PKK's Friends and Foes in the Middle East Since 1999

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This article illustrates the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) relationship with regional actors since 1999. The PKK maintains relations with Iran, Syria, Russia, Iraq, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the US. On the other hand, the PKK has strained relations with Turkey, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, and rebel groups in Syria. At the same time, PKK's affiliate in Syria has received military support from the US and European support since October 2015. It is argued that the PKK and its affiliates are unlikely to become strategic allies of the US since it maintains ties with the pro-Assad camp. This article further shows that contemporary allegiances of the PKK are a result of a longer-term shift initially triggered by the Syrian war. PKK's current position in the regional conundrum recalls its Cold War alliances stretching back to the 1980s and 1990s and reflects on PKK's priority – armed struggle in Turkey.

Keywords: Kurdistan Workers' Party, Party of the Free Life of Kurdistan, war in Syria, Democratic Union Part, Turkey, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

PKK's complex web of relations

The insurgency organization the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)[1] is one of the main proponents of Kurdish nationalist ambitions in the Middle East. During almost forty years of its existence, it has managed to build and maintain a prominent position among the Kurds. At the onset of 2017, the PKK is arguably stronger than ever in its organizational history. It controls major areas of northern Syria through

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its Syrian wing the Democratic Union Party (PYD). It has bolstered its position in Iraq. Since August 2015, the PKK renewed its struggle in Turkey.[2] The PYD and its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) enjoy a considerable amount of international legitimacy for their successes in combating Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including direct US military support since October 2015.[3] Such a state of affairs raises the question of whether PKK-linked actors can be regarded as more than tactical allies against ISIS and the Syrian regime. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the PKK position in the web of regional relations.

As this article suggests, the PKK current strategic and ideological position in the regional mosaic is incompatible with a long-term alliance with the US and other NATO countries. The PKK has a strained relationship with Turkey, a NATO member since 1952. The PKK is also unfriendly towards the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) dominated by Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which has enjoyed increased international support since ISIS emerged in the summer of 2014. On the other hand, the PYD remains in a marriage of convenience with Assad's regime. The PKK enjoys closer ties with Iran and its ally in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), as well as with the Iraqi government.

This article offers a brief account of the PKK reconstruction period since 1999, when its leader Abdullah Öcalan was detained. The Syrian civil war raging since 2011 arguably boosted PKK's prominent position in the region. The PKK relationship with actors such as Syria, Iran, and Russia stretching back to the Cold War era is in many ways revived in the contemporary period. By the end of 2013, the PKK leaned toward Iran, the PUK in Iraq, and Russia and its marriage of convenience with Assad's regime took a clearer shape. We argue that ISIS' rise in 2014 further highlighted existing alliances and trends. In 2015, negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish government ended in failure and led to the escalation of armed conflict in the southeast. Considering the Syrian regime aided by Iran and Russia has a considerable upper hand against weakened opposition throughout 2016-17, the PYD has only little motivation to break ties with the Damascus regime and its sponsors, Russia and Iran. The article points out a gradual shift of the PKK's focus and subsequent alliances which was triggered by the emergence of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The analysis faces several constraints given the relative lack of reliable data and hard evidence that would enable painting the exact picture of PKK's relations, including levels of support. Both states in the region and the PKK and its members themselves tend to undermine or even completely deny ties or even contact with the actor in question. Therefore, a sole reliance on primary sources such as speech acts of stakeholders, documents of the PKK etc. would greatly distort the outcome of the analysis. In order to cope with these constraints we also rely on a combination of existing analyses, largely published by think-tanks, academic works and unstructured interviews with a range of respondents (mainly local and foreign journalists with long-term experience with the issue, PKK-linked actors, local observers such as humanitarians). Additional data was collected during the first author's observation and informal interviews with locals during his stays in Iraq and Turkey.

PKK's reconstruction and success in 1999-2017

The PKK was established as a revolutionary Marxist movement which aimed at the creation of an independent Kurdistan. Beginning as one of the myriad of radical leftists groups in Turkey in 1978, it gradually rose to prominence, arguably becoming one of the key actors shaping Kurdish politics not only in Turkey but also among the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and within the Kurdish diaspora mainly in Europe.[4] The PKK continuously waged an insurgency predominantly in the south-east of Turkey, enjoying the Cold War setting which has provided it with support from Syria and the Soviet Union since the 1980s and 1990s. Its insurgency in Turkey cost the lives of an estimated 30 000 people in 1984-99.[5]

At the onset of 1999, the PKK experienced a period of 'shock and retreat' after the detention of its leader Abdullah Öcalan.[6] He is currently serving a life sentence in Turkey's İmralı island but maintains considerable influence over the organization.[7] The PKK was expelled from Syria upon Ankara's pressure on Hafiz Assad and also retreated from Turkey to the mountains of northern Iraq around the Qandil Mountain.[8] It lost manpower, safe haven and experienced a leadership crisis embedded in a struggle between moderates (such as Abdullah's brother Osman) advocating for a political solution and hawks (in the end prevalent) represented by current PKK leadership.[9] The PKK, largely deprived of its outside supporters such as Syrians, Soviets and

partially also Iran, underwent a period of reconstruction. In 2004, the PKK's insurgency resumed on Turkish soil, albeit with much less intensity than in the 1990s.[10] In the post-2004 era, the PKK has proved its resilience in facing the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party's (AKP) attempts to marginalize them by appealing to the Sunni identity of Turkish Kurds and easing the repression of 'Kurdishness' in general.[11]

In 2003, the PYD was established as the PKK's main front in Syria and thus the PKK kept its presence, albeit so far limited.[12] The expansion went hand in hand with the reconstruction of the PKK as a system of political parties, armed wings and 'civil society' organizations following Öcalan's far-left ideology with branches not only in Turkey but in other countries in the region as well.[13] For example, the PKK spread its insurgency further to Iran in 2004, through its affiliate Party of the Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK).

