiqué menaçant de placer sous sanction toute entité qui contribuerait au ravitaillement pétrolier de la Syrie. La mise en garde visait principalement la filière de transport d'hydrocarbures iraniens, par voie de mer, jusqu'aux ports syriens de Tartous et Lattaquié. Des armateurs, des propriétaires de navires, des banques, des assureurs et des autorités portuaires se sont retrouvés du jour au lendemain dans le collimateur des autorités américaines.

Ce tir de sommation a eu un effet immédiat. Depuis le début de l'année, les livraisons d'or noir iranien, qui représentaient environ 2 millions de barils par mois, ont com-

« Cette crise est beaucoup plus sévère que les précédentes »

SAEED ABU ZAFER
ingénieur

plètement cessé. Ces exportations étaient payées grâce à une ligne de crédit de 3,6 milliards de dollars (3,2 milliards d'euros), que Téhéran avait accordée à Damas, son principal allié au Proche-Orient, en 2013. Les largesses de la République islamique permettaient aux autorités syriennes de compenser la perte des principaux champs pétroliers du pays, passés aux mains de l'organisation Etat islamique, puis des forces kurdes, et la baisse de la production des puits restés sous son contrôle.

« Guerre économique vicieuse »

Cette aide ayant disparu, les zones gouvernementales se retrouvent dans une situation de pénurie structurelle : elles ne produisent que 24 000 barils par jour, sur les 136 000 nécessaires pour couvrir les besoins de la population. Les tentatives de Téhéran pour contourner les restrictions américaines se sont heurtées, selon le régime syrien, au refus du Caire de laisser les tankers chargés de pétrole iranien traverser le canal de Suez. Une accusation démentie par les autorités égyptiennes, mais qui semble plausible, compte tenu des menaces de rétorsion agitées par Washington.

« Nous faisons face à une guerre économique vicieuse », s'est indigné Mustafa Hasweya, le directeur de Mahrakat, la compagnie de distribution de produits pétroliers, sur la chaîne Al-Ikhbariya. « Le projet colonial américain en Syrie a échoué, en raison de la bravoure et des prouesses de l'armée arabe sy-

rienne et de ses alliés (...), écrit le quotidien prorégime Al-Watan. En conséquence, les Etats-Unis ont lancé une guerre contre les moyens de subsistance des Syriens, leurs besoins en essence et leur argent, en imposant un blocus multiforme sur la Syrie, dont le blocus pétrolier n'est qu'un aspect. » Une allusion aux sanctions internationales qui pèsent sur le secteur bancaire syrien ainsi que sur 350 personnalités et entités associées au régime.

Pour tenter d'endiguer la crise, le gouvernement a imposé un rationnement, à base de carte électronique, fixé à 20 litres tous les cinq jours par conducteur. Les autorités ont aussi renoncé à une partie de leur monopole sur la distribution de produits pétroliers, en autorisant les entrepreneurs à se fournir par eux-mêmes par voie terrestre. Sans grand succès pour l'instant, et pour cause. Il y a quelques semaines, l'attaché économique américain à Amman a sommé le secteur privé jordanien de ne pas commercer avec la Syrie. Selon un homme d'affaires syrien basé à Beyrouth, une démarche similaire a été menée au Liban.

Du coup, sur les réseaux sociaux, la grogne monte, contre les Etats-Unis, mais aussi contre le gouvernement, accusé d'incurie et de corruption. Selon le journal en ligne libanais Al-Modon, des membres d'une milice prorégime se sont même permis d'insulter Bachar Al-Assad, le président syrien, alors qu'ils faisaient la queue à une station d'essence à Damas. « Il ne faut pas se faire d'illusions, Assad est là pour des années encore, prévient Jihad Yazigi, rédacteur en chef du site économique The Syria Report. Mais alors que la guerre est terminée, le pays va continuer à s'enliser. C'est une réalité à laquelle les gens ne s'attendaient pas et qui nourrit un sentiment de désespoir très fort. » ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE

Le régime intensifie ses frappes à Idlib

Dans la région d'Idlib, dernière zone tenue par les rebelles dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie, où sévit le groupe djihadiste Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham, les bombardements du régime ont gagné en intensité depuis février. Des tirs d'artillerie ont ainsi fait sept morts, en majorité des femmes et des enfants, jeudi 18 avril, dans le village d'Oum Jalal. Le sort d'Idlib sera au cœur d'un nouveau cycle de pourparlers, les 25 et 26 avril dans le cadre du processus d'Astana, parrainé par Moscou, Téhéran et Ankara. Par ailleurs, vingt-sept soldats et combattants fidèles au régime ont été tués ces dernières quarante-huit heures dans une série d'attaques menées par l'organisation Etat islamique dans l'est de la province de Homs, a indiqué samedi l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme.



Sami Moubayed
Sunday 21/04/2019

<https://theArabweekly.com>

BEIRUT - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is soon going to be announcing a decision on Syria, ahead of upcoming peace talks at the Kazakhstan capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana).

The Turkish leader is in hot water since his party's stunning defeat in municipal elections, which cost him three major cities, including Istanbul.

One of his regional allies, Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, has been overthrown, bringing back memories of Muhammad Morsi's ouster in Egypt six years ago. Another ally, Fayeza al-Sarraj in Libya, is facing uphill battle against a Saudi-backed military offensive led by Field-Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Protests continue to snowball against Hamas rule in Gaza.

Erdogan cannot afford to lose any more friends — or territory.

He will soon be accepting a proposal put forth in January by Russian President Vladimir Putin, reviving the 1998 Adana Agreement between Syria and Turkey. It restores Syrian authority to the entire border but makes it obligatory for Damascus to make sure that it remains free of any Kurdish presence.

It gives Erdogan the right to send troops into Syrian territory in pursuit of Kurdish separatists, should the Syrians fail in doing the job. The agreement, however, only allows him to enter after coordinating with the Syrians and doesn't give him the right to stay inside Syria.

The Russians and Turks are discussing an amendment to the original agreement, deploying Russian military police along the borderline, to make doubly sure that Turkish security concerns are accommodated.

For that to happen, however, Syrian-Turkish relations need to be restored, after an 8-year suspension. Such an agreement requires security coordination, joint military committees and diplomatic relations between Ankara and Damascus. It also requires an end

Clock ticks for Erdogan to decide on Syria

Syrian-Kurdish talks, on hold for several months, need to be jump-started simultaneously, under Russian mediation.

to the media war between the two countries.

This part of the deal is being negotiated by the Iranians, whose foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, travelled between Damascus and Ankara April 16-17, carrying messages whose answers are to be revealed at the Nur-Sultan talks.

The devil is always in the details. The obvious first obstacle is what to do with the 200 US troops who remain in the Kurdish areas and how US President Donald Trump will react to such a Russian-Turkish agreement. Both sides seem to believe that, apart from lip service, Trump will do nothing about it as long as it doesn't threaten Kurdish presence in north-eastern Syria.

As for the US troops, the Russians, Turks and Syrians have agreed to go around them, treating them as invisible while making sure that nobody trespasses on their territory or catches them in any crossfire. Two hundred troops would deter neither the Russians nor the Turks from any joint action.

Some Kurds were pinning hopes on the remaining US troops but others argued otherwise, pointing to Trump's abandonment of them, first in Iraq in September 2017 and then in Afrin in April 2018. Two hundred American troops are not enough to help them carve out a state or even establish a sustainable autonomous entity.

At the Nur-Sultan conference, Erdogan will sign off a continued de-militarisation of Idlib, which he had promised to cleanse from the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham by mid-October 2018, meaning the Russians will not march on the city, as they were expected to do this spring. This will spare Turkey — and Europe — a new wave of refugees.

In exchange, Erdogan will put off a military operation he was planning against the Kurdish towns of Kobane, Tall Rifat and Ras al-Ayn, to give the Adana Agreement a



Risks and uncertainties. Turkish soldiers stand guard on the sides of the road during a patrol around the Syrian border at the demilitarised zone, last March.(DPA)

chance.

Syrian-Kurdish talks, on hold for several months, need to be jump-started simultaneously, under Russian mediation. The same old proposal is on the table: restoration of government rule in all areas held by the Kurds, in exchange for giving them the right to elect their own municipalities and governor and to keep their light arms, while surrendering heavy ones to the Russians once they assume their positions on the Syrian-Turkish borders. That, of course, would be music to the ears of Erdogan.

Another sticking point is what Erdogan will do with the approximated 70,000 Syrians on Turkish payroll, known as the National Liberation Army, who were bracing themselves for the new Kurdish offensive. They cannot be collectively pardoned and returned to Syria because Damascus would never allow it and Erdogan cannot welcome them in Turkey. For now, they will remain in Idlib but will that last? The truce in Idlib is temporary, after all.

Russia wants it restored completely, given that it lies within its sphere of influence within Syria, while Erdogan realises that he cannot keep it forever.

If accommodated properly on other issues, such as the Kurds and other cities under his control — Jarabulus, Azaz, al-Bab and Afrin — will Erdogan abandon those proxies as he did with other Syrians on his payroll, first in West Aleppo and then in East Ghouta, in 2016-18? After reaching an agreement with the Russians, he looked the other way as Russian warplanes pounded their strongholds to dust.

Those Syrian proxies were created for an objective, first to topple the regime in Damascus, which failed, and then to expand Erdogan's geographic influence in Syria.

These are questions that are yet to be answered by Erdogan, who has seemingly decided to go full board into the Russian orbit, now convinced, just like the Kurds, that US President Donald Trump is a very unreliable ally. ♦

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of Under the Black Flag (IB Tauris, 2015). He is a former Carnegie scholar and founding chairman of the Damascus History Foundation.

Macron Meets Syria Kurds, Vows Support in Fight Against ISIS

19 April, 2019 Paris- Asharq Al-Awsat
<https://aawsat.com>

President Emmanuel Macron on Friday hosted representatives of the Kurdish-led force that defeated ISIS extremists in Syria, assuring them of France's support in the fight against remaining militants.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had in late March flushed out ISIS from their last bastion in Syria but still warn the militants remain a threat in places.

The SDF is an umbrella force of Kurds and Arabs dominated by Kurds from the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia. It is regarded with huge distrust by neighboring Turkey which sees the YPG as a terror group.

Macron assured the SDF representatives, who were not named, of the "active support of France in the fight against Daesh which continues to be a menace for collective security," the presidency said in a statement, using an Arabic acronym for ISIS.



Particularly important was the support in the "handling of terrorist fighters held as prisoners along with their families."

European capitals are all keeping a careful eye on the ISIS prisoners held by the SDF after the defeat of the militants, given many are dual nationals.

Macron also vowed that financial support would be allocated to "respond to the humanitarian needs and the socio-economic stabilization of civilian populations in Syria."

