

Turkey's War Against the Kurds

Interview with Diliman Abdulkader

by [Jerry Gordon](#) (April 2021)



Convoy of Hope, Lukman Ahmad, 2017

Erdogan's war against democracy for Turkey's Kurds

Turkey's President Erdogan is obsessed with Kurdish exercise

of democracy, whether it be in Turkey or neighboring Syria and Iraq. He has tried relentlessly to expunge the Kurdish-led Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest party in Ankara's Parliament since election of 80 members in 2015. Following Erdogan's faux coup in July 2016, he arrested, prosecuted jailed HDP's leader, Selahattin Demirtas, a human rights lawyer, and several members of the HDP on trumped up charges of being supporters of the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), an alleged "terrorist" group, founded by Kurdish nationalist Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan founded the PKK in 1974 to redress Turkey's military actions against its Kurdish population. More than 40,000 have been killed in the conflict with the PKK, many of the casualties resulting from Turkish bombing of Kurdish areas. The democratic aspirations of the sizable 20 million Kurdish minority in Turkey's 84 million population have thwarted the autocratic objectives of President Erdogan and his AKP Islamist party followers in the nearly two decades of rule since election in 2002. The HDP minority party was a factor in the loss in the June 2019 of AKP in the re-run Istanbul mayoral election. Opposition secular People's Republican Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu who bested "in a battle for democracy" former AKP Prime Minister Binali Yildirim. Erdogan had haughtily said, as former Mayor of the 15 million Istanbul region, "whomever rules Istanbul rules Turkey".

Now, Erdogan and his minority nationalist MHP in the Ankara parliament are trying to use as a pretext to go after the HDP a failed Turkish operation against a PKK base at Gare Mountain in northern in mid-February 2021. 13 Turkish "civilians," Turkish soldiers were killed; the PKK casualties, 48.

Seth Frantzman, [writing](#) in a *The Jerusalem Post* report about this episode the propaganda accusation against the HDP by the Erdogan's communications director:

The terrorist organization PKK carried out deadly attacks,

including suicide bombings, for four decades. HDP, its political wing in Turkey, praises and condones PKK violence. Not all terrorists shoot people or blow things up. PKK and HDP are one and the same.

The AKP leaders were aroused to finally punish the HDP. On March 17, 2021 *Bloomberg* [reported](#) that Turkey's Chief prosecutor "moved to shut the leading pro-Kurdish party, filing charges that could bar its members from politics and play out in elections still two years away".

Bloomberg noted:

The case filed Wednesday accused the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, of attempting to divide the country along ethnic lines, echoing previous occasions when authorities shut the party's predecessors for allegedly having ties to autonomy-seeking Kurdish militants.

Signaling an extension of a political and judicial crackdown on the HDP, parliament earlier revoked the membership of a pro-Kurdish lawmaker who has been an outspoken critic of the government and had been convicted for producing separatist propaganda.

The U.S. State Department accused this latest move by the Erdogan regime said the case would "unduly subvert the will of Turkish voters," in statement released by State Department spokesman Ned Price. Germany's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the developments call "into question the rule of law in Turkey."

The HDP responded:

The government uses the judiciary, which it has made dependent and biased on itself, as a stick to design politics. The closure case against our party is a heavy blow to the democracy and law of the country.

A Nowruz -spring festival celebration on March 20, 2021 by Kurds a *Reuters* report [noted](#) their defiance of this latest Erdogan action:

“They know closing the HDP will not be a solution. You can close a party, but you can’t close people’s minds,” Abbas Mendi, 45, said at a Newroz celebration in Istanbul, where thousands gathered at a rally amid tight police security.

The crowd waved the brightly colored flags of the HDP and other left-wing parties, played Kurdish music and danced after listening to speeches by HDP officials. It won 11.7% support, or nearly 6 million votes, in a 2018 general election.