The start of the war in Syria in 2011 undoubtedly paved way for the PKK to strengthen its position in the region. In November 2011, Salih Muslim, a leader of the PYD previously exiled in Iraq, returned to Syria.[14] In the summer of 2012, the PYD aided by PKK cadres from Qandil assumed a monopoly in northern Syria when Assad's armed forces withdrew from most of the Kurdish areas.[15] The PYD gradually pursued its radical democratic governance project in northern Syria in line with Öcalan's idea of 'Democratic Confederalism'.[16] Syrian Kurds subsequently earned international prominence and legitimacy and were considered to be one of the forces capable of combating ISIS. In the summer of 2014, PKK's forces took advantage of the vacuum left by the retreating KDP Peshmerga units facing ISIS from Shingal district in Iraq.[17] The PKK-linked forces subsequently moved in and garrisoned itself in the area while enjoying the support of the local Yazidi population and international legitimacy being viewed as the saviour of Yazidis.[18]

In the meantime, a period of ceasefire and negotiations during the so-called Peace Process between the PKK and the AKP government in Turkey, which began at the end of 2012, was used to bolster the PKK-linked actors' political power and organizational structures without direct Turkish counteractions in Kurdish areas of Turkey. However, by the end of July 2015, Ankara renewed its operations against the PKK in Iraq after more than two years of ceasefire.[19]

PKK's Cold War alliances revived

PKK's Russian connection

The PKK was established as a Marxist revolutionary organization and thus it enjoyed support from the Soviet Union and from Russia in the 1990s. This was due to both ideological affinity and the PKK's enmity towards Turkey, which has been a NATO member since 1952. Moscow has never listed the PKK or its affiliates as a terrorist organization. This stance was reiterated in October 2015 by the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrey Karlov: 'Neither the PKK nor the PYD are considered terrorist organizations by either Russia or United Nations Security Council',[20] a stance repeated again by Russian foreign ministry official Aleksandr Botsan-Harshenko in February 2017.[21] The PKK received training and material support from the Soviets through their proxies, but political support for its cause was public.[22] Moreover, its 3rd Congress was held in Moscow in 1996, suggesting that ties continued even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[23] In the 1990s, Russia used 'the Kurdish card' to restrain Turkish ambition to spread influence into newly established Caucasus republics; Turks in turn supported Chechen insurgency.[24] Moscow hosted various conferences of PKK-tied groups, toyed with the possibility of sponsoring (Turkish) Kurdish Parliament in exile and reportedly even set up PKK camp in Moscow.[25] However, it seemed that after 1998, when the PKK was expelled from Syria and re-located to northern Iraq, the mutual relationship was somehow downgraded for the time being.

Nevertheless, incompatibility of Russian and Turkish interests regarding the outcome of the Syrian war again brought the prospect of using the PKK as a card to be played against Ankara. With deterioration of the relationship between Moscow and Ankara which began in November 2015 when the Turks downed a Russian Su-24, Moscow signalled their possible backing of the PYD in Syria.[26] PKK leader Cemil Bayık also issued a statement in support of the Russians.[27] In December 2015, Moscow pledged support for the Syrian Kurds, but only through Assad's government 'as a part of counter-terrorism operation with the Syrian administration."[28] The PYD continues to try to pursue its balancing act and a PYD official noted in November 2015 that it wants to nurture its relationship with both the US and Russia while "one wouldn't be at the expense of the other'.[29] PYD officials openly claim they have a rather warm relationship with Moscow. Salih Muslim not-

ed in October 2015 that the PYD had had a relationship with Moscow for the past three years and they were able to go back and forth to Moscow.[30] The PYD opened its liaison office in Moscow in February 2016.[31] The PYD leadership and the PKK cadres in Syria generally view Russia as an important partner.[32] Maintaining ties with Moscow falls within the PYD effort to balance its external relationships. Russia has also consistently maintained that without the Kurds included, the Geneva Peace Talks cannot succeed. Moreover, Russian is spoken among some senior PKK cadres operating in Syria since they received training from Russians in the past.[33] Other sources also suggest that Russians extended military assistance to the PKK since late 2015 through sending its advisors to Qandil, where PKK's leadership resides.[34]

During 2016, Russian-Turkish relationships normalised, with Erdoğan expressing regrets[35] over the downing of a Russian jet in June and Russians playing a role in negotiating Turkish military operation Euphrates Shield into Syria. However, since early 2016, the PKK-linked forces in north-western Syria have been enjoying Russian aerial support and coordinated their offensives against (Turkey-backed) rebels with pro-Assad forces in Afrîn area. PYD fighters in Afrîn reportedly even received weapons from Russia.[36] PYD's advance effectively cut off the most accessible land-route between Turkey, Aleppo and rebel-held Idlib further south. Additionally, Russian forces have built a permanent military presence in Afrîn since early 2017 in order to shield the PYD-held enclave from a possible Turkish attack.[37] In March 2017, Russia reportedly mediated the deployment of Syrian government forces along the lines of contact between Turks and Kurds in Manbij.[38] In March 2017, it was also reported that Russia set up military base and its advisors were providing training for Kurdish forces.[39]