The SDF were the key ally of the West in

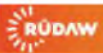


The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes Kurdish female fighters, flushed out IS from their last bastion in Syria in late March | AFP

defeating ISIS and waged the bulk of the fighting on the ground.

But they fear being abandoned by their patrons now ISIS is beaten, after US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of American forces from Syria.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had in April announced one million euros (\$1.1 million) in humanitarian aid for camps housing displaced people, notably Al-Hol which holds thousands of women and children who lived in ISIS-held areas. ♦



April 23, 2019

KRG formation - Gorran, KDP may sign final deal Tuesday: official

By Salim Ibrahim 23/4/2019
<http://www.rudaw.net>

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Gorran has agreed to the creation of a second deputy president position, a party member said, possibly finally breaking the political impasse that has stalled formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s new cabinet.

"In the beginning, we rejected the Kurdistan Region president having two deputies. But now, since we don't want the process to be delayed even longer, we have reached the last stage of finalizing the agreement and it is highly expected for the agreement to be officially signed between Gorran and KDP on Tuesday," said Jalal Mohammed, a Gorran member of the parliament's legal committee.

Parliamentary elections were held on September 30, 2018, with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) coming out on top, winning 45 seats in the 111-seat legislature, but not securing an outright majority. It has spent nearly seven months trying to build a governing coalition with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which won 21 seats, and Gorran, which has 12 seats.

Gorran proposed a reform

package that included amending the presidential law so that the president is elected by the parliament, not a public vote. KDP agreed to the proposal. In talks about distributing positions and roles in the government, the PUK requested the creation of a second deputy for the president. After first resisting, Gorran has now agreed.

"We as Gorran are a responsible party and we understand the dangers of this phase. Hence we don't want government formation to be delayed anymore so people are no longer affected by the delay," explained Ashna Abdulla, an MP with Gorran in Kurdistan Region's parliament, of her party's stance.

Jalal Mohammed predicted that KDP and PUK will ink an agreement soon after Gorran signs, "and there's a strong possibility that Wednesday will be announced as the next parliament session."

The bill amending the presidency law was introduced in parliament in late March and MPs have subsequently met to discuss it twice, most recently on April 3.

The government-formation process has dragged on for months. The KDP first reached a deal with Gorran in February, and then arrived at a similar pact with the PUK in March.



But disagreements over distributing cabinet positions lingered. Gorran and PUK also disagreed over the president's deputies.

PUK, which shares control of the security forces with the KDP, wanted creation of a second deputy president who would be responsible for military affairs. Gorran, which does not have an armed force, objected, arguing that the new post would be a financial drain and, if created, should be solely an administrative position.

The details of the final agreements the parties may sign this week are not immediately known.

The PUK leadership has approved the agreement reached with the KDP and is waiting on the KDP to sign it, Rewaz Faye, PUK member and head of parliament's finance committee, told Rudaw English on

Monday.

The nearly seven month delay in forming the government "is normal," said Nechirvan Barzani on Monday. He is currently prime minister of the Kurdistan Region and is tipped to be the next president.

"The interests of the Kurdistan Region require that enough time is dedicated for the process of dialogue on forming the next government cabinet because we want our country to have political and social stability along with harmony, reconciliation, economic growth and prosperity," he said when making comments on Kurdish Journalism Day.

"The parties should be given the time they need to resolve the problems," he stressed. ■

Emmanuel Macron fâche la Turquie après avoir reçu des Kurdes syriens

Le chef de l'État a reçu une délégation des forces arabo-kurdes engagées en Syrie contre l'EI et l'a assurée de la poursuite du soutien de la France.

Le Point.fr Source AFP le 20/04/2019

Le président français Emmanuel Macron pour avoir reçu plus tôt dans la journée une délégation de combattants arabo-kurdes engagés en Syrie qu'Ankara qualifie de « terroristes ». « Nous condamnons l'accueil par le président français Emmanuel Macron d'une délégation des soi-disant Forces démocratiques syriennes [FDS] », a déclaré dans un communiqué le porte-parole du ministère turc des Affaires étrangères, Hami Aksoy.

Le chef de l'État français a reçu vendredi une délégation des FDS, une coalition arabo-kurde engagée en Syrie contre le groupe État islamique (EI), l'assurant de « la poursuite du soutien actif de la France dans la lutte contre Daech ». Selon des membres de la délégation, Emmanuel Macron s'est engagé à maintenir des forces françaises aux côtés des FDS et à soutenir financièrement la reconstruction et les services publics dans l'administration semi-autonome kurde.

LES CRAINTES D'ANKARA

Appuyées par une coalition internationale emmenée par les États-Unis, les FDS, un groupe

dominé par la milice kurde des Unités de protection du peuple (YPG), ont été en première ligne de la lutte contre l'EI. Les FDS ont annoncé le 23 mars la fin du « califat » proclamé en 2014 par l'organisation djihadiste sur les territoires alors conquis en Irak et en Syrie. Depuis, ces forces, qui contrôlent une partie du territoire du nord de la Syrie, continuent à traquer les djihadistes dans l'est du pays.

Mais la Turquie critique le soutien des Occidentaux à ces combattants, voyant dans les YPG une extension en Syrie du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), un groupe armé kurde qui livre une sanglante guérilla contre Ankara depuis 1984. Le PKK est qualifié d'organisation « terroriste » par la Turquie, l'Union européenne et les États-Unis. L'initiative d'Emmanuel Macron « qui vise à conférer une légitimité artificielle à une extension de groupes terroristes est une mesure qui ne sied pas à notre alliance et est mauvaise au plus haut point », a estimé M. Aksoy.

Depuis 2016, la Turquie a lancé deux offensives visant les positions des YPG dans le nord de la Syrie et menace régulièrement de lancer de nouvelles opérations. Ankara redoute en effet de



Selon des membres de la délégation, Emmanuel Macron s'est engagé à maintenir des forces françaises aux côtés des FDS. / Lewis JOLY/SIPA

voir s'installer le long de sa frontière un embryon d'État kurde susceptible de renforcer les velléités séparatistes sur le sol turc. « La Turquie n'hésitera pas à prendre les mesures qu'elle estime nécessaires pour protéger sa sécurité nationale », a déclaré vendredi le porte-parole du ministère turc des Affaires étrangères. ●

Syrie : au moins 35 combattants prorégime tués par l'EI en 48 heures, selon l'OSDH

AFP 20/04/2019
www.lorientlejour.com

Au moins 35 combattants fidèles au pouvoir en Syrie ont été tués ces dernières 48 heures par le groupe Etat islamique (EI), les attaques les plus meurtrières contre le régime depuis la défaite annoncée de l'organisation jihadiste, a indiqué samedi une ONG.

"Vingt-sept soldats et combattants prorégime, dont quatre hauts gradés syriens" ont péri dans une série d'attaques dans le désert dans l'est de la province centrale de Homs, a rapporté l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH). Huit combattants dont deux officiers ont été tués jeudi soir dans la province

orientale de Deir ez-Zor, également dans un secteur du désert qui s'étend du centre de la Syrie à la frontière irakienne, selon l'OSDH. Il s'agit des attaques les plus meurtrières lancées par l'EI contre les forces du régime depuis l'annonce de l'éradication de son "califat" par une force arabo-kurde syrienne le 23 mars, a déclaré l'ONG.

L'EI a revendiqué les attaques via son organe de propagande Amaq, affirmant que ses combattants avaient tenu une "embuscade" jeudi aux forces du régime "qui avaient essayé de traquer des jihadistes" dans la région de Homs. Les combats qui ont suivi ont duré jusqu'à vendredi dans la nuit.

Six jihadistes ont été tués, selon l'OSDH.

Appuyées par une coalition internationale emmenée par les États-Unis, les Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS)", fer de lance de la lutte anti-EI en Syrie, ont annoncé il y a un mois la fin du "califat" auto-proclamé en 2014 sur les territoires alors conquis en Syrie et en Irak voisin par l'organisation jihadiste.

Des jihadistes de l'EI restent néanmoins disséminés dans le désert syrien et parviennent à mener des attaques.

Le 26 mars, dans la première attaque meurtrière du groupe ultraradical après la chute de son "califat", sept combattants des FDS avaient été tués à Manbij (nord). Manbij a été l'un des bastions de l'EI en Syrie avant de passer sous le contrôle des FDS. L'EI a appelé à frapper les

forces kurdes pour "venger" ses pertes territoriales.

Selon l'OSDH, des centaines de combattants des FDS ont été tués en Syrie depuis août dans des attaques attribuées à des cellules dormantes de l'EI.

Le conflit en Syrie, déclenché en mars 2011 par la répression de manifestations prodémocratie, a fait plus de 370.000 morts et déplacé plusieurs millions de personnes.

Grâce au soutien militaire de ses alliés -Russie, Iran et Hezbollah libanais-, le régime de Bachar el-Assad a enchaîné les victoires contre les rebelles et les jihadistes dans d'autres secteurs du pays et contrôle aujourd'hui près des deux tiers de la Syrie. ♦

En Turquie, le discours de haine culmine depuis les municipales du 31 mars

Signe de la violence du climat politique en Turquie, Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, le secrétaire général du parti d'opposition CHP, a été agressé par une foule hostile à Ankara.

Par Marie Jégo
Publié le 23 avril 2019
www.lemonde.fr

Acte prémédité ou manifestation de la haine ordinaire ? Il s'en est fallu de peu pour que Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, le secrétaire général du Parti républicain du peuple (CHP), le dirigeant du plus vieux parti de Turquie, ne se fasse lyncher par une foule hostile, dimanche 21 avril à Ankara.

Venu assister aux funérailles d'un soldat turc tué lors d'un accrochage avec des séparatistes kurdes du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), M. Kılıçdaroglu a été violemment pris à partie à coups de pierres et de poings par une meute d'hommes en colère qui s'est jetée sur lui juste avant la prière mortuaire prévue dans la localité de Cubuk Akkuzulu, à Ankara.

Lire aussi Elections municipales en Turquie : « La perte d'Istanbul est un sérieux avertissement pour Erdogan et l'AKP »

« TOUT A ÉTÉ PLANIFIÉ À L'AVANCE »

Sorti indemne de ce déferlement de haine, le chef de l'opposition kémaliste a dénoncé « une tentative de lynchage prémédité », affirmant notamment que des bâtons avaient été distribués aux assaillants pendant les échauffourées. « Tout a été planifié à l'avance », a-t-il dénoncé lors d'une conférence de presse organisée lundi au siège du CHP, à Ankara.

Des vidéos de la scène postées sur les réseaux sociaux montrent M.



Le chef du principal parti d'opposition a été violemment pris à partie par une foule dimanche 21 avril dans la capitale, Ankara, au cours de funérailles d'un soldat tué lors de combats contre les séparatistes kurdes.

