

Legitimising Terror: The PYD/YPG, Syrian Kurds and the Myth of Representation

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Introduction

A year after the Syrian Civil War began, Bashar al Assad retreated his forces from the northern border with Turkey, resulting in a power vacuum in northern Syria. The PKK, internationally recognised as a terrorist organisation, has sought to take advantage of the situation in the region in order to push their agenda. It is in this context that the PYD/YPG, which is the Syria branch of the PKK terrorist organisation, took advantage of the power vacuum in northern Syria. It did so in compromise with various other Kurdish groups. However, as time passed, the PYD/YPG began to act against other Kurdish groups in the region in an effort to secure complete dominance over their rivals. For instance, the political activities of Kurdish National Council (KNC) and Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (SDKP) have been blocked by PYD/YPG. Moreover, supporters of other Kurdish groups are routinely jailed by the PYD/YPG in the region owing to their political stances.

Additionally, civilians living in northern Syria under PYD/YPG control have become victims of the ongoing human rights violations and abuses. Thousands of people have fled PYD/YPG rule in order to escape large-scale conscription, including forced military enlistment of children. Furthermore, tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens have also left their homes to find safety in Turkey and northern Iraq.

The PYD/YPG has received the support of many countries, most significantly the United States, ostensibly in the name of tackling Daesh. According to Turkish estimates, the US has delivered 5000 trucks and 2000 cargo plane loads worth of worth of weapons to the YPG in recent years. Through this support, it has managed to increase its power and influence in northern Syria. In addition, US authorities provided assurances that the arms provided to the PYD/YPG were only to be used against Daesh militants in the assault on Raqqa and would be

returned once the militants were eliminated from the city. Yet, even after the capture of Raqqa from Daesh, the US continued arming and training PYD/YPG militants.

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw US military and diplomatic personnel from Syria represents a significant development in the almost 8 year-long Syrian war, particular as it relates to Turkey's position in the country. However, there has been conflicting statements from US decision makers regarding the timetable of the withdrawal and the conditions under which the withdrawal will actually take place. President Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton has recently said that the US will carry on supporting its allies in northern Syria.

The statements sparked harsh criticism from Turkish officials and prompted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in a televised address, to emphasise that the PYD/YPG cannot be taken as a true representative of the Kurdish people. He added that the PYD/YPG is a terrorist group and sharply criticised continued US support in the form of training, arms, and logistical supports. These developments have brought to mind questions related to the representation of the Kurds in northern Syria. The question of whether the PYD/YPG represents Syrian Kurds has become even more prominent. Presentation of the PYD/YPG as being representative of Kurdish politics in northern Syria ultimately ignores other political groups and neglects the fact that many Kurds have been forcibly silenced by the PYD/YPG.

In the light of these facts and the questions they raise, this policy outlook tackles the question of the PYD/YPG's political project and whether or not it can be said to represent the aspirations of Syrian Kurds. The structure of PYD/YPG and its organic relation with the PKK will be explained, followed by an examination of other Kurdish political organisations in northern Syria. The PYD/YPG's human rights violations record and US support to the group will then be scrutinised.



Hundreds of Syrians take part in a demonstration in Jarabulus to protest the PYD/YPG invasion of almost quarter of their country on April 6, 2018 (Bader KJK - Anadolu Agency)

THE PKK'S SYRIAN OFFSHOOT: THE PYD/YPG

The War in Syria has provided terrorist groups with new opportunities to expand their support bases and fields of operations. The most remarkable example of this is the PYD/YPG, the Syria branch of the radical Marxist terror group PKK. The PYD was established long before the Syrian War with the aim of increasing PKK's influence in Syria. The PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan ordered the establishment of PYD in 2002. In the 8th congress of the PKK, the terrorist organisation decided to form offshoot organisations in Syria, Iraq and Iran. Thus, the PYD was founded in 2003 as the Syrian Branch.¹ A statement of the KCK (umbrella organisation of PKK and PYD terrorist structure) in its official newspaper Serxwebun shows the link between PKK, PYD/YPG and KCK: "PYD as the Western Kurdistan organisation of KCK..."² Moreover, the founding code of the PYD recognises Abdullah Öcalan as the leader and KONGRA-GEL (legislative body of the KCK) as the highest legislative power.³

The YPG is the armed wing of the PYD and is based in Kurdish-majority regions of northern Syria. The YPG was founded in 2011, shortly after the start of the Syrian Civil War. A year after the Syrian Civil War began, the Syrian regime withdrew his forces from the northern border with Turkey. The withdrawal of regime forces left a security vacuum in northern Syrian which the YPG moved in to fill.