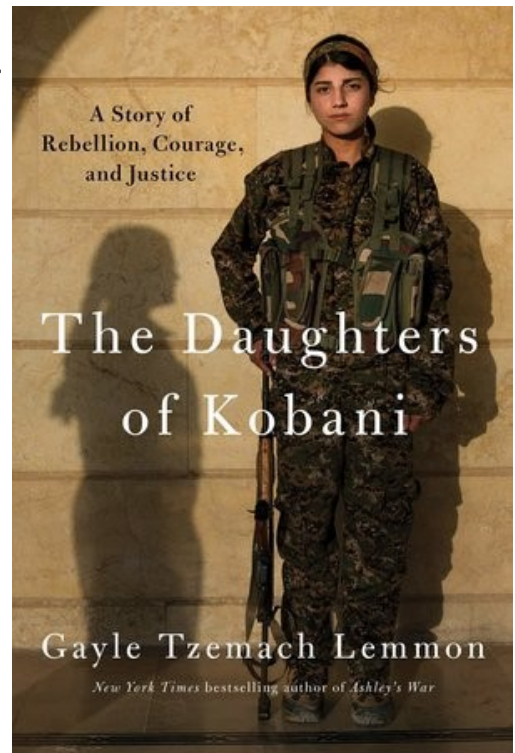
[...]

The prosecutor’s case to close the HDP kicked off a tumultuous week in Turkey. Early on Saturday, Erdogan pulled the country from an international accord designed to protect women and sacked the central bank governor.

Turkey’s War against Syria’s Kurds

In August 2016 Turkey and its jihadist allies of the Syrian Free Army with US consent invaded northern Syria seizing the Town of Jarabulus. In March 2018, Turkish air backed Free Syria Army jihadists in a two-month operation against YPG/ YPJ militias seizing the enclave of Afrin in the northwest Syria, internally displacing 200,000 Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. In October 2019, Turkey unleashed an incursion into Northeastern Syria Kurdish heartland of Rojova following the withdrawal of US special forces posts along the Euphrates. The Turkish objective was seizure a security zone free of Kurdish–YPG led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that the Erdogan regime considers an extension of the PKK. Under the Trump Presidential order, US forces withdrew from the Aleppo

and Raqqa Governorates, but remain in both the Hasakah and Deir es-Zor governorate. [AFP reported](#) on March 22, 2021 Turkish renewal of air strikes against Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, the first such attacks in 17 months since the October 2019 “Operation Peace Spring.”



Kurdish Women take the lead in the Fight against ISIS.

Just before International Women Month in March 2021, noted American author, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon published [The Daughters of Kobani](#), a testimony to the courage, emancipation of battle-tested commanders of the YPJ -Women’s Protection Units of the YPG—who led Syrian Democratic Force operations in the liberation of Kobani, Manbij, Hasakah and Raqqa from the medieval Islamism of ISIS. [Read](#) this *PBS NewsHour* interview with Ms. Lemmon. These women have assumed post combat leadership roles in Rojava community councils and the Syrian Democratic Council. They are an exemplar of women’s rights and freedom for sisters in the Middle East.

Iraqi Kurdistan Commemorative stamp of Pope Francis visit raises Erdogan’s Ire.

Iraqi Kurdistan and Western Iraq are battlegrounds with Turkey, Iran proxies, the Hashd Al Shaabi, the Popular Mobilization Units, the latter controlling Sinjar—the Yazidi

homeland devastated by occupation of ISIS resulting in accusations of genocide and enslavement of men, women, and children. Nineveh province is the ancestral home of the ancient Christian Assyrian communities, with a remaining population of 300,000 in Iraq. Pope Francis made an historic Pilgrimage to this region visiting Baghdad, Nineveh, and Mosul. In honor of the occasion the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government issued a commemorative stamp with his profile



set against map of the Kurdistan region that inflamed Turkish comments. *Al-Monitor* [reported](#) Turkish twitter exploding with statements like: “Those who dream of Kurdistan will end up in Kabristan,” read a top trending tweet. “Kabristan” means graveyard in Turkish.

The conflict with both Turkey and Iran-backed Hashd al Shaabi is continuous in this contested area. Turkey conducts daily bombings in the Qandil Mountains of Northern Iraq. Both Iran and the Hashd al Shaabi have been accused of launching rocket and missile strikes at US bases in Erbil, Balad and Al-Sad airbase incurring both US and local casualties. US, Israeli and coalition air strikes against ISIS targets continue in the western Iraq Syrian border region.

The question arises as to whether the new Administration in Washington may adopt a constructive policy toward the Kurdish communities. Militarily, the original mission of training and equipping Syrian Democratic Force continues with a US advisory force of 2,000. The US maintains a force of 2,500 in Iraq in Iraqi Kurdistan and Western Iraq bases. We note the presence in the new Administration of former Special Envoy Brett McGurk, as Coordinator of Middle East and North Africa affairs, who assisted in backing the

formation of the Syrian Democratic Force. There is reason to believe that the Trump Administration legacy of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Sunni Gulf States, Sudan, Morocco may play a role in enabling Kurdish integration in the region.