On the eve of Turkish invasion to Afrîn in January 2018, Russian forces withdrew from the area and have a green light to Ankara's incursion.[40] Moscow most likely agreed to do so since it prioritised keeping Turkey on board of Russia-sponsored Astana negotiations on ending Syrian war. However, with the existing rivalry between Russia and Turkey, it is only logical that Moscow boosts its ties with the PKK-linked forces in the region in order to keep Turkey at bay as it did in the past. Developments since 2015 show that Moscow has boosted its support for the PYD and used it as a pressure point at times when relationship with Turkey was problematic.[41]

PKK's Iranian connection

The PKK developed a relationship with Teheran which was nurtured in the 1990s, when it was focused almost solely on its insurgency operations in Turkey. In particular, Cemil Bayık, a current co-chair of the PKK's executive council, developed ties with Iranian intelligence in the 1990s.[42] Despite several security agreements between Ankara and Tehran inked in the 1980s and 1990s, Iran turned a blind eye to PKK's bases, logistics and operations launched against Turkey from its soil.[43]

In 2004, the Party of the Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) was established and began its armed insurgency in Kurd-inhabited areas of western Iran. The PJAK fighters organized in its military wing the Eastern Kurdistan Units (YRK) that are subject to the PKK's military command although the PJAK leaders claimed that it is a separate organization sharing the same ideology of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and was only receiving assistance from the PKK.[44] The PJAK's insurgency was less intensive compared to the PKK operations. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the PJAK insurgency claimed more than four hundred lives between 2005 and 2011, with over 220 casualties in 2011.[45] However, by 2011 it managed to stage more comprehensive operations that eventually provoked Iran into launching a major cross-border offensive targeting the PJAK safe havens in northern Iraq between July and September 2011.[46]

The PJAK operations on Iranian soil reportedly boosted intelligence cooperation between Turkey and Iran, which started to share intelligence on the PKK in the summer of 2010.[47] However, by the end of 2011, the cooperation was severed. One of the reasons was the emerging war in Syria, where the competing interests of Teheran and Ankara arguably overshadowed pragmatic cooperation to curb PKK's activities. In the second half of 2011, there was a surge of violence in southeast Turkey and Turkish officials believed that such major PKK operations were possible only because Iran turned a blind eye to PKK's logistics in the area.[48] At this period, Turkish interests once again strongly converged with the Western outlook on Syria and regional developments. The rapprochement between Iran and Turkey in 2000s ended and as Sinkaya argues '(...) despite the rationalization of bilateral relations, the spectre of the former "modus operandi", which was marked by ideological confrontation, regional rivalry, and security concerns, still continues'.[49]

The PJAK retreated to Iraq in late 2011, where it shares bases with the PKK, and since then PJAK's combat operations in Iran have been sporadic. PJAK's fighters engaged in struggles in Turkey, Syria, or were deployed on the frontlines against ISIS in Nineveh province in Iraq.[50] Sources suggested that the decision to withdraw was made in accordance to agreement with Iran mediated by the KRG.[51] The PJAK remains largely absent from the renewed Kurdish armed struggle on Iranian soil and its base is currently in Syria.[52] Since the spring of 2016, other Iranian Kurdish opposition parties such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, Kurdistan Freedom Party and Komala have waged insurgency operations in Iran which have claimed tens of lives.[53]

In July 2013, the PKK convened its 9th Congress in the Qandil Mountain in northern Iraq.[54] The ensuing leadership change further confirmed PKK's focus on Turkey and Syria and facilitated pragmatic relationship with Tehran. Murat Karayılan, considered a more moderate figure within the PKK, was assigned a lower position as a commander of the PKK's armed wing.[55] The newly-appointed co-chairs of the Executive Council were Cemil Bayık and Hüleya Oran. The 2013 leadership change hinted that in general, the PKK was preparing for war by appointing more hawkish figures rather than committing to the Peace Process with the Turkish government.

The traditional rivalry between Iran and Turkey once again manifested in Syria brought the PKK closer to Iran. Iran has no interest in resolving the Kurdish issue in Turkey and views the 'PKK card' as a useful tool to maintain pressure on Turkey and curb its regional ambitions, including in Syria. That argument especially holds since the current PKK leadership prioritizes its struggle in Turkey, and largely abstains from fighting in Iran.[56] In 2012-15, Iran was in contact with PYD leadership as well, including PYD co-chair Salih Muslim who visited Iran on several occasions. Iran encouraged its territorial expansion to deny these areas to opposition groups.[57] However, International Crisis Group noticed[58] that Iranian security officials have started to view self-rule as contagious and asserted that 'An autonomous Kurdish region [in Syria] will trigger the fragmentation of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey (…)'. On the other hand, such a rhetorical shift does not mean open enmity (instead it falls within the pattern of pragmatic cooperation on certain issues with the PKK) but at the same time preventing such Kurdish entities from emerging in the region and in Syria for that matter. Moreover, a key Iranian ally Lebanese Hezbollah has reportedly

deployed its troops in Kurdish areas such as in Hasaka or regime-controlled Qamishli airport over the course of the war albeit their numbers are relatively small.[59] Hezbollah commanders in Syria noted that they coordinated with the PYD and shared intelligence during operations along the Turkish border at least throughout 2016.[60]