Despite its extensive record of violating human rights norms, ranging from extensive use of child soldiers to the demolishing of civilian homes, the YPG has generated sympathy abroad thanks to a strong propaganda campaign, presenting themselves as the only truly democratic force on the frontline against Daesh.⁴ This image has attracted foreign fighters from Western countries such as the UK, Greece, Spain and the US to Syria to fight for the YPG, with some losing their lives while fighting against Daesh.⁵



Supporters of PKK/PYD terrorist organisation, holding posters of PKK/PYD terrorist leader Abdullah Öcalan and flags symbolising the terrorist organisation gather for a rally at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany on March 3, 2018. (Erbil Başay - Anadolu Agency)

PKK/PYD's Terror Structure



- The group controls Syria's most productive regions. Rich oil fields and most of the agricultural lands of the country are occupied by PYD/YPG.
- Following Operation Olive Branch, the group lost most of its land in Western Syria. The group controls mainly eastern parts of the Euphrates River and the Manbij region.

- Until today the PYD/YPG has forcibly displaced 1.7 million people.
- The PYD/YPG controls more than 45 thousand square kilometre of land which comprises nearly 1/3 of Syria.
- The PYD/YPG also controls 70 percent of Syria's electricity production.

The YPG welcomed Russia's military intervention in Syria, which began in late 2015. It took advantage of Russian air strikes on Syrian opposition forces to expand its territory.⁶ However, the group's main backer has been the US, which has supported the YPG with arms, training and logistical support.⁷

The PYD/YPG's confrontation with Daesh has led to a friendship with the US. Although the US and EU consider the PKK and KONGRAGEL as terrorist organisations,⁸ they refuse to acknowledge the PYD/YPG as their Syria wing. The US continues to deny the link between the YPG and the PKK, despite testimony offered by a range of current and former

officials, including former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter.⁹ There are also a number of reports on the organisation that clearly demonstrate the link between the PKK and the YPG, including one that records some 2,500 cases of YPG members who were killed in action, previously known to have fought for the PKK.¹⁰ While the US acknowledges Turkey's concerns over the YPG and has repeatedly reassured its commitment to protecting its NATO ally, Washington has proceeded to arm the YPG as part of their bid to eliminate Daesh from the region.¹¹ US insistence on this policy has strained relations between Ankara and Washington. Furthermore, the support has given the PYD/YPG a ticket to hide their

The BBC's Raqqa Investigation: Uncovering the Secret Release of Daesh Terrorists

Turkey has long argued that the YPG in Syria have organic links with the outlawed PKK terrorist organisation. Two weeks after the capture of Raqqa, the BBC revealed a secret deal that the YPG struck with Daesh terrorists. The deal included letting Daesh militants, including some of the most notorious figures, and their families escape from the city under the watchful eye of the US-led anti-Daesh coalition. The report indicates that the freed Daesh terrorists have spread across Syria and some of them have ended up in YPG-controlled areas close to the Turkish border. The BBC's revelation is based on extensive interviews with dozens of people, including those who transported the fighters (convoy drivers), those who were transported, those who negotiated the deal and those who observed it.

The deal unleashed threats on Syria as well as the outside world by letting hundreds of terrorists, some of them foreigners, to spread to different parts of the country. In May last year, US Defence Secretary James Mattis dubbed the war against Daesh as a fight of "annihilation." "Our intention is that the foreign fighters do not survive the fight to return home to North Africa, to Europe, to America, to Asia, to Africa. We are not going to allow them to do so," he said on US television. However, foreign fighters, were allowed to leave Raqqa following the deal. According to the BBC



investigation, the coalition now admits that it let the foreigners join the convoy. "We did not want anyone to leave," said Col Ryan Dillon, spokesperson for the anti-Daesh coalition. "But this goes to the heart of our strategy, 'by, with and through' local leaders on the ground. It comes down to Syrians – they are the ones fighting and dying, they get to make the decisions regarding operations."

At the beginning of February 2018, news spread that the YPG had released more than 400 Daesh terrorists from some of its detention centres in Afrin, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor on the condition they joined the fight against the Turkish and FSA offensive in the Afrin region.

terrorist activities from the eyes of the international community, and to facilitate PKK attacks in Turkey. Turkish authorities have confirmed the perpetrators of suicide bombings which led to death of more than 80 people in Istanbul and Ankara have received training from the PYD/YPG.¹²

Furthermore, authorities believe weapons transferred to the PYD/YPG are being handed over to the PKK, as sophisticated shoulder launched surface to air missiles (MANPADS) have been captured by the Turkish security forces in operations against the PKK.¹³ It is likely more than a coincidence that these weapons began to be used by the PKK ever since the US, Russia and EU countries have commenced to equip the PYD/YPG with such weapons.¹⁴

The PYD/YPG practices a totalitarian regime in Northern Syria, as such the terrorist organisation suppresses other Kurdish political group's activities in the region.¹⁵ In a statement by Xalid Eli, an official from the Kurdish National Council (KNC), he said their friends were jailed by the PYD/YPG. Reports also show that the office of the KNC and Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (SDKP) were set on fire by the PYD/YPG. This comes in addition to the terrorist organisation threatening to halt their political activities.¹⁶