Kılıçdaroglu, 70 ans, prendre deux coups-de-poing en plein visage alors que ses gardes du corps tentent de le protéger. In extremis, il est conduit vers une maison voisine. Mais la foule cerne bientôt la modeste demeure. Des pierres sont jetées. Un cri retentit : « Il faut brûler la maison ! »

Des hommes tentent d'approcher de la porte d'entrée. Les policiers, impuissants, font des moulinets avec leurs bras pour les en dissuader. Hulusi Akar, le ministre de la défense, est là qui tente de calmer la meute en colère. « Mes amis ! Vous avez exprimé votre protestation, maintenant vous devez vous éloigner ! » Rien n'y fait. En danger, Kemal Kılıçdaroglu ne devra son salut qu'à l'arrivée d'un véhicule blindé de transport de troupes dépêché sur les lieux pour l'exfiltrer.

L'AKP CONTESTE SA

Pour le pouvoir présidentiel, le parti d'opposition CHP est complice du terrorisme parce qu'il s'est allié au parti HDP prokurde.

Leur raisonnement est simple. Le CHP est complice du terrorisme parce qu'il s'est allié au parti HDP prokurde, perçu par l'AKP au pouvoir comme une émanation du PKK. Pourtant le HDP est une formation parfaitement légale, la troisième force politique du Parlement avec 56 députés.

UN DISCOURS DE HAINE EN ACCÈS LIBRE SUR TOUTES LES CHAÎNES

Toute la campagne électorale pour les municipales était axée sur le thème « opposition = terroristes ». Le discours de haine était en accès libre sur toutes les chaînes. Un présentateur de la chaîne progouvernementale Akit TV est même allé jusqu'à suggérer de « pendre » Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, sans que ses propos ait été sanctionnés par l'autorité de surveillance de l'audiovisuel.

La veille des funérailles, le quotidien Günes, proche du pouvoir, est revenu à la charge en publiant une photographie d'Ekrem Imamoglu, le nouveau maire CHP d'Istanbul, accolée à celles de quatre soldats turcs tués par le PKK à Hakkari (sud-est) avec ce titre : « Tu es content ? »

DÉFAITE À ISTANBUL

Son agression illustre la violence du climat politique en Turquie, où le discours de haine culmine depuis les élections municipales du 31 mars, quand le CHP, allié au Bon Parti (droite nationaliste) et au parti de la démocratie des peuples (HDP, prokurde) a remporté plusieurs grandes villes, dont Ankara et Istanbul, fiefs de l'AKP, le parti de la justice et du développement du président (islamo-conservateur), depuis vingt-cinq ans.

L'AKP conteste sa défaite à Istanbul et demande l'annulation du scrutin. La tension est à son comble ces jours-ci, alors que le verdict de la commission électorale est attendu sur la tenue ou non d'un nouveau vote.

Familiers du discours de haine, les médias progouvernementaux décrivent à l'envi les leaders de l'opposition comme des « terroristes » à la solde du PKK, considéré comme terroriste et en guerre contre l'Etat turc depuis plus de trente-cinq ans.

L'agression de M. Kılıçdaroglu a choqué une large partie de l'opinion publique, à en juger par le succès du mot dièse #kiliçdarogluynizdegildir (#kiliçdaroglu nest pas seul). Une enquête judiciaire a été ouverte et six suspects ont été interpellés, dont un adhérent de l'AKP.

Les autorités tentent de minimiser les faits, qu'elles décrivent comme une forme d'expression de la volonté populaire dans laquelle Kılıçdaroglu a sa part de responsabilités. « Si le dirigeant du parti d'Atatürk est confronté à une réaction de rejet de la part des citoyens à l'enterrement d'un soldat à Ankara, il doit faire preuve d'humilité et se poser des questions », a estimé Fahrettin Altun, le directeur de la communication de la présidence turque, au lendemain des funérailles violentes. ■

Marie Jégo (Istanbul, correspondante)

U.S. Withdrawal From Syria Threatens Revival of Kurdish Language, Too

The civil war lessened the Assad regime's grip on northeastern Syria, allowing Kurdish culture to be seen and heard again. Locals worry that recent events will force it underground once more



By Elizabeth Tsurkov
(Northern Syria)
Apr 23, 2019
www.haaretz.com

QAMISHLI and AL-MALIKIYAH, Northern Syria — The students at Rojava University rise to welcome their Kurdish literature professor. The large room is dimly lit by indirect sunlight because the electricity is cut off most hours of the day, and the lecturer, whose students address him as “professor,” has not completed his master’s degree.

Yet despite the immense challenges, the students are making history: They are among the first to ever attend a university in which classes and reading materials are in Kurmanji — the dialect of Kurdish spoken in Syria and Turkey.

Rojava University, opened only three years ago in the autonomous region established by Syria’s Kurds in northeastern Syria, is part of the revival of the long-suppressed Kurdish language. However, this revival is now under threat as the future of the region hangs in the balance following an announcement on the drawdown of the U.S. forces whose presence has protected the Kurds from a regime takeover or Turkish invasion.

Some 10 percent of Syria’s population are Kurds. But under the Ba’ath Party regimes of Syrian presidents Hafez and Bashar Assad, expressions of Kurdish identity have been suppressed and penalized. The Kurds suffered discrimination in public sector employment, while Kurdish-majority areas in Syria’s northeast — bordering the areas inhabited by Kurds in Iraq and Turkey — received disproportionately smaller state budgets, contributing to the region’s impoverishment.

Publications in Kurdish were banned during the reign of Hafez Assad and only slightly relaxed under his son’s rule, starting in the year 2000.

Speaking to Haaretz in his spacious



People walking down the street in Qamishli, northern Syria, with storefronts featuring signage in various languages. Elizabeth Tsurkov

home in central Qamishli, Zara, a famous Kurdish novelist and poet, recounts being interrogated in 1978 for publishing an apolitical Kurdish children’s song in a Kurdish-language newspaper in Turkey. (Most of the Kurds’ names in this article were changed to protect the identity of Syrians speaking to an Israeli reporter.)

Prior to the interrogation, Zara was able to avoid the harassment of authorities for years by publishing using a pen name and traveling to Banyas — a majority-Alawite town with a decreased secret police presence — to mail his poems and novels. Zara’s books could not be published in Syria and either had to be printed outside of Syria and smuggled into the country, or printed in Damascus while falsely claiming the books were printed in Beirut.

Kurdish language education has been banned under the Arab nationalist regimes that have ruled Syria since independence. Shiyar, a resident of Qamishli in his 30s, recalls being sent to study Kurdish by his father. “He told me not to speak about this. I used to carry the notebook under my clothes. I was constantly afraid. I was a child, but I could feel something was abnormal about this situation,” he tells Haaretz. Later, as an adult, “I realized that I and the teacher could have been arrested, tortured and even killed for doing this.”

Barin, a journalist and activist from Qamishli, describes becoming involved in covert study circles of

the Kurdish language in 2009, during her time at Aleppo University.

“We were five people studying with a teacher. The idea was for each of us to learn the language and then teach it to five more people,” she explains. Despite limiting the number of students in an effort to prevent infiltration by the regime, after Barin began teaching the Kurmanji alphabet to five students, someone informed on her. The secret police raided her workplace and her supervisor had to bribe them to leave, following which he fired her. “This was the moment I realized that I am a Kurd; I am not Syrian. I will never forget this terrifying moment,” she says, her eyes glistening.

‘SWEETEST DAYS’

In 2011, with the outbreak of the civil war, the Assad regime lost its tight grip over large swaths of Syria. Kurdish towns witnessed anti-regime protests that featured Kurdish chants and flags. Syrians across the country rushed to enjoy the newly created space to organize, protest, publish magazines and debate politics for the first time in their lives.

Across Syria’s northeast, Kurds rushed to study their long-banned language. Samira Hajj Ali, co-chair of the educational body of Syria’s northeast region, recalls studying Kurdish for the first time in her life in 2012. “We gathered money and built a two-room school in Qamishli,” she says, adding that

despite the lack of electricity that winter and it being so cold in the school that “our pencils would fall out of our hands,” she still remembers that time as “the sweetest days of my life.”

In mid-2012, Syrian opposition factions stormed Aleppo City, forcing the regime to shift forces there to protect Syria’s largest city. Most regime forces withdrew from the country’s northeast, ceding the territory to the militarily most dominant Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which remains the region’s ruling party to this day. (It maintains a “third way” policy of not aligning with the Assad regime but not fighting it either.)

With Kurds in control of their own region for the first time in Syria’s post-independence history, all prohibitions on studying or using the Kurdish language were lifted.

Storefronts, street signs and official documents across the region now feature both Arabic and Kurdish, and at times the Syriac language as well, used by the region’s Assyrian community. Public events and a plethora of local media outlets that sprang up in the area celebrate the region’s ethnic and linguistic diversity. Starting in 2017, the local administration implemented its own curriculum and Kurdish-language education in schools. In Kurdish-majority areas, Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians now study in their own languages in grades 1 through 10. Rojava University currently offers classes mostly in Arabic, with only Kurdish literature being taught in Kurdish. Hajj Ali tells Haaretz that the intention is to begin teaching additional subjects in Kurdish in the coming years.

KURDISH ‘INDOCTRINATION’

Not all the region’s residents are rushing to embrace the new curriculum, though. Some oppose it due to educational content that they see as indoctrination by the Democratic Union Party, which sets the curricula. Others are concerned about the long-term viability of the region’s educational system, worried that if the Syrian regime

► retakes the area, their children will be at a disadvantage because they've studied an unrecognized curriculum and would only know Arabic as a second language.

In areas recaptured from the opposition by the Syrian regime, children have had to repeat all classes they've studied in opposition-run schools due to the regime's refusal to recognize the alternative curriculum.

Such fears have increased following President Donald Trump's surprise announcement last December regarding the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. The decision has since been partially reversed with a residual force of several hundred U.S. personnel set to remain in place. But the autonomy of the region faces threats both from the emboldened Assad regime and neighboring Turkey.

The Assad regime refuses to accept any genuine autonomy inside Syria's borders, ceding control over certain regions only due to its military weakness. Now that Syria's opposition and the Islamic State have been largely defeated due to Iranian and Russian support, the regime is determined to extend its control over Syria's oil-rich north-

east.

Another threat is Turkey, which has vehemently opposed the emergence of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria — particularly due to the close organizational and ideological ties between the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a militant group that has waged a guerrilla campaign against Turkey since 1984.

Turkey has made repeated threats and even mobilized forces to invade the region. Locals in northeastern Syria are painfully aware of the reality in Efrin, a region in northwestern Syria previously under the control of the Democratic Union Party, which was captured by Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian armed factions in early 2018. Since that takeover, the Kurdish language has again been erased from the region, celebrations of Newroz (the Kurdish New Year) were banned, Kurdish statues destroyed and Turkish is taught as a second language in schools while instruction is done in Arabic.