A marriage of convenience with Damascus

The Ba'athist regime in Syria directly supported and hosted the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s due to its enmity towards Turkey over the Hatay province, which fell under Turkish control in 1939, despite then having an Arab majority.[61] Another major source of friction was Ankara's ambitious Southeast Anatolian Project that allowed Turkey to use a newly built system of dams to choke water flows both in the Euphrates and Tigris since the mid-1970s.[62] Turkey has periodically used this tool to pressure the Syrian government. Although the PKK was expelled by Hafiz Assad's regime following the signing of the Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria in October 1998, it renewed its presence in northern Syria which has been tolerated by Damascus. The PYD, established in 2003, became the main political front of the PKK in Syria. In 2003-11, the PYD remained rather politically inactive compared to Turkey, keeping its covert presence while building on its personal network of operatives from pre-1999 period. In Syria, there is an exceptionally rich palette of Kurdish political parties, some more independent, others with ties to Iraqi Kurdish politics, specifically to the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria), or to the PUK (Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party).[63] For Damascus, allowing the existence of more Kurdish parties in Syria and thus keeping the Syrian Kurdish political scene fragmented has long been one of its main Kurdish strategies. PYD's networks, including youth and women rights organizations played a hand in recruiting Syrian Kurds into the PKK ranks fighting mainly in Turkey.[64] Needless to say that for the regime such an arrangement was favourable since it ensured radical Syrian Kurds had the means to join the Kurdish struggle elsewhere.

In July 2012, Assad's forces left major garrisons in northern Syria without fighting, reportedly even leaving supplies and arms to the PYD forces.[65] This event can be marked as a breaking point highlighting the renewal of the 1980s and 1990s marriage of convenience between Assad's regime and the PKK. Armed confrontations between the PYD and the regime forces were sporadic and were only short-lived of local na-

ture, most likely driven by local disputes, such as clashes with pro-regime militias in Hasaka in January 2015 or August 2016.[66] Assad's armed forces coexisted and fought side by side in Hasaka against ISIS. There were numerous reports on cooperation over time, for example regarding the protection of oil fields in the Rumayla area on behalf of the regime.[67] During the bloody battle for Aleppo in the second half of 2016, Kurdish neighbourhoods under PYD control were largely excluded from fighting and the Kurds did not evacuate their forces unlike other rebels. In 2017, the PYD-held areas in Aleppo are still under their sole territorial control with the regime accepting such an arrangement.[68]

These developments bolstered (traditional) suspicion and enmity of Arab opposition groups (both nationalist and Islamist elements) which blamed the PYD for their cooperation with Assad and strictly refused the establishment of any kind of Kurdish entity in Syria. The PYD, on the other hand, never joined major Arab opposition projects. As early as in the second half of 2012, the PYD was engaged in high-intensity fighting with other rebels, mainly with radical Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and later ISIS, but also with elements of the Free Syrian Army.

The PYD proactively worked on the establishment of quasi-state structures in northern Syria. These efforts were taken to a new level in late 2013, when the PYD announced an aim to establish three 'cantons' in northern Syria: Jazira, Kobanî, and Afrîn. Later on in March 2016, in an attempt to cope with the controlling areas with significant Arab population and dispel its 'Kurdish character', the PYD governance project was re-branded on December 2016 finally as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.[69] Accenting ethnic inclusiveness of both armed and political structures also stems from Öcalan's ideological outlook since he considers ethnic richness of Kurdish-inhabited areas as '(…) a blessing for new democratic political formations'.[70] Even the Charter of the Social Contract adopted in January 2014 which served as a 'constitution' for Rojava stresses this since it speaks about 'a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens'.[71] Interviews and existing research, however, suggest that decision-making is still strictly in the hands of the PYD-affiliated figures, and ultimately in the hands of the PKK cadres loyal to Qandil who usually work behind the scenes.[72] The bureaucratic apparatus itself also relies on the regime's structures and people who have received salaries from Damascus over the years.[73]

In October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established as an armed force consisting of Kurdish, Arab and other elements.[74] Establishment of the SDF was in line with the general attempt to re-brand both the YPG and governance structures as primarily non-Kurdish. The SDF served as the main platform for the US-supported anti-ISIS campaign in Syria and is also comprised of the groups consisting of Arabs, Christians and Turks. In reality, however, Kurdish elements (and more specifically the PKK cadres) prevail and hold decision-making powers and the same goes for governance structures of the Democratic Federation.[75]

The PYD continues to cooperate with Assad's forces in northern Syria. It has also coordinated military operations. For example, since early 2016, PYD's forces apparently coordinated its operations with regime forces to cut opposition groups' supply lines from Turkey, in the Aʿzaz area north of Aleppo.[76] In March 2017, it allowed for the return of regime forces to Manbij.[77] Since the Turkish incursion to Afrîn began in January 2018, the Kurds officially called for Damascus to intervene and send its forces to the area.[78] The regime consistently argued throughout 2015 that Damascus already provided Kurds with support in combating terrorism.[79] A PYD spokesman Redur Khalil noted as early as in August 2014 that the cooperation between Kurds and pro-Assad forces 'is quite logical under the current conditions," adding that the PYD "will collaborate with anyone to expel extremists'.[80] Moreover, Damascus repeatedly signalled willingness to discuss more autonomous position of the Kurds.[81] This was repeated by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muʿalim in September 2017.[82] The PYD officials were negotiating numerous times with the regime officials in Qamishli on the post-war arrangements during the course of the war, however, no concrete outcome of these talks is known.[83]

Given the fact that it seems that Assad's regime will remain in power, Kurds represent useful allies for Assad to counterbalance the Arab majority in the north. The PYD, on the other hand, needs to keep its relationship with Damascus to maintain at least a prospect of improving Kurdish standing in Syria in the long-term.