The PYD/YPG follows a 'Kurdification' policy in the regions that it dominates. The group has forcibly displaced Turkmen and Arab residents of Northern Syria in order to change the demographics of the region.¹⁷ PYD/YPG oppression is not only directed towards Arab's and Turkmen's, as more than half a million Kurds have escaped their totalitarian rule and fled to Turkey and Northern Iraq.¹⁸

Foreign fighters from the West are an important propaganda tool for the PYD/YPG, with leading media outlets competing to interview them. Few interviews, however, reveal the story in its entirety or at least attempt to draw the parallels between foreign fighters joining the PYD/YPG and those joining Daesh and similar organisations. In fact, most reports and interviews glorify them and their cause, whilst turning a blind eye to the reality on the ground. One former PYD/YPG fighter, Patrick, captured the reality of the foreign fighter policy of the PYD/YPG:

"We were treated very poorly. We were kept in very poor conditions, and the only time we were



Members of Free Syrian Army (FSA) take down a portrait of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Afrin town center after Turkish Armed Forces and FSA took complete control of northwestern Syria's Afrin from PYD/YPG and Daesh terror groups with the "Operation Olive Branch" on March 18, 2018.(Useyd Pasa - Anadolu Agency)

put in good accommodations was in preparation for interviews for media that were coming through... Some of the foreigners even had their passports and phones taken away. The YPG told the fighters this was because they feared Daesh might gain a propaganda victory if they killed or captured a foreigner and discovered their passport. However, it might have had just as much to do with ensuring the fighters could not leave at will or speak to anyone on the outside without a YPG minder present."¹⁹

A large portion of the group's finances comes from its activities in Europe. In addition, another significant part of its income is generated by the so-called "taxation" of contrabandists in neighbouring countries.²⁰ The PKK is heavily involved in the heroin traffic from Southwest Asia to Europe, with some estimating that 80% of the narcotics in Europe have some connection to the terrorist organisation.²¹ On May 30, 2008 and on April 20, 2011, the US Secretary of Treasury decided to freeze the assets and bank accounts of the KCK's top brass due to concrete indications of involvement in drug trafficking.²² Moreover, the groups need for guns and yields is being financed through an arms trade and human trafficking enterprise encompassing Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Europe. The PYD/YPG has also been extracting and selling oil from the oil fields in north-eastern Syria.

The PYD/YPG's Suppression of Kurdish Political Organisations in Syria

The consideration of the PYD/YPG as the “reliable partner” on the ground against Daesh by the US and other western countries has paved the way for significant political changes in northern Syria. Moderate political groups such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC/ENKS), which espouses secular, democratic and pluralist ideas, have been first overshadowed and ultimately persecuted by the US-backed PYD/YPG. Negligence of other Kurdish political organisations has led to erroneous perceptions that PYD/YPG represents the aspirations of the Kurdish population in Syria despite the fact that PYD/YPG is an affiliate of PKK and that their suppression of Syrian Kurds living under their authoritarian rule is well documented.²³

The KNC is one of the legitimate Kurdish organisations in Syria that represents the diverse social fabric of the region and that believes in an inclusive Syria with all ethnicities living peacefully alongside each other. The KNC was founded in 2011 following the beginning of the protests against the Syrian regime. It was established as an umbrella organisation bringing together about a dozen Syrian Kurdish parties as well as Kurdish youth and women's organisations and, excluding the PYD/YPG.²⁴ In an attempt to establish a unified bloc that represents the interests of the Kurdish population in Syria, the KNC

aimed to be part of the moderate opposition to the regime represented by the Syrian National Council. As such, the majority of the Kurdish groups joined KNC. Considering the historical divisions and rivalries among Kurdish political movements, the establishment of KNC played a decisive role in bringing about a unified voice.

The KNC is among the staunchest critics of the Syrian regime. They hold the Assad regime responsible for the ongoing crisis in Syria and support a democratic, pluralist and a decentralised government structure.²⁵ They also seek constitutional recognition, consolidation of human rights and democratic process in the country.²⁶ KNC has also firmly denounced the policies and objectives of PYD/YPG on the ground that PYD/YPG embrace the political ideology of the PKK and oppress the other Kurds in the region.