For Syrian Kurds, schools were a place of oppression and violence where they were forced to attend classes on history and nationalism that erased their identity. Shiyar,



Rojava University in Qamishli, northern Syria. The Kurdish literature curriculum is being taught in the original language, but for how long? Elizabeth Tsurkov

who studied Kurdish in secret as a child, describes being beaten by a teacher twice a week in front of his classmates for an entire semester at age 13 for refusing to join the ruling Ba'ath Party. "He would slap my head so hard it would hit the wall," he recalls.

Kurdish People's Protection Units fighters (YPG) waving their movement's flag as they parade in the northeastern Syrian town of Qamishli in June 2015. AFP

Shiyar did not tell his parents about

the abuse, fearing his father would complain and then be arrested. Today, Shiyar's children attend Kurdish schools. "I will never let my children study in regime schools again," he says defiantly. "If Assad comes back, we will have to escape." ■

Elizabeth Tsurkov is a Research Fellow specializing in Syria and Iraq at the Jerusalem-based Forum for Regional Thinking. You can follow her on Twitter @Elizrael.



APRIL 23, 2019

Top French court rejects ISIS nationals demands for repatriation from Syria

Kurdistan24.net April 23-2019

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24) – A French court has rejected repatriation demands from its nationals in Syria who are accused of membership in the so-called Islamic State.

France's top administrative court, Conseil d'Etat or the Council of State, said in a court statement on Tuesday that it "rejects the demands for repatriation made by French nationals and for their children, currently in Syria," Reuters reported.



Dorothee Maquere, the wife of French Islamic State member Jean-Michel Clain, sits with four of her five children at a screening area in the eastern Syrian province of Deir al-Zor. (Photo: AFP)

The court statement argued that a judge was unable to rule on the matter because it involved "negotiations with foreign authorities."

Tens of thousands of militants and their wives and children remain in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) custody after the Kurdish-led group military defeated the Islamic State on March 23.

The US-backed forces have called on nations to alleviate their burden and take back their citizens, and even called for the establishment of an international court in Syria to

try the prisoners.

In March, France said it would support the prosecution of Islamic State fighters in custody in Syria and Iraq, but called the international tribunal a "complex operation."

In Iraq, the French government has cooperated with Baghdad as it continues to hold trials for dozens of foreign Islamic State fighters.

So far, European states have been reluctant to bring back Islamic State fighters or women accused of membership in the extremist group and their children who are stuck in Syria.

Many EU countries fear that due to the lack of evidence, Islamic State supporters could be quickly released once they appear in court after returning home.

In February, France ignored repeated calls by the United States to repatriate citizens who joined the militant group in Syria, and instead said it would deal with the fighters and women accused of membership on a "case-by-case" basis.

Last week, the United Nations called for a "concerted effort" from the international community to repatriate thousands of foreign children who are stuck in a Kurdish-run camp in northern Syria. ●

“Revenge of the Kurds”: Erdogan’s Missteps Are Piling Up

After 18 years of unchallenged power, the Turkish president finds himself in the middle of several domestic and foreign crises of his own making.

By Conn Hallinan, April 25, 2019.
<https://fpif.org>

After 18 years of unchallenged power and success, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suddenly finds himself in the middle of several domestic and foreign crises with no obvious way out. It’s unfamiliar ground for a master politician who’s moved nimbly from the margins of power to becoming the undisputed leader of the largest economy in the Middle East.

Erdogan’s problems are largely of his own making: an economy built on a deeply corrupt construction industry, a disastrous intervention in Syria, and a declaration of war on Turkey’s Kurdish population. All of these initiatives have backfired badly.

In the March 31 local elections, Erdogan’s conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost control of all of Turkey’s major cities, including the country’s political center, Ankara, and the nation’s economic engine, Istanbul. The latter contributes more than 30 percent of Turkey’s GNP.

REVENGE OF THE KURDS

That’s not to say that the man is down and out. The AKP is demanding a re-run of the Istanbul election and is preventing the progressive mayors of several Kurdish cities in Turkey’s south-east from assuming office.

Erdogan isn’t a man who shies from using brute force and intimidation to get his way. Close to 10,000 of his political opponents are in prison, hundreds of thousands of others have been dismissed from their jobs, and opposition media is largely crushed. The final outcome of the election is by no means settled.

But force will only exacerbate Erdogan’s problems.

The Kurds are a case in point. When the leftist, Kurdish-based People’s Democratic Party (HDP) made a major electoral breakthrough in 2015 — winning 81 seats in the Parliament and denying the AKP a majority — Erdogan responded by ending peace talks with the Kurds and occupying Kurdish towns and cities.

Rather than cowing the Kurds, however, it sowed the wind, and the AKP reaped the hurricane in the March election. An analysis of the Istanbul mayor’s race shows that the AKP and its right-wing National Movement Party alliance won about the same percentage of votes it had in last year’s presidential election. The same was true for the AKP’s opposition — the secular Republican People’s Party (CHP) and its ally, the right-wing Good Party.

The difference was that the HDP didn’t field a candidate, and its imprisoned leader, Selahattin Demirtas, urged the Kurds and their supporters to vote against Erdogan’s candidate. They did so in droves and tipped the balance to the CHP’s candidate. That pattern pretty much held for the rest of the country and accounts for the AKP’s loss of other cities, like Izmir, Antalya, Mersin, and Adana.

When the Turkish state waged a war against the Kurds in the 1980s and ‘90s, many fled rural areas to take up life in the cities. Istanbul is now about 11 percent Kurdish. Indeed, it is the largest grouping of urban Kurds in the world. So if there is a phrase that sums up the election, it might be “revenge of the Kurds.”

But the AKP’s loss of the major urban centers is more than a political setback. Cities are the motors for the Turkish economy, and for the past 18 years Erdogan has doled out huge construction projects to AKP-friendly firms, which in turn kick money back to the party. The president has delivered growth over the years, but it was growth built on the three “Cs”: credit, corruption and cronyism.

Those chickens have finally come home to roost. Foreign currency reserves are low, Turkey’s lira has plummeted in value, debts are out of hand, and unemployment — particularly among the young and well educated — is rising. In a rare case of political tone deafness, Erdogan focused the recent campaign around the issues of terrorism and the Kurds, ignoring polls that showed most Turks were far more worried about high prices and joblessness.

TROUBLES WITH NATO

Where Erdogan goes from here is not clear. Turkey is holding talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about a possible bailout, but the president knows that means increased taxes and austerity — not exactly the kind of program that delivers votes.

There will be no elections until the 2023 presidential contest, so there’s time to try to turn things around — but how? Foreign investors are wary of Turkey’s political volatility, and the Europeans and Americans are unhappy with Erdogan’s erratic foreign policy.

The latest dustup is fallout from Turkey’s disastrous 2011 decision to support the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. Assad has survived — largely because of Russian and Iranian support — and now Turkey is hosting millions of refugees and bleeding out billions of dollars occupying parts of northern Syria.



Turkey initially tried to get NATO to challenge Moscow in Syria — even shooting down a Russian warplane — but NATO wanted no part of it. So Erdogan shifted and cut a deal with Moscow, part of which involved buying the Russians’ new S-400 anti-missile and aircraft system for \$2.5 billion.

Backing the extremists trying to overthrow Assad was never a good hand, but Erdogan has played it rather badly.

The S-400 deal displeased NATO, which doesn’t want high-tech Russian military technology potentially eavesdropping on a NATO member country, particularly on American warplanes based in Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base.

The U.S. Congress is threatening to block Turkey’s purchase of the F-35 fifth generation fighter plane, even though Turkey is an investor in the project. The Trump administration has also warned Ankara that it will apply the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act if Turkey buys Russian military equipment, sanctions that could damage Ankara’s already troubled economy. Turkey is officially in a recession.

The Americans are so upset about this S-400 business that the Senate recently proposed lifting an arms embargo on Cyprus and signing energy agreements with Greece and Egypt — two of Turkey’s major regional rivals.

(Of course, not being able to purchase the F-35 may end up being a plus for Ankara. The plane is an overpriced lemon. Some of Erdogan’s advisors argue that Ankara could always turn to Russia for a fifth generation warplane — and one that might actually work.)

There is some talk about throwing Turkey out of NATO, but that’s mostly bluff. The simple fact is that NATO needs Turkey more than Turkey needs NATO. Ankara controls access to the Black Sea, where NATO has deployed several missile-firing surface ships. Russia’s largest >

➤ naval base is on the Crimean Peninsula and relations between Moscow and NATO are tense.

A strategic turn toward Moscow seems unlikely. The Russians oppose Turkey's hostility toward the Kurds in Syria, don't share Erdogan's antagonism toward Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and have differences with Ankara over Cyprus and the Caucasus. And for all the talk about increasing trade between the two countries, the Russian economy is not all that much larger than Turkey's and is currently straining under NATO-applied sanctions.

On the one hand, Ankara is angry with Washington for its refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim leader that Erdogan claims was behind the failed 2016 coup. On the other hand, the Turkish president also knows that the U.S. pretty much con-

trols the IMF and he will need American support if he goes for a bailout.

HOLDING THE CENTER

How Erdogan will handle his domestic problems and foreign entanglements is anyone's guess. Erdogan the politician made peace with the Kurds, established a good neighbor policy regionally, and lifted tens of millions of Turks out of poverty.

But Erdogan the autocrat pulled his country into a senseless war with the Kurds and Syria, distorted the economy to build an election juggernaut, jailed political opponents, and turned Turkish democracy into one-man rule.

If the local elections were a sobering lesson for Erdogan, they should also be a wakeup call for the mainstream Turkish opposition.

The only reason the CHP now runs Turkey's major cities is because the Kurdish HDP took a deep breath and voted for the party's candidates. That must not have been easy. The CHP was largely silent when Erdogan launched his war on the Kurds in 2015 and voted with the AKP to remove parliamentary immunity for HDP members. That allowed the Turkish president to imprison 16 HDP parliamentarians, remove HDP mayors, and smash up Kurdish cities.

The Kurds demonstrated enormous political sophistication in the recent Turkish balloting, but they won't be patient forever. Erdogan can be challenged, but — as the election demonstrated — only by a united front of center-left and left parties. That will require the CHP alliance to find a political solution to the demands of the Kurds for rights and autonomy. ♦

ANF NEWS 26 April 2019

Leyla Güven: 168 day on hunger strike

The hunger strike resistance led by Leyla Güven has been joined by thousands in Kurdish and Turkish prisons as well as in many European cities.

ANF AMED Wednesday, 24 Apr 2019, 08:12
<https://anfenglish.com>

Democratic Society Congress (DTK) Co-chair and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Hakkari MP Leyla Güven's indefinite hunger strike launched on 7 November 2018 demanding an end to the isolation imposed upon Kurdish People's Leader Abdullah Öcalan continues on day 168.