The PKK cadres from Qandil exercise firm control over military and governance structures of the PYD in northern Syria.[84] Moreover, the extent of influence of PKK fighters from neighbouring countries can also be illustrated by Stein's and Foley's casualty study[85] of YPG martyrdom notices asserting that by January 2013 and January 2016 that

359 Turkish citizens, 323 Syrians, 32 Iranians and seven Iraqis. In the words of PKK fighter Zind Ruken: 'Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK, sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK.'[86] International Crisis Group further argues that while some PYD cadres are open to reaching a pragmatic agreement with Turkey, which they view as crucial for economic and political sustainability of their project, the current PKK leadership prioritizes activities against Turkey and considers its Syrian efforts closely interconnected with Turkey.[87] PKK commander Cemil Bayık describes the fight in Syria as interconnected with the campaign in Turkey which is crucial: 'It is wrong not to mention Turkey when we speak about Syria, Iran and Iraq. Turkey is behind the crisis in those two countries. If you can't fix the Kurdish issue in Turkey first, you can't resolve it there either'.[88] Murat Karayılan's wing is, on the other hand, known as a proponent of supporting Kurdish self-determination in all four countries.[89] Moreover, developments in early 2018 in mountainous Afrîn show that the PKK is determined to engage in a bloody protracted fight with Turkish forces and has relocated significant number of fighters from battlefields against ISIS.[90] Apparently there have been contradictions between parts of the PYD political leadership and views of the local Syrian Kurds aligned with its administration and the PKK cadres. An example is Salih Muslim, former co-chair of the PYD, who advocated for an agreement with Turkey and met with Turkish officials several times in 2013-15.[91] However, his position was comparably weaker to PKK-trained militants with stronger allegiance to Qandil leadership with a different outlook[92] such as Aldar Khalil,[93] who is currently a co-chair of the PYD-dominated governing coalition in Democratic Federation, the Movement for Democratic Society (TEV-DEM). Salih Muslim was gradually sidelined and eventually replaced as the co-chair of the PYD in September 2017.[94] Existence of this friction between parts of the pragmatic PYD cadres when it comes to relations with Ankara and the PKK leadership, which considers Syria an integral part of its campaign in Turkey (and in the region in general), was repeatedly mentioned by Syrian Kurds in informal interviews.[95]

A strong grip of 'Qandilians' over military and political structures in Rojava remains and it is unlikely that it would rapidly change. As a result, there is even more space for cooperation between the PYD and the regime (and Iran for that matter) since Qandil could be willing to agree not to incite further conflict within Syria (or in Iran).

Turkish Kurdish conundrum

The failed peace process

The AKP's coming to power in 2002 gradually raised hopes that they would take a more favourable stance towards the Turkish Kurdish issue than the previous government. During his speech in the symbolic city of Diyarbakır in August 2005, Turkish PM Erdoğan remarked that 'Turkey needs to face up to its past' and that 'More democracy, not more repression was the answer to Kurds' grievances'.[96] Subsequently, the so-called Kurdish Opening was introduced in 2009 with an aim to improve Kurdish rights.[97] However, these efforts, even while they were accompanied with negotiations between the Turkish intelligence and the PKK, failed in the summer of 2011. The Kurdish Opening ended up halfway and was accompanied by repressive measures towards PKK-linked actors and their networks such as mass arrests in 2009 and 2010. The AKP government believed that by improving the situation of the Kurds in general and at the same time employing repressive measure towards PKK-linked networks, the PKK would be politically marginalized.[98] This was not the case since Kurdish political parties and candidates scored better results than the AKP in core Kurdish areas both in local elections in 2009 and the parliamentary election in 2011.[99] Following the period of renewed insurgency since the summer of 2011 and state's repressive measures aiming at dismantling the pro-PKK Kurdish political structures, the so-called 'Solution Process' (in Turkish *Çözüm süreci*) and a cease-fire were announced with the PKK leader Öcalan's statement read in Diyarbakır during Newroz celebrations in March 2013.[100] During the Kurdish Opening in 2009-11, the PKK declared sporadic ceasefires. However, only after March 2013 were the arms quiet for an uninterrupted period until July 2015. Furthermore, in 2013-15 (in contrast to the Kurdish Opening period), Turkish law enforcement abstained from repressive measures towards the PKK-linked political structures which allowed them to flourish.

Despite initial high hopes, the Process has been stalled since May 2013. The AKP government demanded that the PKK lay down arms. The PKK, on the other hand, demanded legal reforms and legal grounding of the negotiations. Finally, in February 2015, the Dolmabahçe Declaration[101] between the AKP government and the pro-Kurdish party Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) laid out a more concrete framework for the stalled the process.