Head of Kurdish National Council (KNC) Ibrahim Biro
(Yunus Keleş - Anadolu Agency)



Syrian-Kurdish protesters hold banners demanding the release of political prisoners during a protest against the illegal detention and kidnapping of political opposition members, by the PYD/YPG in al-Hassakah, Syria on June 24th, 2016. (Habat Ahmed - Anadolu Agency)

Initially, the PYD/YPG was invited to the meetings that led to the founding of the KNC, however, they ultimately did not participate the coalition, but rather pursued their own agenda. Thanks to the efforts of President of Kurdish region of northern Iraq Masoud Barzani, the KNC and the PYD struck a deal in July 2012, in what came to be known as the Erbil Declaration. According to this deal, the PYD and the KNC would establish a power sharing structure that would allow them to jointly govern the Kurdish populated areas in Syria. This is in addition to an agreement that Peshmerga and YPG militias would be responsible for the security of the region. However, the deal was never realised as the PYD refused to give up its power and started to oppress other Kurdish groups.

Following subsequent efforts to establish a partnership between KNC and PYD, the relationships between the two continued to deteriorate, as the PYD/YPG opted for unilateralism, intimidation, harassment and authoritarian actions against the KNC and the wider Kurdish population.²⁷ As such, the PYD/YPG resorted to efforts meant to eliminate any other Kurdish group opposed to their objectives. The PYD/YPG's 'police force Asayish' have detained their political opponents without evidence. Human Rights Watch investigated the cases of six Kurdish men linked to an opposition

political party – the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, the Azadi Party and the Yekiti Party – all of whom had been arrested arbitrarily in Afrin. Three of them were released and the other three were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in April 2014.²⁸ Human Rights Watch interviewed the three released men where they stated that they had no access to a lawyer, and that only one of them was granted a family visit. Two of the men believed they had been detained due to their peaceful political activism, and the third did not know the reason at all.



Hundreds of Kurdish people attend protest against PYD's totalitarian rule in Al-Hasakah, Syria on August 16, 2016. (Habat Ahmed - Anadolu Agency)



Syrian-Kurds gathered to protest PYD/YPG rule in Al-Hasakah, Syria on August 16, 2016. (Habat Ahmed - Anadolu Agency)

Kidnapping members of local KNC community in Afrin, taking people in custody and forcing them into trials at special courts established by the PYD/YPG has become an everyday reality.²⁹ The PYD/YPG arrested the head of KNC, Ibrahim Berro, in August 2016 in Qamishli, sparking an anti-PYD/YPG protests among local Kurds who were not happy with their rule.³⁰ Upon his release, he said that "people are being arrested and released on a daily basis and they (PYD/YPG) attack civilian houses."³¹

Osman Huseyin and Mustafa Ali Mousto, both of whom are Syrian Kurds, opposed the Assad regime's rule and the violent tactics of the PYD/YPG in the Kurdish populated towns of Syria. They gave an exclusive interview to TRT World in which they share their experience with PYD/YPG rule in northern Syria.³² In January 2015, Mousto says his house in Kobani was targeted by the US-led coalition in its bombing campaign against Daesh. Mousto says the YPG gave coordinates to the US forces under the guise that they belonged

to a Daesh-held area. However, in reality they belonged to his home. Huseyin says that Assad regime brought PKK militants from the Qandil mountains to northern Syria and allowed to set up a de facto rule there. According to Huseyin, who himself survived a YPG car-bomb attack, the PYD/YPG killed 55 influential Kurdish figures who opposed the PYD/YPG rule.

Although the PYD/YPG have represented themselves as the champions and true representatives of the Syrian Kurds, the KNC still continues to be a relevant actor in northern Syria having the potential to represent the true political demands of the various Kurdish groups. Their participation in the Geneva and Astana Talks exemplify how they can play a significant role in the future of Syria.³³ Ali Ibrahim, a prominent member of the KNC, furthers this argument by defining the KNC as "a coalition of [Syrian Kurdish] parties and NGOs that also believe in coexisting with people of other backgrounds."³⁴

Human Rights Violations

Civilians living in northern Syria, predominantly under PYD/YPG control, have become victims of the ongoing human rights violations and abuses. Thousands of people have fled PYD/YPG rule in order to escape large-scale conscription, including forced military enlistment of children.³⁵ Additionally tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds have also left their homes to pursue safety in Turkey as well as northern Iraq. Some have fled due to the poor economic conditions in Syria and others due to political pressure from the PYD.³⁶