Leyla Güven said she would continue her hunger strike until Öcalan is allowed to have regular visits with his family and lawyers. Güven was released from prison and since 25 January is continuing the hunger strike at her home, in Amed. ♦

Hunger strikers in Strasbourg at critical stage

Kurds and their friends in European countries are doing all they can to draw attention to the hunger strike resistance in Strasbourg and are well aware that the health of the 14 activists is badly shaken.

ANF STRASBOURG Friday, 26 Apr 2019, 12:00
<https://anfenglish.com>

Doctor Fahrettin Gülşen has been monitoring hunger strikers in Strasbourg on a daily basis. He reports that they all suffered from heart, kidney and lungs problems.

The doctor said that these problems affecting the organs can lead to serious complications and warned about the critical situation the activists have found themselves in.

The hunger strike in Strasbourg reached its 131st day. The 14 Kurdish activists are fasting demanding the end of isolation against Abdullah



Öcalan.

Kurds and their friends in European countries are doing all they can to draw attention to the hunger strike resistance in Strasbourg and are well aware that the health of the 14 activists is badly shaken.

Problems to vital organs can quickly deteriorate

The hunger strikers have been monitored since they began fasting. According to Fahrettin Gülşen, if the solution to the problem is not found in a short time, the damage to the activists' organs can cause serious complications and even death.

The systemic and neurological problems identified earlier in the activists are now life-threatening, said Gülşen, adding that the heart, kidneys and lungs are the most delicate organs and that heart failure, renal failure or lung inflammation may occur at any stage.

The doctor stated that so far 3 activists were found to have serious problems, yet now he can identify the same problems in 7 of the activists. In particular, the activists showing the most serious symptoms are Yüksel Koç, Kerem Solhan and Gulistan Ike.

Other activists, said doctor Fahrettin Gülşen, are experiencing problems with sound, light and smell as well as heavy muscle pain and insomnia. Doctor Gülşen warned that these complications put the life of the activists at risk.

Call to institutions and public opinion

Once again, doctor Fahrettin Gülşen underlined that the health problems detected in the activists on hunger strike could lead to a fatal outcome and called on the public opinion and the institutions to act quickly.

The doctor reiterated that one of the most important factors for activists was morale. He said the hunger strikers are good as to morale, however, he added, the attitude of the European institutions towards the indefinite hunger strike continues to be negative and this has a bad impact on the morale of the activists.

Doctor Fahrettin Gülşen also called on health institutions in France and other countries, asking them to come and monitor the situation on the ground. ♦

HDP mayor for Diyarbakir finally certified after cleared in investigation

By Rudaw.net 17/4/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region — The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party's (HDP) candidate for Diyarbakir (Amed) mayor, who won the province in March 31 local election, was certified by Turkey's electoral body on Wednesday following weeks of uncertainty.

"We regained municipalities through people's efforts after about two-and-half years. Our people are the owners of this victory," the new mayor, Adnan Selcuk Mizrakli, said in a press conference.

Mizrakli will also have a co-mayor, Hulya Alokmen Uynak, as his party shares top positions between men and women, regardless of who wins under the party's gender-balance system.

Diyarbakir's prosecutor had launched an investigation into both co-mayors on April 5 for allegedly supporting terrorism after they were seen at an event with the pro-Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) slogans.

"We were celebrating the election victory," Alokmen told Rudaw English at the time. "The event was organized by [HDP's] provincial office in Diyarbakir. All the co-chairs who won in the election met there. [The prosecutor] wanted to launch an investigation into this event. We have been under pressure since the election began. All our steps were monitored."

Mizrakli shared a video on his Twitter account, showing him entering his new office for the first time, claiming that the trustee who had been in office since 2016 had spent public money to decorate the office.

"Look, look! What they have created with the people's money ... We will expose all their waste of money," he said in the tweet.

The Turkish Supreme Election Council (YSK) had declared that it would not certify those winners who had previously been removed from office during the State of Emergency since 2016.

The decision affected the HDP more than most other parties as most of its mayors and municipal



Newly elected Mayor of Diyarbakir Adnan Selcuk Mizrakli speaks to reporters at a press conference in the Kurdish city in southern Turkey on April 16, 2019. Photo: Rudaw TV

councils' members were previously removed due to alleged connections with the PKK — connections which the HDP deny.

The party's contentious winner in Mardin, Ahmed Turk, was also certified on April 15 and he shared

the position with a co-mayor, Figen Altindag.

Five days earlier HDP's mayor for Van, Bedia Ozgokce Ertan was the first mayor for a metropolis to be certified. ■

Grèves de la faim en France contre les conditions de détention d'Ocalan en Turquie

AFP 29/04/2019
www.lorientlejour.com

Au moins quinze ressortissants turcs sont en grève de la faim en France pour dénoncer l'isolement d'Abdullah Ocalan, le chef historique du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), emprisonné depuis vingt ans en Turquie, a annoncé lundi une association à Paris.

Selon l'Actit, Association culturelle des travailleurs immigrés de Turquie, quatorze personnes à Strasbourg (est), siège du Parlement et du Conseil de l'Europe et une personne à Paris, ont cessé de s'alimenter par solidarité avec la députée pro-kurde Leyla Güven, elle-même en grève de la faim partielle depuis le 8 novembre 2018.

En poursuivant sa grève de la faim, Mme Güven, élue du Parti démocratique des Peuples (HDP),

entend dénoncer les conditions de détention d'Abdullah Ocalan, chef historique du PKK, une organisation qualifiée de "terroriste" par Ankara, l'Union européenne et les Etats-Unis.

Dans un communiqué, l'Actit, basée à Paris, affirme que "la Turquie est devenue une immense prison à ciel ouvert pour les peuples de Turquie et du Kurdistan".

Selon une coprésidente du groupe parlementaire HDP, Fatma Kurtulan, environ 3.000 personnes écrouées dans 92 prisons à travers la Turquie sont actuellement en grève de la faim par solidarité avec Leyla Güven.

L'Actit assure que, par solidarité des militants politiques ont également cessé de s'alimenter - ils absorbent des solutions salées, sucrées et/ou vitaminées mais aucun aliment solide - à Toronto (Canada), au Pays de Galles, en



La grève de la faim illimitée et sans relais à Strasbourg

Allemagne, en Suisse "et dans d'autres villes européennes".

Très affaiblie, Leyla Güven avait été remise en liberté conditionnelle fin janvier après un an de détention pour avoir qualifié d'"invasion" une offensive militaire turque contre une milice kurde dans le nord de la Syrie.

Malgré un isolement quasi-

total, Abdullah Ocalan reste une figure de proue non seulement pour la rébellion kurde en Turquie, où le conflit avec l'Etat a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis 1984, mais aussi pour les mouvements kurdes ailleurs dans la région, notamment en Syrie.

Il purge une peine de détention à vie dans l'île-prison d'Imrali, non loin d'Istanbul. ♦

Turkey captures four PKK members in Iraq

Apr 22, 2019 <https://ahvalnews.com/>

Turkish security forces captured four Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) members in Iraq's Sinjar province and returned them to Turkey as part of an intelligence operation, state-funded Anadolu Agency reported on Monday.

"Four terrorists captured in Sinjar during MIT's (National Intelligence Service) operations against PKK/KCK targets, were brought from Iraq to Turkey and delivered to the police," the agency said.

Turkey and the PKK have been engaged in a decades-long guerilla war in the country's southeast, which has seen more than 40,000



killed. The PKK, which maintains its headquarters in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq, has been labelled a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union. ♦

Irak : les enfants nés de viols de djihadistes ne seront pas considérés Yazidis

Les enfants de femmes yazidies violées par des djihadistes de l'État islamique (EI) ne sont pas considérés comme Yazidis, a annoncé leur Conseil spirituel suprême.

28 avril 2019 www.atlantico.fr

Considérés comme des mécréants par les djihadistes de l'Etat islamique, les Yazidis, dont les croyances sont antérieures à l'Islam, ont été traqués lorsque l'EI a établi son califat dans la région. Cette minorité kurde (les yézidis seraient environ 550 000 en Irak) est accusée par les islamistes d'adorer le diable.

Dès 2014, les hommes yazidis ont été tués, les garçons forcés à combattre dans les rangs de l'EI et des milliers de femmes ont été enlevées et réduites à l'état d'esclaves sexuelles. Avec la fin du califat, le futur de ces victimes pose question. La semaine dernière, le chef du Conseil spirituel suprême Hazem Tahsin Said a publié un arrêté "acceptant tous les survivants" des crimes de

l'EI, les considérant comme victimes d'actes commis "contre leur volonté". Cette décision s'applique notamment aux femmes mariées de forces à des djihadistes : en théorie, en se mariant en dehors de la communauté, celles-ci ne sont plus yazidies.

Mais ce samedi, le Conseil a précisé que sa décision "n'incluait pas les enfants nés de viols". En effet, la tra-

dition yazidie ne reconnaît que les enfants dont les deux parents font partie de cette communauté. ■



Syrie: malgré la présence russe et turque, escalade dans les provinces du nord

RFI Avec notre correspondant à Beyrouth, Paul Khalifeh / 27 avril 2019

Dans la zone de désescalade englobant les provinces de Hama, Idlib, Alep et Lattaquié, dans le nord de la Syrie, l'escalade a atteint des sommets cette semaine. L'Observatoire des droits de l'homme a dénombré 130 morts, dont près de la moitié des civils, depuis le 20 avril.

La Russie, qui parraine avec la Turquie la trêve conclue en septembre dernier, participe aux opérations militaires dans les provinces du nord à travers son aviation, qui multiplie les raids.

Les troupes gouvernementales syriennes intensifient aussi leurs tirs d'artillerie qui visent tous les jours des dizaines de cibles.

L'armée turque, elle, continue de faire circuler des patrouilles dans les 12 régions convenues avec les Russes, et observe les violations



Photo du lieu de l'explosion d'une moto piégée dans la ville d'Al-Dana, dans la région d'Idlib sous contrôle des rebelles syriens, à la frontière turque, le 27 avril

de la trêve sans intervenir.

Les jihadistes, quant à eux, élargissent le champ de bataille en bombardant la ville de

Lattaquié et la base aérienne russe de Hmeimim.

Les combats sont de plus en plus violents et meurtriers, et pourtant, un embrasement généralisé de tous les fronts, prélude à une grande offensive, ne semble pas imminent.

Une telle opération d'envergure ne peut avoir lieu dans le consentement de la Turquie, que la Russie souhaite ménager pour des raisons géopolitiques. Et Ankara ne semble pas pressé d'en finir avec les groupes jihadistes tant que le sort des régions contrôlées par les Kurdes et protégées par les Américains n'est pas connu.

La guerre d'usure dans cette région où vivent quatre millions de civils est donc appelée à se poursuivre dans les semaines à venir. ●

Syria opposition receives military training from Turkey ahead of potential battle against SDF

Free Syrian Army factions in northern Syria are receiving military training under Turkish army supervision in preparation for an imminent battle against the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces.