To address these and other Kurdish policy issues, we reached out to interview, Diliman Abdulkader.

He is Co-Founder and Spokesperson for American Friends of Kurdistan (AFK), an advocacy and education organization working to enhance US-Kurdish relations in Washington. Diliman was born in Kirkuk and, along with his family, spent seven years at a refugee camp in Syria following the first Gulf War. Diliman comes from a foreign policy, national security background where he was previously director of the Kurdistan Project at a DC policy shop. He continues to invest his time on Capitol Hill, educating lawmakers and staffers on the plight of the Kurds. Diliman received his M.A. at the American University in Washington, D.C., in International Peace and Conflict Resolution.



Jerry Gordon: Diliman Abdulkader. Thank you for consenting to this interview. So that our listeners and readers will understand about American friends of Kurdistan: its mission, range of activities with Congress and the White House providing information regarding Kurdish issues and policies.

Diliman Abdulkader: Thank you, Jerry, for having me on again. Great to speak to you on these critical issues as they happen in the Middle East. My name is Diliman Abdulkader, I am co-founder and spokesperson for American Friends of Kurdistan, which is the only independent advocacy and education

organization based in Washington, DC to enhance US-Kurdish relations. What that means is that AFK, American Friends of Kurdistan, focuses on all four regions of Kurdistan, the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, which numbers at an estimated 45 million plus. We are an independent organization, meaning that we are not affiliated with any Kurdish governments, political parties, or individuals, and we are a bipartisan organization. We work with both sides of the Congress to enhance and develop that relation between the Kurds and the Americans, because we see that relationship as a US interest, but also a human rights interest as well.

Jerry Gordon: Monday, March 8th, 2021 was International Women's Day. For Syrian Kurdish women it marked an opportunity to celebrate their emancipation, courage, and leadership in the battle for human rights and freedom in their homeland besieged by the Islamic State, Erdogan's Turkey, and Assad's Syria. What is their status in the Kurdish community? Why is it an important example for other subjugated women in the Middle East?

Diliman Abdulkader: The Kurdish women have proven that even in the Middle East women can be free, women are able to defend themselves, and women can be part of the society and part of the political life and make key decisions in developing this region for the future. And the women's protection unit, which is YPJ, have been incredible examples ever since . . . I mean, even long before, but they started being recognized by the mainstream media about 2014 when ISIS or Daesh attacked the small town of Kobani. The YPJ, the women's protection units, were forced to protect themselves because they were surrounded by ISIS on one side, and on the opposite side of the Turkish border were Erdogan's forces that decided not to help at all. The United States decided to act and support the Kurds there with air strikes. I think, there is a philosophy behind the women's protection unit, the YPJ is the idea that women should control their lives and have freedom. In Kurdish it is "jin,

jiyan, azadî.” That means that without women there is no freedom, without women there is no life, and you cannot be free in a successful society without the emancipation of women. We have seen this develop over the past six years. Kurdish Women today are co-chairs in the political society of North East Syria, and they play key roles in top political roles in the YPJ and the Syrian Democratic Forces. There is no limit to what they can do, and the Kurds have proven that.

Jerry Gordon: This new book by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *Daughters of Kobani*. It profiles several Syrian Kurdish women of the YPJ, who are part of the Syrian Democratic Force. They became fighters and ultimately battle tested commanders in major campaigns backed by US Air and Special Forces that liberated Northeastern Syria from the Islamic State. Who are these women? What motivated their quest for emancipation? What were their leadership roles during the critical battles to liberate Syrian Kurdistan from the Islamic State?