Child Soldiers

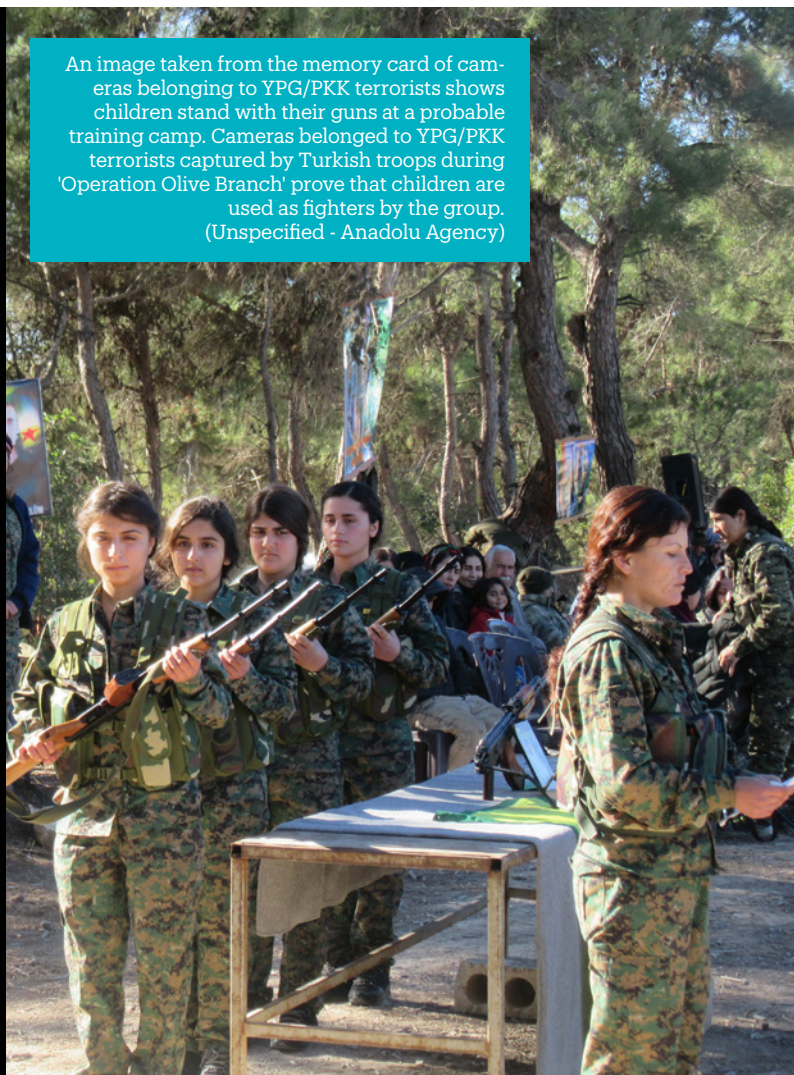
Since 2012, the 'Asayish', YPG's so-called police force, along with the YPG have used boys and girls under the age of 18 at checkpoints and on bases in northern Syria. These children have been forced to fight alongside the YPG. A report by Human Rights Watch in 2015 raised the issue of the PYD-YPG's recruitment of children under the age of 18.³⁷ Whether children are forced to join the YPG or do so out of social pressure or ideological brainwashing, the recruit of children under 18

The UN's 2018 Report on Children and Armed Conflict in Syria

"The recruitment and use of boys (263) and girls (152) by Kurdish armed groups were also prevalent during the reporting period (12 per cent of the verified cases) and sharply increased in 2017 and the first quarter of 2018. Children as young as 10 years of age were associated with the People's Protection Units (249), the Women's Protection Units (137) and the Asayish male (14) and female (15) wings. Contrary to the stated policy of the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units, as further detailed below, 224 of the verified cases (54 per cent) involved children of 15 years of age or less and, overall, 398 of the verified cases (96 per cent) involved children in combat roles, armed and in uniform, including 133 girls. In July 2016, for example, two girls of between 16 and 17 years of age were posted, armed and in uniform, at a checkpoint in Kafr Jannah in the Afrin district of Aleppo. Identified as a new trend in 2017, 49 cases (12 per cent) referred to the recruitment of Arab children by Kurdish armed groups, in the context of the expansion of Syrian Democratic Forces towards territories in Aleppo, Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates. Overall, in at least 51 of the cases (12 per cent), the recruitment of children involved an element of coercion. In June 2017, in Aleppo Governorate, for example, at least three Arab boys of between 15 and 16 years of age were taken from Ayn Daqnah checkpoint in I'zaz district to be recruited by the People's Protection Units and taken to a military training centre in Afrin district."

Source: The UN Security Council's Report on "Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic", 30 October 2018.

An image taken from the memory card of cameras belonging to YPG/PKK terrorists shows children stand with their guns at a probable training camp. Cameras belonged to YPG/PKK terrorists captured by Turkish troops during 'Operation Olive Branch' prove that children are used as fighters by the group. (Unspecified - Anadolu Agency)





People of Jarablus, after the liberation of their city from PYD/YPG, took streets to demonstrate against the PYD/YPG rule in Syria. (Bader KJK - Anadolu Agency)

by state or non-state actors is illegal according to the Optional Protocol to the Children's Rights Convention on Children and Armed Conflict.

