



The Background Guide for The Fourth Committee is current as of October 12, 2017. In light of substantial subsequent developments, the following is an update to the Historical Background of “The Question of the Kurdish Population”, current as of February 12, 2018.

The parliament of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq backed a measure by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to hold an official independence referendum on 25 September, 2017.<sup>1</sup> Turnout at the referendum was claimed to be relatively high returned a claimed 92% vote in favour of separation from Iraq. The integrity of the vote was not questioned, but the Iraqi government pledged nevertheless that it would not honour, nor would it discuss, increased autonomy based on the referendum.<sup>2</sup>

The KRG delayed a declaration of independence pending negotiations with the Iraqi government, which were unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup> These negotiations took on a more urgent tone when it became apparent that the Iraqi Army and its allied militias were massing on the Kurdish borders in October, and on October 16, a massive Iraqi advance into Peshmerga lines led to limited fighting and a number of deaths.<sup>4</sup> Most Peshmerga forces, however, withdrew without a fight after what were later alleged to be covert negotiations between the PUK and the Iraqi government behind the backs of the governing KDP.<sup>5</sup> Kirkuk was occupied by the Iraqi Army and a joint Kurdish-Iraqi administration was established, though the Peshmerga were expelled. The KRG alleged that up to 100 000 Kurds fled Kirkuk, but this was not verified.<sup>6</sup>

The Iraqi Army supervised the withdrawal of Peshmerga forces into the 2014 Kurdish borders. They briefly pushed beyond those lines on October 20<sup>th</sup> and clashed with Peshmerga forces, eventually withdrawing without consequential territorial gains.<sup>7</sup>

President Barzani of the KDP subsequently announced his intention not to run for re-election.<sup>8</sup> The KRG accepted the Supreme Court’s assertion that secession was illegal.<sup>9</sup>

In Syria, the situation of the YPG deteriorated when Syrian rebels (FSA) backed by Turkey began an assault on the Kurdish enclave of Afrin on January 20, 2018. Turkish troops

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<sup>1</sup> Dalay, Galip. "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum." *Foreign Affairs*. 2 October 2017.

<sup>2</sup> BBC. "Iraqi Kurds decisively back independence in referendum." *BBC News*. 27 September 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Dalay, Galip. "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum."

<sup>4</sup> Dehghan, Saeed Kamali and Martin Chulov. "Iraqi forces claim rapid progress in operation to 'impose security' on Kirkuk." *The Guardian*. 16 October 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, Loveday. "How the Kurdish independence referendum backfired spectacularly." *The Washington Post*. 20 October 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters. "About 100,000 Kurds have fled Kirkuk since Monday: Kurdish officials." *Reuters*. Baghdad, 19 October 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, Loveday. "How the Kurdish independence referendum backfired spectacularly." *The Washington Post*. 20 October 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters. "Iraqi Kurdistan leader Barzani will hand over presidential powers on November 1." *CNBC*. 29 October 2017.

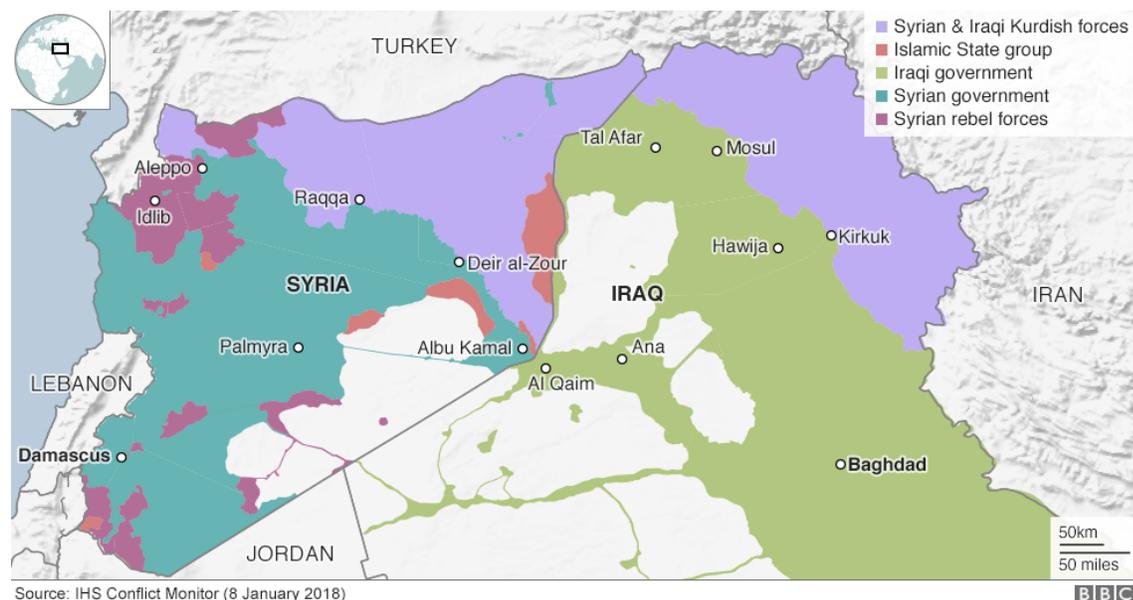
<sup>9</sup> Ali, Sangar. "KRG respects Supreme Court’s interpretation of Constitution, calls for full enforcement." *Kurdistan 24*. Erbil, 14 November 2017.



followed the FSA into Afrin and continued to fight in a support role. This operation, dubbed “Olive Branch”, was described by the Turkish government as an anti-terrorist measure to defeat the pro-PKK YPG by attacking the more vulnerable enclave of Afrin.<sup>10</sup> Turkish president Erdogan pledged to follow this operation with one directed at Manbij in the main body of YPG territory.<sup>11</sup>

Turkish and FSA forces have found it difficult to advance towards Afrin and have made slow progress towards the heavily fortified city with considerable loss of life on both sides. Russian restrictions on Turkish access to Syrian airspace have made it difficult for Turkey to make use of its greatest tactical advantage, air power, in speeding up the advance. Bashar al-Assad’s government has reportedly been cooperating with the YPG in the defence of Afrin, providing it with support in the fight against Damascus’ FSA opponents. 30 000 people in and around the city are reported to have fled their homes, with the newest front of Syria’s multifaceted civil war showing no sign of abatement.<sup>12</sup>

As for the so-called IS, its territory has been reduced to small pockets. Its fighters and cells remain a threat, but having lost its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa on October 17, it retains very little conventional military capability. The Iraqi government proclaimed it to have been totally expunged from the country on December 7, and it retains a very small amount of territory in Syria. NATO forces in both countries are drawing down their operations.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Al Jazeera News. "Turkey's operation in Syria's Afrin: The key players." *Al Jazeera*. 22 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Bassam, Laila and Tom Perry. "Friend or foe? Assad quietly aids Syrian Kurds against Turkey." 11 February 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Loveluck, Louisa and Zakaria Zakaria. "Turkey's offensive against Kurdish fighters in Syria runs into problems: mountains and mud." *Chicago Tribune*. 10 February 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Muir, Jim. "'Islamic State': Raqqa's loss seals rapid rise and fall." *BBC News*. 17 October 2017.



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