Khaled al-Khateb
April 28, 2019
www.al-monitor.com/

ALEPPO — Opposition factions in the Operation Euphrates Shield area in the Aleppo countryside continue to hold various military training sessions under the supervision of officers from the Turkish army and the so-called Syrian National Army, which is affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), opposition officials have told Al-Monitor. The program, which began April 7, includes training on airdrop operations using Turkish army helicopters.

This is the first time FSA fighters have received this type of training.

Director of the politburo for the FSA-affiliated Al-Moaatsem Brigade Mustafa Sejari told Al-Monitor, “The trainings of the National Army are ongoing, and preparations for the upcoming battle in the Eastern Euphrates are underway. The trainings are reaching high levels to ensure the success of operations in record time. Undoubtedly, previous experience in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations will benefit the Eastern Euphrates battles.”

Sejari added, “The trainings are part of the cooperation between the FSA and the Turkish army in their joint war on terror. FSA fighters receive intensive training on airdrops and new military tactics. This is the first such training for FSA fighters. The FSA continues to coordinate and cooperate with the Turkish army, which is offering special trainings and sessions constantly to teach our forces more battle expertise.”

Trainings are held at Turkish military bases in the Aleppo countryside and in training camps affiliated with the factions in the area. FSA-affiliated National Army leaders said the main aim behind the trainings is to raise fighters' combat readiness to engage in a joint battle with the Turkish army against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Eastern Euphrates.

The SDF is a coalition of Arab and Kurdish fighters, with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) being the largest component. Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist group and an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, which the Turkish army is fighting inside Turkey.

The training also includes lessons in tactics for storming enemy positions. The 2nd Corps, 2nd Regiment — affiliated with the National Army — launched these training sessions in its camps near al-Bab city on April 15. Before the training began, 18 Syrian officers who defected from the Syrian regime's army at the beginning of the war joined the ranks of the 2nd Regiment to participate in the trainings by sharing their military and training expertise.

The Ahrar al-Sharqia faction affiliated with the FSA is holding training sessions on machine guns, mortars, urban warfare and close distance martial arts, in addition to giving lessons about the geographic nature of the Eastern Euphrates and the tactics that should be followed in a battle against the SDF. The training of Ahrar al-Sharqia began April 15 as part of the opposition's efforts to prepare for a possible battle in the Eastern Euphrates, as per the Turkish Anadolu Agency. A military group graduated from the FSA-affiliated Al-Sultan Murad Division in Afrin on April 12.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had declared on Dec. 12, 2018, a military operation in the Eastern Euphrates against the YPG. But the surprising announcement of US President Donald Trump Dec. 19 to withdraw US troops from the northeastern Euphrates delayed the operation.

On March 30, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar opened a joint opera-



REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi
Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army fighters walk together after advancing north of Afrin, Syria, March 17, 2018.

tions room near the Syrian-Turkish border in Gaziantep to plan and implement military operations in the Eastern Euphrates.

Official spokesperson for the National Army Yusuf Hamoud told Al-Monitor, “The FSA has benefited a lot from direct contact with the Turkish army and acquired wide-scale technical and military expertise during the two joint battles — Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield. The FSA also benefited from the training offered by officers and experts in the Turkish army to the FSA fighters, including training on several military disciplines like airdrop and landing operations.”

Hamoud added, “If our battle against the SDF in the Eastern Euphrates is launched, it will be a wide-scale one and will require various military tactics. The airdrop and landing operations supply the battlefield with fighters within enemy lines and transfer equipment and ammunition to deep frontlines that can only be accessed through helicopters.”

Ali Tamii — a member of the Kurdish Future Movement, which is active in SDF-controlled areas — undermined the importance of the FSA trainings before engaging in the upcoming battle in the Eastern Euphrates. He told Al-Monitor, “The trainings of the Turkish army for FSA factions aim to pressure the SDF, and they are not as important as a US-Turkish consensus for entry into the Eastern Euphrates. Without such consensus, there won't be a wide-scale confrontation.”

Tamii pointed to ongoing talks between Turkey and the United States over the fate of the Eastern Euphrates area, saying Ankara will only launch a battle against the SDF if it gets the green light from Washington. In such case, the SDF would be abandoned by the United States — its main backer — and would be forced to retreat, Tamii explained.

On the topic of whether the SDF will insist on waging a battle against the Turkish army and the FSA despite a US-Turkish consensus on Turkey's entry into the Eastern Euphrates region, Tamii said “the SDF could not wage such battle without their US and European allies. They will be left alone if a Turkish-Western consensus on the region is reached. The SDF might wage limited battles and resistance acts, but only for a short period. The Afrin experience proved that defense is a lost bet because the two sides [Turkey and the SDF] do not have equal powers.”

He said Turkey got US approval to launch Operation Olive Branch in 2018 against the YPG in Afrin, and thus the United States had abandoned their ally — which is why they lost the battle. ♦

Khaled al-Khateb is a Syrian journalist and former lecturer in the Geography Department of the University of Aleppo.

En Turquie, panique chez les oligarques

CONTRATS La crise économique et la perte électorale d'Istanbul noircissent l'horizon de la « bourgeoisie verte » pro-Erdogan

Correspondant
Istanbul (Turquie)

Samedi 13 avril, en début de soirée, le bus municipal où se trouve l'avocat Sertug Süronoglu est à l'arrêt, dans le quartier de Besiktas, non loin du luxueux Çiragan Palace. Le trafic est complètement bloqué par la police. Excédé, alors qu'il patiente avec d'autres voyageurs sur la chaussée, l'avocat s'enquiert de la raison de ce blocage : « *un mariage* », lui répond-on. « *Et on bloque tout pour un mariage ?* » s'emporte-t-il, au moment où un long convoi de voitures aux vitres teintées s'engage dans la rue, encadré de gardes du corps. L'un d'eux l'expédie, menotté, dans une voiture où il subira un passage à tabac en règle. Quelques jours après les faits, le visage encore tuméfié, il tourne en rond dans son appartement d'Istanbul. Le convoi était celui du président Recep Tayyip Erdogan, et l'avocat, accusé par les gardes du corps « *d'insulte au président de la République* », est assigné à résidence, dans l'attente d'un éventuel procès.

Pour la seule année 2017, 20 539 procédures judiciaires ont été lancées sur la base de cette accusation. « *Je ne savais pas qu'il s'agissait du président, se défend l'avocat. Je ne suis pas près d'oublier tous les invités en smoking et robe de soirée passant devant la voiture sans mot dire, peste-t-il. Mais je m'estime chanceux. A un moment, j'ai vraiment cru que j'allais y passer.* »

Le gouvernement contrôle 95 % des médias écrits

Ce mariage, où se rendait le président Erdogan en qualité de témoin, consacrait l'union de

deux enfants de la « bourgeoisie verte », ces patrons de grands holdings plutôt pieux et conservateurs qui ont fait fortune dans le giron de l'AKP (Parti de la justice et du développement, au pouvoir depuis 2002). Le marié, Haluk Kalyoncu, est l'héritier de Hassan Kalyoncu, un proche du président turc, dont il a financé les activités politiques depuis les années 1990. Le jeune homme est aujourd'hui responsable du holding familial Kalyon, qui a notamment décroché le contrat de 26 milliards d'euros pour la construction et la gestion du troisième aéroport d'Istanbul, en coopération avec quatre autres entreprises du bâtiment proches de l'AKP. La mariée, Yelda Demirören, est l'héritière de la fortune du très puissant Demirören Holding, qui opère dans le secteur de l'énergie, de la construction et du tourisme. Ces deux groupes sont surtout très actifs dans l'industrie des médias. Kalyon possède depuis 2013 Turkuvaz Media, qui comprend, entre autres, le quotidien *Sabah* et la chaîne A Haber, parmi les plus fervents soutiens du gouvernement. Demirören Holding possède de son côté des journaux et a racheté en 2018 plusieurs médias jusqu'ici d'opposition. « *D'après nos chiffres, jusqu'à l'année dernière, le gouvernement contrôlait 70 % des médias écrits et télévisés. Cette année, le chiffre a bondi à 95 %* », explique Aydin Engin, l'ancien éditorialiste du quotidien *Cumhuriyet*.

6 milliards d'euros

C'est le budget annuel de la ville d'Istanbul dont dépendent de nombreux marchés publics

Un audit sur les dépenses de la ville

En 2014, dans un enregistrement téléphonique diffusé sur Internet, on pouvait entendre le président de la République se plaignant auprès de Demirören du contenu d'un article publié dans l'un de ses médias, et le puissant chef d'entreprise sangloter et supplier le chef de l'État, qu'il appelait « *patron* »...

Mais la bourgeoisie verte a du plomb dans l'aile. L'économie turque est entrée en récession depuis le mois de mars et cela a joué dans la défaite de l'AKP aux dernières municipales du 31 mars. Le parti au pouvoir a perdu Istanbul et ses 6 milliards d'euros annuels de budget. « *De très nombreux contrats ont été signés par la mairie alors que les appels d'offres étaient très supérieurs à ceux du marché* », s'offusque Tarik Balyali, élu municipal d'opposition chargé de questions financières et proche du nouveau maire élu. Un des premiers gestes du nouvel édile a donc été de créer un groupe de cinq per-

sonnes chargées de mener un audit sur les dépenses de la ville. La décision a été immédiatement bloquée par un tribunal administratif. Signe de l'inquiétude du pouvoir, l'AKP multiplie les recours pour tenter d'obtenir l'annulation du scrutin et aller vers de nouvelles élections, sans succès pour le moment. La décision finale du Haut Conseil électoral est prévue pour les prochains jours. Ce revers électoral en temps de crise sonne aussi le glas des grands projets d'infrastructure voulus par Erdogan. Cela place ces holdings, dopés par l'incroyable boom du secteur de la construction, dans une situation difficile alors même qu'ils se sont lourdement endettés en dollars et que la livre turque ne cesse de perdre de sa valeur. « *Erdogan est un homme politique habile. Il a fait acheter à perte des médias entiers à ces hommes d'affaires en contrepartie de l'obtention de marchés publics, analyse Aydin Engin. Mais la crise économique et le basculement des villes dans le camp de l'opposition va les priver d'une manne importante. La panique règne à bord. Reste à savoir si ces gens auront le courage d'arrêter de soutenir Erdogan.* » ●

ZAFER ORHAN SIVRIKAYA

Turkey Sends Military Reinforcements to Syria Border after Astana Meeting

Sunday, 28 April, 2019 - Ankara - Saeed Abdul Razek
<https://aawsat.com>

The Turkish army dispatched additional special forces to the border with Syria just a few hours after the end of the 12th round of Astana talks in Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan, on Friday.