The Human Rights Watch report compiled a list of 59 children, 10 of whom were under 15, allegedly recruited by or volunteered for YPG or YPJ (Women branch of YPG) since July 2014. The human rights organisation also confirmed that some of the children were enlisted without their parents' consent. A quote from the report below: "My daughter went to school and was taken from there by a group of YPJ," a father of a 14-year-old girl near Qamishli said. "We knew nothing about her until a YPJ commander called and informed us that she had joined YPJ."

The report further states that despite having signed a 'deed of commitment' in 2014 with the non-governmental organisation Geneva Call, pledging to demobilise all fighters under 18 within one month, the YPG did not fulfil this commitment and continued to pursue the recruitment of children.

According to UN report on children in armed conflict published on May 2018; YPG and its women branch YPJ's recruitment and use of children increased in 2017. The report stated that 224 children including 72 girls were used by the group as child soldiers. Moreover, this trend continued to increase in 2018 and the terrorist group also commenced to recruit Arab children to fight in its ranks.³⁸

"We were playing computer games with my uncle's son. He told me "Let's join PKK and go to Syria to fight against Daesh". I accepted. We found someone to mediate us to join the PKK. The mediator, while taking us for surrender, he was talking on the phone, cryptically saying "I am on my way. Shall I come to the place [where] we have tea? I slaughtered two black sheeps. They are in the black bags. On the trap". When we crossed the border, the YPG members received us. I saw foreign national soldiers under the YPG terrorist organisation in Tel Tamr District. They were wearing YPG uniforms and fighting on the battlefield to support the YPG."[sic] M.B., 16 years old.³⁹

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS REVEAL PYD/PKK VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA

International groups report PYD/PKK disappearances/killings, abuse, use of child soldiers, war crimes in Syria

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (HRW)

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

- In a 2014 report, Human Rights Watch also detailed arbitrary arrests, rights violations, drug smuggling, and other illegal activities by the PYD/PKK.
- The 107-page report also documented disappearances and killings, jurisdictional violations, random arrests of political opponents, abuse of prisoners, and the use of child soldiers in northern and northwestern Syria controlled by the PYD/PKK terrorist group, especially in Afrin as well as Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and Jazira.
- The report documented arbitrary arrests of the PYD/PKK's political opponents, abuse in detention, and unsolved abductions and murders. It also documented the use of children in the PYD/PKK's police force and armed wing, the YPG. It also said PYD/PKK terrorists had committed crimes violating people's rights in areas mostly populated by Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and other groups.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL

- Amnesty International documented similar cases in its October 2015 report "Syria: We Had Nowhere to Go." Civilians living in areas of northern Syria were subjected to serious abuses by PYD/PKK terrorists including forced displacement and home demolitions, said the group.

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

- A report released Friday by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) said that in 2017, PKK/PYD terrorists killed 316 civilians in Syria, including 58 children and 54 women.



People stand near a tent, burnt down in an attack by PYD/YPG terrorist group, in Al-Bab town, where 'Operation Euphrates Shield' was conducted, in Aleppo, Syria on January 19, 2018. Attacks left a child dead and 5 injured. (Hüseyin Nasir - Anadolu Agency)

Forced Displacement

The PYD/YPG is pursuing an ethnic purification policy in the regions under its domination. The multi-ethnic structure of Syria's north east has been disrupted as the terrorist group continues to force Arab and Turkmen residents to leave their lands. Dozens of villages have been emptied since the PYD/YPG gained control in the north east of the country. Demolishing homes, sometimes entire villages, torturing, kidnapping and even killing are tactics the group uses to displace civilians.

Victim statements in Amnesty International's report show the degree of PYD/YPG brutality in the region. "They (PYD/YPG) pulled us out of our homes and began burning them... Then they brought the bulldozers and they began demolishing the homes" says Farah, a former resident of Husseiniya village in Qamishli. Yasser of al Ghebin village in Tal Abyad says: "They

[the YPG] said, 'If you don't leave, we will tell the warplanes [of the US-led coalition] to attack you...' the PYD/YPG also forces people to join their lines. Sultan from al Hasakah district says: "When the [PYD/] YPG entered the village at night they lined 63 people along the wall including me and my brother. They told us, 'You either join us or leave the land of Kurdistan'".⁴⁰

It is not only the Arab and Turkmen that are being targeted by the group. Armenian and Aremean Christian minority indigenous communities of the region have also been targeted by the PYD/YPG. In a statement the World Council of Arameans declared that homes of the community members were seized by the group. In the statement community member Eddie Gaboro Hanna said that "What the YPG does is reminiscent of what Daesh did to Christians in northern Iraq. It has confiscated many more buildings like this."