In the June 2015 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan's AKP achieved only a Pyrrhic victory as for the first time since 2002, the AKP was unable to form a single-party government. In July 2015, President Erdoğan denounced the Dolmabahçe Declaration, definitely freezing the Solution Process.[102] The pro-Kurdish HDP managed to ally with Turkish leftist parties and, most importantly, dispel its image as a primarily Kurdish-focused actor and instead show itself as a leftist pro-democratic and anti-AKP platform.[103] Together they scored a historic victory passing the 10 percent threshold to enter Turkish parliament for the first time. The AKP lost Kurdish vote to the HDP and lost votes to nationalists as well due to its 'soft stance' towards the Kurds and the PKK. Neither of these segments of society was fully satisfied, the Kurds also due to diminishing hope in the genuine interest of the AKP to push the stalled Solution Process further. A political deadlock led to early elections in November 2015, securing an absolute majority for the AKP. Erdoğan's AKP changed its electoral strategy and adopted a more nationalist stance, finally scrapping the Solution Process and abandoning policies which favoured the Kurds. The strategy contributed to AKP's victory. Arguably, the AKP government returned to security-based strategy against the Kurds since its policies failed to sway Kurdish support in their favour and strip the PKK-linked actors from significant portion of popular support.

In 2013-15, the PKK pro-actively worked on building parallel governance structures and a stable presence in south-eastern cities. The Democratic Society Congress (DTK) served as an important framework for these efforts. The DTK was already established in 2007 but has been overtly more active since 2014-15 and serves as an umbrella organization that pursues the establishment of Democratic Confederalism and is a de facto umbrella political organisation for PKK-linked political groups in Turkey.[104] The HDP is also a part of the DTK. Although the HDP denies any links to the PKK, there are ideological and personal connections with a myriad of existing PKK-linked groups and actors. However, it should be noted that the HDP and its organisational predecessors are in general more pragmatic and political solution-oriented compared to the PKK illegal networks, which have on occasions caused rifts.[105] Such rifts led for example to sidelining the HDP from local councils and the local level in general in 2014-15 at the expense of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), which has stronger organic links to the PKK.[106] Following the renewed fighting since

the summer of 2015, the situation in the southeast Turkey escalated into a 'now or never' stance among pro-PKK actors. Numerous pro-PKK mayors declared their autonomy from Turkey (18 mayors between August and October 2015).[107] Furthermore, the DTK itself announced Democratic Autonomy (in Turkish *Demokratik özerlik*; in other words Democratic Confederalism) in Kurdish areas of Turkey in December 2015[108] and the HDP declared pursuit for Democratic Autonomy as the centrepiece of proposed political reforms in Turkey in its 2015 electoral manifesto.[109]

This accent on the Democratic Confederalism project, accompanied with high intensity conflict in Turkey which cost more than 3.300 lives since July 2015 to March 2018[110], shows the PKK's determination to focus on its struggle in Turkey, even at the expense of other struggles in the region. This argument holds true especially since in this period, the PYD experienced major combat operations against ISIS and against other rebel groups in northwest Syria.

In February 2013, the Patriotic Revolutionary Movement (YDG-H), a predominantly urban youth wing of the PKK was established.[111] Turkish security forces conducted only a few operations against the PKK in the southeast in 2014[112], thus providing an opportunity for the PKK and the YDG-H to build a stronger presence during the two and a half years of ceasefire between March 2013 and July 2015 in predominantly Kurdish cities such as Cizre, Silopi, Silvan, or Diyarbakır. Since July 2015, the radical youth of the YDG-H[113] has waged an urban guerrilla campaign in numerous Kurdish cities, contrary to the PKK's usual modus operandi of focusing on rural operations. Until early April 2016, the clashes had resulted in at least 1200 deaths, and up to 400,000 displaced people who fled the clashes and continuous curfews.[114]

Both the Turkish state and the PKK signalled their resolve to continue the armed struggle. The PKK commander Cemil Bayık warned in December 2015 that 'The civil war in Turkey will greatly intensify in the coming months'.[115] By the summer of 2016, the PKK abandoned its focus on urban operations, facing rising criticism from the Kurdish population for the destruction they brought on Kurdish cities.[116] However, intense fighting, this time with more focus on rural areas of Hakkarî, Şırnak, Mardin and Diyarbakır provinces, has continued. Neither side has signalled fatigue or prospect of a ceasefire and renewed negotiations.

The 'Kobanî Effect'

Gradually, Turkey started to view the PYD as an increasingly problematic actor, despite Salih Muslim's efforts to assure Ankara that the PYD would not endanger Turkey's interests. Muslim conducted high-level visits to Turkey, for example twice in the summer of 2013 and in October 2014[117], but Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu criticized the PYD's declaration of de facto administration and blamed it for 'not keeping its promises'.[118] Moreover, shortly after Muslim's last visit to Turkey in October 2014, President Erdoğan labelled the PYD as a terrorist organization equal to the PKK.[119] While PYD officials regularly maintain that their goal is not to break from Syria[120], Ankara views the Kurdish entity in Syria tied to the PKK as a primary issue of its national security.

By September 2014, when the siege of the PYD-held town of Kobanî by ISIS forces started, the Solution Process between the PKK and the AKP had been frozen. While a large part of the Turkish public, namely the Turkish Kurds, still believed that at least the ceasefire would be kept, Kurdish opinion was gradually shifting. Many Turkish Kurds believed that the AKP pro-actively supported ISIS and other radical Islamist groups not only in order to get an upper hand against Assad, but also to contain the Kurds and thus simultaneously deny help for Kobanî.[121] In October 2014, Turkish Kurds subsequently launched numerous demonstrations in support of Kobanî, mainly in the south-eastern Turkish cities, while many escalated in riots and loss of lives.[122]

The siege of Kobanî effectively boosted Turkish Kurds' solidarity with Rojava. Such developments further increased Turkish fears that Syrian Kurdish efforts could spill over into Turkey taking inspiration from Rojava. Indeed it can be argued that in 2015-16, urban operations of the PKK in Turkey with mobilized youth were taking inspiration in urban experience from fighting in Syrian towns.