Diliman Abdulkader: These women are key players in what is happening in the Syrian civil war and what is happening especially in Northeast Syria. They are not only setting an example for North East Syria, but for the entire Middle East. They play key critical roles in top positions, these are not just, “Oh, let’s include the women, let them vote.” No, they went beyond this, and they have proven to be critical to the future of the Middle East. They are presidents, they are legislators in Northeast Syria, they run towns and they are commanders, and they are special forces, they play leadership roles. This is unique in this part of the world, it has not been seen previously, and they have proven the Islamic State wrong, we know that. The biggest threat for the Islamic State extremists were that “Hey, it’s worse to get killed by a man, but it’s even worse to get killed by a woman,” and the Kurdish women realized this. They took this as an advantage, they liberated their town of Kobani in 2014, and I think this book by Gayle Lemmon is well-timed and inspiring. It highlights the

achievements of the Kurdish women in Northeast Syria. What is great about the book, I would argue, is that it allows everybody to learn about their successes. Unfortunately, not a lot of people know about what is going on in Northeast Syria to this day, even though the Civil War has been ongoing since 2011. *The Daughters of Kobani* by Ms. Lemmon highlights the achievements of what can be possible if women are in leadership.

Jerry Gordon: What is the status of the Syrian-Kurdish women now in the wake of the Turkish and Jihadist allies' incursion into Northeast Syria?

Diliman Abdulkader: They are constantly a threat. Why? Because this not only threatens the Jihadists' agenda, but it also threatens the Erdogan regime's agenda. It sets an example for what the Kurds in Turkey can do, for example. As you know, there are 20-plus million Kurds inside Turkey, and they too have this ideology. Most of the Kurds there have the same ideology as the women in Northeast Syria. They go by the philosophy of, "Women, Life, Freedom." This, of course, threatens this extremist radical Islamist ideology. The mission of these radical groups, including the Turkish regime, if they had their way, is to eliminate Kurdish women.

Jerry Gordon: The US effectively withdrew most of its special forces in Syria, retaining limited control of strategic posts. What is the continuing mission, operations, and activities of the Syrian Democratic Force?

Diliman Abdulkader: The US mission has shifted back to its original goals and mission, which was to train, equip, and advise the Syrian Democratic Forces in Northeast Syria. The previous administration with President Trump said that US Special Forces were there to protect the oil. We are beyond that now. Obviously, the policy of the Biden Administration is to do what is different from the previous administration, but that is a good thing for the Kurds. Back in November 2019,

before the withdrawal, there were 2000 US troops. That number has, since then has gradually declined. Today, based on the latest numbers I believe from the US Department of Defense there are about 900 US troops based in Northeast Syria. That mission is back to train, equip, and advise. So I will tell you the Kurds are more hopeful in Northeast Syria, with the Americans there. They are not asking for hundreds of thousands of American boots. You know that is not realistic. That is not necessary because the Kurds are there. They have their own mixed Kurdish, Christian and Arab Syrian Democratic Forces in addition to the 900 US forces there. However, I would argue that the new Administration in Washington might reset this number back to 2000 prior to the 2019 withdrawal to restrengthen this relationship between the Kurds and the Americans in Syria.

Jerry Gordon: How destabilizing are Turkey's recent actions in Syria and adjacent Iraqi Kurdistan? We note the threats to the Yazidi minority in Sinjar and recent raids on PKK camps in the Kurdish region in Iraq.

Diliman Abdulkader: This is not an Erdogan policy, but this is a long-term Turkish government policy before the Erdogan AKP regime came to power in 2002, it will be the same thing after Erdogan is gone. They are 100% against all Kurds. They may argue otherwise just to better their image, but the Kurds know, if you ask any Kurd, the Turkish government is against all Kurds. This is unfortunate, and why do we argue this? Because the Turks have conflicts with the Kurds inside Turkey. The Turks have conflicts with Kurds inside Northeast Syria. They have constant air strikes in Northern Iraq, in the Kurdistan region, and this continues daily. The recent incursion into what you are mentioning with the PKK and Gara region, that just continues to prove that Turkey does not want a peaceful solution with the Kurds. The only solution to this Turkish-Kurdish conflict is for a peaceful solution. That can only be achieved through dialogue, not military intervention

because this will create more Kurdish nationalism. This will create more Kurdish grievances against the Turkish government, constantly igniting military campaigns. We saw what happened in the largely Kurdish enclave of Afrin in Northwest Syria. We saw what happened in Northeast Syria in 2019. The air strikes continue in Northeast Syria to this day, and continuous military operations in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. We know that this is against all Kurds. Just to give you another example of that, that goes beyond the Turkish argument, "Oh no, we're only against the PKK camp." The Pope recently visited the Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous region. Among gifts given to the Pope, was a picture of a stamp depicting the Pope's face with the map of Kurdistan in the background. The Turkish government and the Iranian regime were infuriated with this. Why? Because it depicted a Kurdish map. And they said, "Oh, the Kurdish dream. And you should give up on this dream of independence and self-determination. This is against our national security. The map depicts areas within Turkey. You're claiming a land within Turkey." This was simply a stamp with a map of the Kurdish region that can ignite a war by Turkey against the Kurds. This is the ideology of the Turkish regime and Turkish nationalism and the Erdogan government. Unfortunately, it does not look like it will be solved anytime soon.