As part of Turkey's recent military reinforcements, a convoy of armored vehicles arrived in the Reyhanli district, Hatay province on the southern borders with Syria, amid tight security measures.

The forces were deployed on Saturday throughout Turkish military points on the border.

Observers expected the new reinforcements to be aimed at strengthening Turkish patrols in Idlib or carrying out operations against the terrorist groups, whose withdrawal from the Syrian province Russia has been demanding under last year's Sochi agreement.

Signed with Turkey on September 17, the deal calls for enforcing a new demilitarized zone between the regime forces and opposition in Idlib and the withdrawal of terrorist groups along with their heavy weapons, tanks, rockets systems and mortars.

In March, Turkey and Russia launched independent coordinated military patrols in Idlib and its surrounding areas.

Meanwhile, the 12th round of Astana talks was concluded on Friday with participants failing to reach an agreement on the formation of the Syrian constitutional committee.

Russian, Turkish and Iranian representatives of guarantor states stressed in their final communique that the parties have agreed on the importance of implementing all the articles of the Sochi agreement.

The statement reaffirmed the guarantor state's determination to fully implement the agreements on stabilization in Idlib, including the coordinated patrols and effective functioning of the Joint Iranian-



Foreign Ministers, Sergei Lavrov (C) of Russia, Mevlut Cavusoglu (L) of Turkey and Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran, attend the international meeting on Syria in Astana, Kazakhstan, March 16, 2018. REUTERS/Mukhtar Kholdorbekov

Russian-Turkish Coordination Center.

Turkey has been reinforcing its military presence on the border with Syria since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signaled that Ankara would launch a cross-border operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Manbij and east of the Euphrates.

It suspended the possible military operation after US President Donald Trump's announcement in December that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria.

Trump also proposed establishing a 32-km security zone in northeastern Syria, which Turkey wants to be in control of. Washington wants it to be controlled by European forces from the coalition it leads against ISIS. ●

Bloomberg APRIL 29, 2019

Turkey on an Arms Binge Outdoes World's Top 15 Defense Spenders

By Selcan Hacaoglu 29 avril 2019
www.bloomberg.com

Defense spending in Turkey rose at the fastest pace among the world's top 15 arms purchasers, a reflection of the burden imposed on the country's strained finances by NATO's second-largest army after its foray into neighboring Syria.

The country's defense spending rose 24 percent to \$19 billion in 2018, putting it just behind Canada and ahead of Spain and Israel in total outlays, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute said in a report released Monday. Turkey's spending on the military surged 65 percent between 2009

and 2018, according to SIPRI, which researches global arms expenditure.

"Funding for arms procurement increased rapidly in 2018 and Turkey also expanded its military operation against Kurdish armed groups in Syria," it said.

Turkey's 400,000-strong army remains engaged in one of the country's largest foreign operations since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent troops to Syria in 2016 to fight both Islamic State jihadists and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces, which are linked to PKK militants who have battled for an autonomous Kurdish region inside Turkey.



Troops are also massing along the border in the hope of establishing a safe zone to encourage the more than 3.6 million Syrians who fled to Turkey to return home, and avert any new wave of refugees. ●

REUTERS

Arabs in Syria's Deir al-Zor protest against ruling Kurdish militia: residents

April 28, 2019 / AMMAN (Reuters) - Sulciman Al-Khalidi

ARABS IN SYRIA'S DEIR AL-ZOR have stepped up protests against the U.S.-allied Kurdish militia that controls the oil-rich province after seizing it from Islamic State, residents, protesters and tribal chiefs said on Sunday.

Starting five days ago, they said demonstrations against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had taken place in a string of towns, from Busayrah to Shuhail, in a strategic oil belt in the heart of Arab tribal territory, east of the Euphrates River.

Protesters burned tyres along a major highway from Deir al-Zor to Hasaka that is used by tankers carrying oil, a lucrative trade the SDF took over from Islamic State after defeating the militant group there from late 2017.

"Where is our oil? We won't accept after today to transport our wealth outside our areas," said a banner held by demonstrators in the village of al-Shanan, pictures of which were sent by residents to Reuters and published on social media.

Residents, protesters and tribal chiefs said convoys of tankers from the nearby oil field of al Omar, the largest under YPG control in Syria, had been turned back by local mobs angered by what they see as theft of oil from their region.

"No to Kurdish occupation," chanted protesters in Husayn, one of the towns witnessing large protests.

Spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG militia, the SDF has been the main U.S. partner in Syria and has driven Islamic State out of a swathe of the country's north and east over the last four years.

The YPG has formally declined comment on the unrest but two officials privately told Reuters they had begun talks with tribal elders over demands from local residents that include ending arbitrary arrests.

The SDF has continued to sell oil to the Syrian government in Damascus despite U.S. misgivings. It has increased shipments in recent weeks to ease acute fuel shortages caused partly by U.S. sanctions on Iran, a main financial supporter of the Syrian government, which are hurting the Syrian economy.

By ousting Islamic State from Deir al-Zor, the YPG laid its hands on some of Syria's biggest oil fields, beating the Syrian army and its Russian backers to the prize.



The Syrian government controls areas west of the Euphrates river that are less endowed with oil resources.

But resentment against SDF rule in eastern Syria has grown among the predominately Arab population, residents and tribal elders say, with many objecting to compulsory conscription of young men and discrimination in top leadership layers.

With living conditions poor and many towns without electricity, Arab residents complain the YPG-led administration favors majority Kurdish areas in northeast Syria.

Detentions of Arabs have also angered locals but SDF officials have denied any discrimination, saying they themselves had long been victims of Arab nationalist policies that denied them their culture before Syria's conflict began in 2011.

"In SDF prisons, Arabs are 100 percent and Kurds 0 percent. Where is Justice?" said a banner held by angry demonstrators in the town of Tayanah on Sunday.

Reporting on the demonstrations, Syrian state television showed footage of oil tankers being blocked and diverted and alleged the SDF had fired live rounds at protesters. ●

ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

30 APRIL 2019

Ankara Working on 2 Fronts to Counter Kurdish 'Threat' from Syria

Tuesday, 30 April, 2019 - Ankara - Saeed Abdul Razek
<https://aawsat.com>

Ankara, to this day, has failed to stick to a clear policy on the perceived "threat" of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria near Turkey's borders. Whilst it insists on making loud threats of fierce cross-border offensives, it continues to negotiate with Washington on creating a buffer zone.

Even though Washington has conceded to Turkish demands to address the Kurdish presence across the border, there has yet to be an agreement on the dimensions of and which party would monitor the zone.

Keeping the YPG, the military arm and largest component of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, at a 30-kilometer distance from Turkish borders figures highest on Ankara's agenda.

Such a distance, however, contradicts with the US-led International Coalition's interests on the ground.

The SDF has been vital in the fight against ISIS in areas east of the

Euphrates in Syria. Should Kurdish forces be driven too far from the area, it could hamper anti-terror efforts by the Coalition in Syria.

Turkish government spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, last week, claimed that a so-called safe zone which "stretches from Idlib to Manbij, passing through the border towns of Manbij, Afrin and Jarablus" has been erected.

On US-Turkish negotiations on Syria, Kalin said: "Our talks are ongoing with the American side intensively about the buffer zone, which covers 32 kilometers in northeastern Syria."

He also labeled the US withdrawal from Syria, announced in 2018 by President Donald Trump, as "floundering."

Another contended point is what parties would be allowed to regulate and monitor the safe zone. While Turkey is vying for total control of the zone, the US said it preferred European forces on the ground.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues to boost military reinforcements deployed to the east Euphrates region amid ongoing threats by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan against the Kurds. ●

Energy tops agenda of Turkish FM's meetings in Iraq

Turkey's foreign minister is touring Iraq in a likely bid to boost ties with his country's oil-rich neighbor as the United States ends the waivers that allowed Turkey to buy oil from Iran.



Amberin Zaman
April 29, 2019
www.al-monitor.com

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu met with Iraqi Kurdish leaders today on the last leg of an ambitious visit to Iraq, in which the Turkish diplomat unveiled plans to reopen consulates in Mosul and Basra and to establish new ones in Kirkuk and Najaf. Cavusoglu also announced that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would pay a formal visit to Iraq before the year's end.

The timing of the two-day tour, which took Cavusoglu from Baghdad to Basra and finally Erbil, prompted speculation that Turkey was turning to its oil-rich neighbor for help after the US administration announced it was ending waivers that allowed a clutch of countries including Turkey to continue buying oil from Iran effective May 2.

Last week Cavusoglu railed against the sanctions, saying, "We don't accept unilateral sanctions and impositions on the issue of how we will establish relations with our neighbors."

Getting around the sanctions will be tough if not impossible because taking delivery of Iranian oil regardless of how it's paid for will be deemed sanctionable by Washington.

Also read

Defense/Security cooperationIntel: How Russia and Turkey are growing closer at US expense

Hence, Turkey is already looking to alternative suppliers and Iraq's oil-rich Basra is an obvious choice due to its proximity.

Bloomberg, citing anonymous sources, reported Turkey was looking to import more crude from Basra — ostensibly via tankers — and also from the oil-rich province of Kirkuk through an existing pipeline that runs through Iraqi Kurdish territory. The dual line, which began operating in 1976, was badly damaged during the war against the Islamic State and is operating under capacity.

Sources familiar with the substance of his talks with the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, intelligence head Masrour Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani said Cavusoglu had talked about energy, though not at any great length. Turkey is extremely keen to begin importing Kurdish natural gas from a pipeline that is currently under construction and by Russia's Rosneft. It would help offset its dependency on Iranian gas, which the United States is expected to end waivers for as well. The Iraqi-Kurdish line will be able to handle up to 30 billion cubic meters of gas per year and is expected to be able to meet up to 6% of Europe's yearly gas demand.

Energy clearly was on the agenda in Basra. After meeting with Basra's Governor Asaad Abdulameer Al Eidani yesterday, Cavusoglu tweeted that with its "strategic location&natural resources, Basra is the economic capital of Iraq. Will establish a trade corridor from Turkey to Basra." He did not specifically mention either oil or gas, though Basra has loads of both.



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu speaks during a news conference with Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali Alhakim in Baghdad, Iraq, April 28, 2019. REUTERS/Khalid Al-Mousily

In an ironic twist, however, Cavusoglu sought the KRG's help in persuading Baghdad to drop its 2014 arbitration case filed against Turkey when Ankara allowed Iraqi Kurdistan to export its own oil independently of Iraq's central government via loading terminals on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Baghdad called it a breach of its sovereignty and of the 1973 Iraq-Turkey pipeline agreement. The move was widely interpreted at the time as the most concrete signal yet that Turkey had overcome its paranoia about the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. It also drove a deep wedge between Ankara and Baghdad.