PKK's relationship with Iraqi Kurds

The PKK main safe haven was established after being expelled from Syria in the mountains of northern Iraq in 1999. It also gradually assumed de facto control over numerous villages and towns in the mountainous areas alongside Turkish and Iranian border. The PKK traditionally enjoys a rather good relationship with the PUK, which is a principal power in the eastern part of the KRI. The PUK and the KDP were engaged in a bloody internal armed conflict in 1994-97 during

which the PKK forces assisted the PUK. That is one of the major reasons why PKK's relationship with the KDP has remained stranded. The Barzani family and the KDP in general seeks to maintain a title of the main representative of Kurdish struggle in the region, which puts it at odds with the PKK. Moreover, the PKK ideology itself is in direct conflict with that of the KDP since it views it as a tribal entity and naturally not in line with its extreme leftist ideology. A snapshot of these relationships also corresponds with the fact that in the PUK-dominated areas, PKK's popularity is higher than in Erbil or Dohuk.[123]

When the ISIS threat emerged in the summer of 2014, the PUK was forced to seek increased Iranian help including money, advisors, weapons shipments and side-by-side deployment with Iran-backed Shiite militias on the frontlines along with the PUK Peshmerga.[124] The PUK also boosted its cooperation with the PKK, including common deployment.[125]

In northern Iraq, the PKK filled the power vacuum in Shingal while KDP forces fled the district in August 2014 facing ISIS advance, leaving the Yazidis unprotected. The PKK, already having limited presence in Shingal in the 2000s, dispatched forces from Syria and also from Qandil and swiftly opened a corridor for Yazidi people trapped in the mountain. Training of the Yazidi PKK-linked militia YBŞ (Shingal Protection Units) soon followed. While Peshmerga forces only slowly began to retake lost positions after having fled in August 2014, the PKK had already had a strong presence and won the 'hearts and minds' of the Yazidis championing its ideas of self-governance and self-protection.[126] For the PKK, the Shingal district is a strategic land-bridge between Iraq and Syria while its mountain ridge serves as a defendable safe haven. Interviews suggested that the PKK seeks to establish a permanent presence in the mountain.[127]

The KDP-PKK relationship in the area oscillated between tactical cooperation and rhetorical enmity. For example, during the war against ISIS, the KDP forces were deployed in the Shingal district or in the Bashiqa area where the PJAK fighters were deployed.[128] However, since November 2015, pro-KDP officials have insisted that the PKK presence in Shingal is illegal and KRI's President Barzani considers Shingal effectively annexed to KRI.[129] There are reports of an on-and-off economic blockade of the PKK-controlled areas of Shingal district imposed by the KDP forces, as well as persecution of Yazidis joining the PKK's political and armed structures in Shingal.[130] In March 2017,

clashes between the PKK-linked forces and Peshmerga occurred when the KDP tried to expand its presence in town of Khanasor under PKK control.[131] The principal force in these clashes was the so-called Rojava Peshmerga (RP), linked to KRG's Ministry of Interior forces.[132] The RP is an armed wing of Kurdish National Council (KNC), the main opposition to PYD in Syria. The KDP has also tried to re-inject its allies (the RP and the KNC) to Syria, which has been staunchly opposed by the PKK-linked forces. However, despite KDP's ties with Turkey (which calls for action against the PKK) its hands still remain somewhat tied considering that openly promoting intra-Kurdish fighting with the PKK would deeply disturb its constituency.

Moreover, PKK's contact with Iran facilitated some degree of communication and cooperation with Iraqi Shia leadership.[133] For example, some 1,000 YBŞ fighters have been on Baghdad's payroll within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) since June 2015.[134] YBŞ commanders highlighted their direct talks with Iraqi government over post-ISIS arrangements of the Shingal district,[135] and the YBŞ delegation even visited Tehran as a part of PMF visit in January 2017.[136]

Western support of the PYD

When ISIS swept through major Sunni parts of Iraq in the summer of 2014, the PKK had already become stronger than ever in the region. The PKK's affiliate in Syria, the PYD, became a symbol of a successful fight against ISIS and very carefully crafted its image as a moderate force in order to win over Western public opinion. The breaking point was indeed the siege of Kobanî in October 2014-January 2015. Lightly armed Kurdish forces repelled numerous ISIS attacks while US airstrikes supported the Kurds tactically. Turkey, fearing the Kurds would eventually push further west and effectively assume control over almost the whole Turkish-Syrian border, reached a deal with the US. The July 2015 agreement stipulated that there would be a 'safe zone' along the Turkish-Syrian border stretching 100 km and 40 km wide[137] – the zone would be without ISIS but, at the same time, effectively without the Kurds. Turkish intervention Euphrates Shield launched to secure the area started a year later, in August 2016.[138]

By then, the US was regularly supporting the SDF's advance with airstrikes. Since then it became a principal ally of the US on the ground in Syria against ISIS. The US facilitated its advance into majority-Arab areas, including ISIS stronghold Raqqa. The US has re-

peatedly maintained that the PYD (and the SDF) is not a part of the PKK, which has been listed as a terrorist entity by the US since 1997. Similarly, the EU listed the PKK as a designated terrorist organization in 2002. However, both interviews and other sources suggested that the PKK cadres hold key decision-making powers.[139] The US backing of the SDF appears to be focused solely on combating ISIS in the area, more specifically in the region east of Euphrates River. On occasions when the SDF crossed this line, the US support has been suspended or severely limited for those campaigns. Despite pressure from the SDF, the US has not facilitated further advance to the west from Manbij in order to connect it to the Afrin canton. For that matter, it has also remained adamant that Afrîn area is not part of the agreement and the US will not establish any presence or direct any support there. The SDF has in turn pursued these campaigns regardless and especially in the Aleppo surroundings it has bolstered relations with the regime and its allies.