Jerry Gordon: How threatening is the presence of Iran proxies, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi popular mobilization units, to both Sinjar and the Iraqi Kurdish regions, given recent rocket attacks that resulted in casualties on US bases in both Erbil and at the al-Asad airbase in Western Iraq?

Diliman Abdulkader: The Hashd al-Shaabi militias continue to be a threat to the entire region of Iraq. Why? Because they are backed by Iran and undermines Iraqi national security and Iraqi military and security apparatus, the police, and in politics, often it is also about economics. So, I think they have infiltrated into every aspect of the Iraqi sovereignty.

This in turn also affects the Kurdistan region. You mentioned the air strikes. The air strikes were targeted at US service members based in the US base in Erbil, and they continue to threaten other areas of Iraq where US forces are located, for example, the green zone and the US embassy. The Hashd al-Shaabi forces in the recent strikes might not have taken responsibility for missile strikes, but they have inspired other smaller groups to do the same as it was doing previous. These Iran proxy militias continue to be a threat. Unfortunately, the PMF, the Popular Mobilization Forces or Hashd al-Shaabi, is still a legitimate force under the Iraqi constitution, and this was done by the previous prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. The Kurdistan region is forced to protect its territories. The United States mission I argue should be to strengthen the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish government in the north, to prevent any new future incursions. The Biden administration did respond by attacking a proxy of Iran inside Syria. You can say this was a positive move, of course, but this also shows that the Biden administration does not want to take it too far because of the ongoing nuclear discussions, negotiations with Iran that are going on behind closed doors. However, Hashd al-Shaabi as Iran's proxies do not care. They are taking it too far. I think the response from the US government to date is not proportionate to the threat that these proxies pose.

Jerry Gordon: The Erdogan AKP and nationalist MHP parties are trying to eliminate the third largest party and the anchor of parliament, the Kurdish HDP party. Many HDP members in the parliament and elected mayors have been jailed on trumped up charges. What is the connection between recent Turkish raids on a PKK base in Northern Iraq and this push to eliminate the HDP?

Diliman Abdulkader: This has been ongoing ever since the failed coup orchestrated by Erdogan in July 2016. Turkey has attacked both the PKK, and its military wings, but also the

political aspect of the Kurdish society inside Turkey. That is directed at the HDP, the People's Democratic Party, which won an estimated six and a half million votes in the election in 2015. Since then and since the July 2016 coup, most of their members of parliament, who have been democratically elected by Kurds, and non-Kurds, have been thrown in jail on trumped charges, as you mentioned. The HDP chair Selahattin Demirtas, has been in jail for four years. He is a human rights lawyer. The Erdogan air strikes and military mission campaign against the PKK, failed in Gara resulting in the deaths of 13 Turkish soldiers that the PKK was holding in the camps in northern Iraq. What Erdogan did to save face among his AKP supporters, as he thought it was going to be an easy mission, was to crack down on the Kurds inside Turkey. This is a continuous policy of Erdogan. We know that the Kurdish card is always easy to play against the Kurds, for him to stay in power. Sadly, his AKP supporters continue to support and believe him. They blamed the HDP for the recent failures in the military campaign. We know there is no connection between these two events. The banning of HDP as a political entity in Turkey is no surprise to the Kurds. It is no surprise to the HDP themselves because most of their members of parliament have been thrown in prison, and even their municipal elected leaders in Southeast Turkey, who were voted in by Kurds themselves. They have been removed by the Turkish government, and replaced with pro-Erdogan, pro-AKP appointees. Has been a trend since the Turkish election in 2015. I think the HDP was prepared for this. Putting down a Kurdish political party just proves to the West, the EU, and the United States that, "Hey, Turkey's not democratic. It doesn't abide by democratic principles." It will do whatever it wants until it is punished, until the EU finally wakes up and says, "Hey, you will never be an EU member." Until NATO says, "Hey, this is not in accordance with a core NATO principle of security, democracy".