But such thinking was upended when Turkey joined forces with Baghdad, Iran and the United States to oppose the KRG's 2017 referendum on independence. Though Turkey never sealed the oil pipeline or its border with the KRG, it has since revised its policy of relying mainly on the Barzanis' Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) - which pushed for the referendum - and has been reaching out to its rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of late.

The new strategy was in evidence as Cavusoglu tweeted that Turkey would be "more present in [Sulaimaniyah] with our private sector&businessmen" after his meeting with Talabani. Sulaimaniyah is the PUK's unofficial capital while Erbil is seen as the KDP's.

This development marks a sea change. Turkey has long accused the PUK of backing the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK, which is based in the Qandil mountains separating Iraqi Kurdistan from Iraq, was granted virtual carte blanche in Sulaimaniyah until the PUK started squeezing the group under Turkish pressure.

Ankara rewarded the PUK by reopening Turkish airspace to Sulaimaniyah-bound flights but it wants more, well-informed sources told Al-Monitor. It views the closure of the offices of the PKK-linked Kurdistan Free Society Movement in PUK-controlled areas as merely a start and still holds the PUK responsible for the August 2017 abduction of two Turkish intelligence agents by the PKK. Turkey expects Baghdad to be more assertive against PKK militants operating in its territory, notably in Yazidi-dominated Sinjar and in Makhmour, the sources briefing Al-Monitor said.

Cavusoglu also broached the matter of a second border gate between Turkey and Iraq in today's talks. He acknowledged this in yet another tweet, saying it will benefit both Iraq and the KRG. But while Baghdad loves the idea, the Kurds beg to differ. The proposed crossing would be very close to the existing one in Zakho and would again have to run through Kurdish-controlled territory. The Kurds fear that once it's established and a network of roads and bridges connecting Turkey to Tal Afar, Mosul and on to Baghdad is built, Iraqi forces will move in. They would then be cut off from their brethren in neighboring Syria, allowing Ankara to bypass Erbil in their dealings with Baghdad, which is precisely what Turkey wants. ♦

Amberin Zaman is a senior correspondent reporting from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe exclusively for Al-Monitor.

Turkish FM broaches new border crossings in talks with PM Barzani

By. rudaw.net 29/4/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Erbil-Ankara relations are “very important and strategic,” Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said on Monday following talks with visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Barzani said the Region has taken measures to encourage Turkish companies to invest and boost cross-border trade. According to a KRG statement, he and Cavusoglu stressed the need for more border crossings.

Turkey and the Kurdistan Region currently have just one road crossing, Ibrahim Khalil (Habur), near Zakho, Duhok province. The Iraqi side of the crossing is controlled by the Peshmerga and Kurdish border officials.

Customs revenues are paid to the KRG, which also issues its own visa stamps independently of Baghdad.

There have long been discussions over a potential new crossing in Ovaköy, 12 km southwest of Ibrahim Khalil, which could bypass the Kurdistan Region entirely and allow Turkey to trade directly with Iraq.

Such a new crossing could boost trade and tourism and relieve notoriously long delays at the bor-



KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani receives Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Erbil, April 29, 2019. Photo: Rudaw

der. However, a new crossing managed by Iraqi officials could see the KRG sidelined, eating into trade and revenues.

Iraq-Turkey trade volume stands at around \$10 billion. However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told a press conference in March alongside his Iraqi counterpart Barham Salih they want to expand it.

A delegation of businessmen from Turkey's Kurdish provinces of Diyarbakir and Sirnak recently visited Erbil for a construction trade expo.

According to a statement published by the KRG, Barzani and Cavusoglu also discussed mechanisms to counter terrorism and to address the situation in Kirkuk and other disputed areas.

Kirkuk has a large Turkmen community and historic buildings dating back to the Ottoman period.

The Turkish foreign minister said his country is ready to help rebuild war-ravaged regions, particularly Mosul, which urgently needs help with reconstruction. Turkish construction firms are likely to pick up contracts.

Cavusoglu also met with Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani and Kurdistan Region Security Council Chancellor Masrouf Barzani, who is slated to replace his cousin as prime minister in the next government.

Cavusoglu arrived in Erbil late on Sunday. He earlier held talks with Iraqi officials in Baghdad and Basra, including Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

Ankara and Baghdad have been at loggerheads over the issue of shared water resources. Turkey last year threatened to stop the flow of the Tigris River into Iraq in order to fill its new Ilisu Dam.

Low water volumes exacerbated the drought already afflicting southern and central Iraq, devastating local farming.

“Last year, there was a huge water crisis and problem. But this year was the year of compassion and blessings. This year we instead have the problem of flooding,” the Turkish FM said.

Cavusoglu said Turkey would address the water problem with Iraq “so we do not face any potential drought crisis in the future.”

Despite recent heavy rain, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region still lack adequate reservoirs to store surplus water for the drier seasons. ■

REUTERS

Iran inflation could reach 40 percent this year as economy shrinks further - IMF

April 29, 2019 DUBAI (Reuters) - Davide Barbuscia

IRAN'S ECONOMY is expected to shrink for the second consecutive year and inflation could reach 40 percent, an International Monetary Fund senior official said, as the country copes with the impact of tighter sanctions imposed by the United States.

Washington, which re-imposed sanctions against Iran's oil exports last November, this month demanded buyers of Iranian oil to stop purchases by May or face sanctions, ending six months of waivers which allowed Iran's eight biggest buyers to continue importing limited volumes.

Iran's economy shrank by 3.9 percent last year, according to IMF estimates, and is expected to shrink by 6 percent in 2019, Jihad Azour, director of the IMF's Middle East and Central Asia department, told Reuters adding, however, that the projection preceded the latest elimination of waivers.

“Clearly the re-imposition of sanctions and the removal of the waivers will have additional negative impact on the Iranian economy both in terms of growth and in terms of inflation, where inflation could reach 40 percent or even more this year,” he said.

U.S. sanctions against Iran have denied its government more than \$10 billion in oil revenue, a U.S. official said earlier this month.

The Iranian currency, the rial, lost more than 60 percent last year, disrupting Iran's foreign trade and boosting annual inflation.

The Iranian rial official rate is set at 42,000 rials to the U.S. dollar, but its market rate stood at around 144,000 against the U.S. dollar on Sunday, according to foreign exchange website Bonbast.com.

Iran should work to eliminate the gap that currently exists between the market exchange rate and the official exchange rate, said Azour.

“By aligning the market and official rates this will help tame and control inflation and will reduce pressure on the exchange rate.”

The currency's slide, from levels around 43,000 at the end of last year, has eroded the value of ordinary Iranians' savings, triggering panic buying of dollars.

The weak currency and galloping inflation have been a complaint of sporadic street protests since late 2017. ●

3,000 prisoners on hunger strike in Turkey, says rights group

(ANKARA, Turkey — Apr 30, 2019)
By The Associated Press
abcnews.go.com

The number of prisoners who have joined a hunger strike to press Turkish authorities to end the isolation in jail of Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan has increased to close to 3,000, a human rights group said Tuesday.

Human Rights Association head Ozturk Turkdogan told The Associated Press that a total of 2,983 people in 90 prisons across Turkey are refusing food in protest of jail conditions for Ocalan, whose family members and lawyers have reportedly been denied visits.



Pro-Kurdish legislator Leyla Guven launched the hunger strike from prison in November. She has since been released and is continuing the strike at home. Two former pro-Kurdish legislators are among the thousands of prisoners who have joined Guven's strike over the

following months.

Hunger strikers in Turkey traditionally refuse food but take vitamins and salt and sugar solutions, which help prolong life.

Turkdogan said 15 of the hunger strikers are now also refusing vitamins.

Ocalan, the leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, has been serving a life prison term on Imrali island, near Istanbul, since 1999. His group is considered a terror organization by Turkey and its western allies.

Turkdogan's group says Ocalan has not seen his lawyers since 2011 while pro-Kurdish legislators last visited him in 2015. His brother was allowed a half-hour visit on Jan. 12.

Ocalan has in the past conveyed messages to his rebel group through his lawyers.

Hundreds of Kurdish inmates ended a similar hunger strike in 2012, heeding a call by Ocalan.

Turkish authorities have not commented publicly on the hunger strikes. ♦

US will stay in Syria to stop Iran 'taking dangerous action', Centcom head says

April 27, 2019 www.thenational.ae

Gen Kenneth McKenzie reportedly said that the US is communicating with allies to ensure all on same page when it comes to Iran

US Central Command head Gen Kenneth McKenzie said on Saturday that his forces will have the necessary resources to stop Iran from "taking any action that might be dangerous," Sky News Arabia reported.

The Abu Dhabi-based television channel cited Gen McKenzie as saying: "We communicate with our allies and friends in the region to ensure that we are united against the Iranian threat," according to alerts in Arabic by the channel.

"I believe we'll have the resources necessary to deter Iran from taking actions that will be dangerous. We will be able to respond effectively," he added.

The US general also said that reducing the number of US troops in Syria will be done cautiously.

"We recognise that, that's the guidance in which we are operating. That will be something that we will look at very carefully as we go forward," the general said.

In Iraq, Gen McKenzie said the presence of US forces will remain "long-term" in order to combat terrorism.

"America is working to support the State Department and diplomats in Iraq, and will focus on the counter-terror mission."

Gen McKenzie said the best solution to combat terror groups is to establishing "effective local forces". He pointed out that US force are situated in Yemen to combat Al Qaeda and to assist US allies in the region.

The general assumed Central Command leadership from from General Joseph Votel in late March.

Last December, US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of all American forces from Syria but backed down after shock from allies in the region and the West. There was a concern that the withdrawal of American troops could destabilise a delicate status-quo that is emerging and lead to a new wave of conflict in the country.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces who did much of the ground fighting against ISIS expressed concern that if American troops left then Turkey – who views some of the Kurdish groups that make up a major part of the multi-ethnic force – would launch a cross border offensive after rising rhetoric from Ankara.

Also, counter-terrorism experts also warned that while the ground war against ISIS was completed, the militant group remained a potent force



Members of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces walk in the village of Baghouz in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor province near the Iraqi border a day after the ISIS "caliphate" was declared defeated. AFP

and with SDF forces already overstretched and continuing to battle sleeper cells, US forces leaving would allow the militants to resurface.

US officials also said that American forces were needed to ensure that Iran did not spread its presence further in war-torn Syria where it heavily backs Damascus.

In February, the US said it was keeping some 400 of the original 2,000 soldiers on the ground to maintain a foothold and support local partners going forwards.

Meanwhile, earlier this month Washington blacklisted Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Mr Trump also demanded that buyers of Iranian oil stop purchases by May 1 or face sanctions, a move aimed at choking off Tehran's oil revenues.

The US reimposed sanctions in November on exports of Iranian oil after Mr Trump pulled out of a 2015 accord between Iran and six world powers to curb Tehran's nuclear programme.

Eight economies, including China and India, were granted waivers for six months, and several had expected those exemptions to be renewed. ●