Thus, the relationship between the SDF and the US is one of a tactical cooperation on one matter only and that is fighting ISIS, which has been common interest for both actors. Thinking about the way forward, neither the US nor the SDF have signalled any specific roadmap for the nature of the relationship in the post-ISIS Syria, and post-war Syria for that matter. In January 2018, the US announced that its plans to train a 'Border Force' of some 30,000 (half out of the SDF cadres, half from the new recruits)[140] in order to secure desert areas and patrol porous borders with Iraq. Training of this force is apparently underway.[141] This again illustrates that the support is aimed at one goal only: to defeat ISIS. Since ISIS lost its territory and was conventionally defeated by late 2017, the US wishes to have a local force (apparently not PKK-dominated since it does not use the SDF framework) on the ground in Syria, which would be able to deny ISIS movement in the area and across borders and ultimately prevent another Sunni Islamist insurgency to emerge in the region. This approach is, after all, within the scope of the updated focus of the Operation Inherent Resolve and in the focus of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which stresses creating local actors' military capabilities to fight insurgency as well as non-military stabilisation efforts.[142] Additionally, in February and March 2018, the SDF relocated significant number of fighters to Afrin to fight off Turkish invasion, despite the US objection to the move since it could distract from the SDF from combating ISIS.[143] This once again shows

the tactical nature of the cooperation since the PKK-linked forces act autonomously and seemingly regardless of US concerns if the matter is of strategic importance to them – such as fighting Turkey in Afrîn.

Additionally, the PYD and its affiliates strictly follow PKK's ideology laid out by Abdullah Öcalan. This ideological outlook is radical leftist and totalitarian in nature. Also, it ultimately strives to spread Democratic Confederalism in the whole region and as such is highly subversive to the key US allies since it inherently undermines state authorities. This may seem in part tolerable or even useful in Syria for the time being. However, its spread could further destabilize the key US allies in the region (Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

Conclusion

The PKK is currently engaged in a marriage of convenience with the Syrian regime. The PKK and its affiliates fit rather to the 'pro-Assad bloc' consisting of Iran, the PUK, and, in a broader sense, Russia. On the other hand, the PKK has a quarrel with the pro-Islamist government of the AKP in Turkey, a quarrel which once again has grown into an intensive armed confrontation in the Turkish southeast since the summer of 2015. The PKK is also a rival to another Western ally in the region, Barzani's KDP. Effectively, the PKK stands against the interests of Western allies in the region. Thus, any prospect of a strategic alliance with the PKK and its affiliates, such as the PYD in Syria, is far-fetched. A tactical ad hoc cooperation can take place on particular issues, such as combating ISIS (ongoing since late 2014). However, a more long-term strategic relationship seems, in the light of the PKK's stance in the regional conundrum, unlikely considering Western (especially the US) interests and existing alliances.

This article argues that the PKK's current position in the region is not a result of a sudden shift or of the establishment of ties with actors previously not close to the PKK and its affiliates. The PKK has a long history of contact and cooperation stretching back to Cold War times and the 1990s with Syria, Iran, and Russia. The Syrian civil war, hand in hand with the successful reconstruction of the weakened PKK after 1999 when its leader Öcalan was captured by the Turks, fully revived these allegiances. Eruption of the Syrian civil war posed an opportunity for the PKK to re-establish its strong presence in Syria. ISIS' arrival on the scene in 2014 further confirmed revival of PKK's Cold War alliances.

In the current onset, it seems more promising for the PKK to lean towards the 'pro-Assad camp', resurrecting old Cold War partnerships. Iran will support the PKK against its regional rival Turkey, with whom the PKK failed to reach settlement over the past years. The charm of the AKP's favourable stance towards the Kurds is now clearly over and unlikely to be revived anytime soon. Also, the PKK leadership itself prioritizes its Turkish struggle. Moreover, Iran has a sizeable Kurdish population as well and thus keeping the Kurds focused on their Syrian and Turkish battlefield is in its interest as well. The war in Syria seems to be nearing settlement which will most likely include the current regime in Damascus. For Assad's regime, the PYD could be useful to counterbalance Sunni Arab elements in the north and as a card to play against Turkey.

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Notes

1 Following a series of organisational changes within the PKK, the 'PKK' itself was officially abolished in 2002. Instead, the Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK) was established in 2003 [see Walter Posch (2016), 'The New PKK: Between Extremism, Political Violence, and Strategic Challenges (Part 1),' Östereichische *Militärische Zeitschrift* 7(2), available at: <https://www.oemz-online.at/display/ENSPACE/The+new+PKK+Part+1> (accessed 23 May 2017)]. The KCK serves as an umbrella organisation for the PKK-linked political parties and their armed wings in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Nonetheless, the term PKK still remains widely used. To avoid unnecessary confusion in this study, the term 'PKK' is used as a general term, both for the political and armed structures and their activities across the region. When it is useful

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