Syrians hold flags during a support rally for 'Operation Olive Branch' to Afrin after the Turkish military secure Burseya mountain within the operation, in Azez, Syria on January 29, 2018. (Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

Abuses

According to Human Rights Watch, physical and mental abuse of detainees in YPG custody has been prevalent. Another victim stated that 'Asayish' officials physically beat him in Qamishli in late 2013 in order to try to force him to confess. As far as he knew, Asayish members had not been punished for this unlawful act. Below is the statement from the victim:

"When they put me in the car they started to punch me. They kept beating me from Amuda to Qamishli. They punched me in the head, face and stomach. They took me to Qanat al-Sweis police station. I didn't confess right away, and they beat me. The second day they asked me again and I denied. The fifth day they took me, blindfolded me, and put my hands in cuffs. They put me on the ground. They put my legs in their Kalashnikov. They started to beat me on part of my legs... bottom of my feet...with a thick stick...my eyes were blindfolded. Two people held my legs. They caused a big shock. They used electricity also. Because my flesh couldn't handle the stick, I confessed."³³

London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)⁴¹ and Amnesty International⁴² have published several reports demonstrating that the PYD/YPG has committed ethnic cleansing leading to the displacement of thousands of people. In particular, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) emphasised that at least 120 000 people have been displaced in PYD/YPG dominated areas. In addition, civilian properties have been demolished and confiscated by the PYD/YPG.⁴³ These human right violations constitute war crimes under international law.

SNHR also reports that in one case 42 women, nine of whom were adolescents, had died at the hands of the PYD/YPG, mostly because of "random shelling or through direct firing during raiding campaigns or sniping."⁴⁴ Furthermore, Amnesty International interviewed three individuals who said the PYD/YPG destroyed their homes or confiscated their property, forcibly displacing them because of their suspected familial affiliation with other nonstate armed groups.

US Support for the PYD/YPG

In September 2014, the US Congress approved the Obama administration's request to arm and train rebel groups in Syria fighting against Daesh.⁴⁵ According to this programme called "train and equip", trained and armed 'moderate' opposition fighters were to fight only against Daesh, and not against the Syrian regime.⁴⁶ Among other issues, this created a motivational problem among opposition groups and the programme ultimately failed to achieve its goals.

Following the failure of the 'train and equip' programme, the US adopted a new policy in Syria, name to support the PYD/YPG on the ground as the main proxy in the fight against Daesh. The policy was officially announced during the battle for Kobane in 2014 in which the US assisted the PYD/YPG against Daesh with air strikes. Turkish authorities have criticised this support since the very beginning, saying that the PYD/YPG is the equivalent of the PKK.⁴⁷

The US has largely turned a blind eye to the Syrian regime's brutality and has made the defeat of Daesh in Syria its sole focus. The PYD/YPG's focus on their own narrow political project, rather than a broader Syrian project in combination with their inaction against the Assad regime⁴⁸ from the beginning of the war has engendered intense criticism from the mainstream Syrian opposition. Therefore, the PYD/YPG has failed to gain any support from Syrian opposition groups.⁴⁹

Although success in the battle for Kobane against Daesh was achieved with the help of Turkey and the Kurdish region of northern Iraq's governments, the US has chosen to attribute the success exclusively to the PYD/YPG. In the first month of the battle for Kobane⁵⁰, the Obama administration defined the PYD/YPG forces as a "reliable partner" in the fight against Daesh. Despite the rhetoric that the US support for the PYD/YPG is solely focused on the battle against Daesh, in reality it would appear as though the US's primary objective is to

maintain a proxy force on the ground in Syria in order to further its longer-term strategic interests.