Jerry Gordon: With the start of the Biden administration, are

there any prospects for the development of a regional policy recognizing Kurdish and other minority rights? We note the appointment of former special envoy ambassador Brett McGurk as coordinator for Middle East and North Africa. He backed the establishment of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Force to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq. What in your view is the likelihood of any positive developments for the new administration regarding Kurdish policy?

Diliman Abdulkader: The biggest barrier, of course, to any US-Kurdish policy is Turkey. It has always been Turkey. Under previous administrations as well, Turkey has always been the naysayers, even if the United States wants to better relations. The positive aspect of this Administration is that it wants to do the opposite of the previous administration. What that means is, Erdogan can no longer pick up the phone and call President Biden and just spew propaganda in his ears. That is no longer available to him. Since President Biden's inauguration, Erdogan has not had a call with President Biden himself. This means that the Biden Administration is taking a different path than the previous Administration. Which could be key to improved relations and Kurdish policy. You mentioned Brett McGurk within the Administration. Brett McGurk did withdraw from the Trump Administration, largely because of the withdrawal in 2019 from Syria. He understands Turkey. He understands the ins and outs of Turkey and the Erdogan regime. I think he is playing a key role in shaping US policy for the Kurds. It is still early, so we have not seen the full Biden Administration policy and we still do not know what the policy is. However, we know that the US is not withdrawing. We know that the US relations, with Turkey is not positive. From that, we can say that the Kurds are hopeful in Northeast Syria compared to the previous administration.

Jerry Gordon: Final question for you is that America's relationships in the Middle East have shifted under the Trump administration with the adoption by Israel of what are called

the Abraham Accords, primarily focusing on the Sunni Gulf Arab states, and Saudi Arabia, positioning them as a possible bulwark against the threat of a nuclear Iran. How does that impact on Kurdish policy?

Diliman Abdulkader: From my perspective I think that these new deals that are going on in relations with Israel is a positive for the region. It is a positive for Israel and for the other countries involved. The Middle East must evolve and move forward. The real threat is the Iranian regime, and this has been the argument for years now, and it is useful that the region is finally realizing this. Peace with Palestine and arguments of two state solution or whatever the result is, it does not have to be the barrier to normalization of relations. I think that the Abraham Accords is positive, allows the Kurds in the future to have open relations with Israel as well. That it is no longer taboo. For too long the Kurds have been accused as being Israel's project. We saw what happened during the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. Erdogan threatened the Kurds there. The late IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani threatened the Kurds. The Iranian regime threatened the Kurds and simply said, "We will not allow it." Even Nouri al-Maliki, the former Iraqi prime minister, threatened the Kurds, saying, "We're not going to allow a second Israel."

So, these steps are positive for the entire region. It allows us as region to be more stable, allows people-to-people interaction, more cultural interaction between the Jewish people and the rest of the Middle East. I hope that the Kurds can play part in these open relationships soon. Will it occur soon? That is a different question because the Kurds are still considered non-state actors. They have to abide by their central government's relationship and policies. What that means is, the Iraqi Kurds might like Israel and the Jewish state, but Iraq has a policy, and Baghdad does not have any formal relations with Israel, and that is not going to change any time soon. The same might be true for the Sunni states who

have entered Abraham Accords with Israel. I think the more countries that join these accords, the better for the region. And hopefully, the Kurds can finally come out, out in the open and have better relations with Israel as well.

Jerry Gordon: Where can we find information on American Friends of Kurdistan online and its activities in Washington DC?

Diliman Abdulkader: We're available at on-line at americanfriendsofkurdistan.org. On Twitter, we are continually active at [@AFKurds](https://twitter.com/AFKurds). And you can follow me on Twitter as well. We constantly have meetings with Congressional members and their staffers on these issues. We have a strong coalition of like-minded organizations that have the same values of enhancing US-Kurdish relations in addition to their respective partners.

Jerry Gordon: Diliman Abdulkader, I want to thank you for this engrossing and timely interview. And we hope to hear more about the productive activities of American Friends of Kurdistan. Thank you.

Diliman Abdulkader: Thank you for having me, Jerry. It was a pleasure.

[Watch](#) this *NetivOnline* video of the interview with Diliman Abdulkader of American Friends of Kurdistan

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