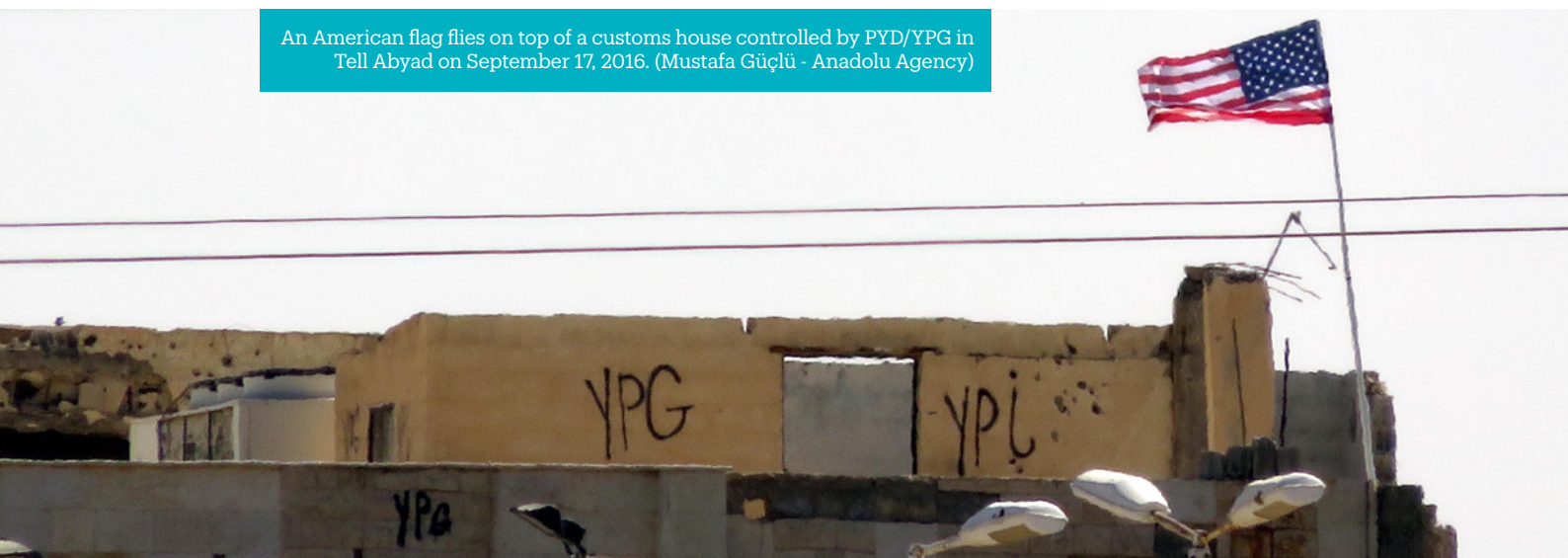
A media campaign was launched to legitimise the PYD/YPG as a reliable partner in the fight against Daesh. Following media coverage of the PYD/YPG as "secular", US backing of the group gained international support and legitimisation. Nevertheless, US support was heavily criticised by experts and policy makers in the region who acknowledged the link between the PKK and the PYD/YPG.

In mid-2016, the SDF was established as a coalition of Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Syriac Christians. However, the SDF's command structure and main fighting forces were composed of PYD/YPG elements. Former high-rank commander of the SDF, Talal Silo, said that the creation of SDF was a move to cover the US military support to the YPG.⁵¹ Additionally in 2017, a statement from the US Army General Raymond Thomas revealed that the US was the mastermind behind rebranding the YPG to the SDF. General Raymond stated, "we literally played back to them: You have to change your brand. What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG?" With about a day's notice they declared themselves as the SDF.⁵²

In May 2017, the US announced that it would directly⁵³ provide heavy weaponry to the PYD/YPG, including heavy machine guns and anti-tank weapons⁵⁴ for the assault on Raqqa - the self-proclaimed capital of Daesh in Syria. The US authorities claimed that the weapons provided to the PYD/YPG were only to be used against the Daesh militants in the Raqqa assault and would be called back in when Daesh following the removal of the group from the city. However, even after the capture of Raqqa, the US continued arming and training the PYD/YPG militants.

Turkey has accused the US of providing over 4000 truckloads of weapons to the PYD/YPG.⁵⁵

An American flag flies on top of a customs house controlled by PYD/YPG in Tell Abyad on September 17, 2016. (Mustafa Güçlü - Anadolu Agency)



Turkish President Erdoğan condemned this move during a speech at the TRT World Forum 2017 by warning the US that these weapons might be used against Turkey, which occurred when George W. Bush decided to send military aid to Kurdish forces in northern Iraq during the Iraq invasion of the US in 2003.

The US has on many occasions tacitly acknowledged the ties that exist between the PKK and PYD/YPG. An example of this appears on the CIA's website of enlisted terrorist organisations. Under terrorist organisations, the CIA listed Salih Muslim as the leader of the PKK's Syrian wing, the PYD.⁵⁶ In a meeting in 2013, NATO declared, with US ratification, the PYD to be a terrorist organisation⁵⁷, further supporting the notion that the US acknowledges the ties between PYD/YPG and the PKK. The aim of the PYD and PKK in Syria is to seek some form of autonomy⁵⁸ that will indisputably create grave security challenges for Turkey. The aforementioned examples further support the notion that US foreign policy contradicts itself. On one side US claims to be in Syria to fight against terrorism and on the other side it cooperates with a terrorist organisation that possesses threat to security of its long-time ally.

Finally, the US announced on that it would form a "border security force" under the command of PYD/YPG forces, consisting of up to 40 thousand people. This caused tremendous fury in Turkey. "The US is trying to form a terror army in our southern border," Erdoğan said. The US Secretary

of State Rex Tillerson said in a speech at Stanford University that the US "owes an explanation to Turkey for saying that it supports the creation of a border security force in northern Syria."⁵⁹

On December 19th 2018, US President Donald Trump unexpectedly announced that he had ordered the withdrawal of over two thousand US soldiers from Syria. He justified his decision on the ground that the threat from Daesh had largely been eliminated, thereby obviating the need for the US troops to stay in Syria. He said in a tweet; "We have defeated ISIS [Daesh] in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."⁶⁰

The details and timeline of the announced withdrawal process has become fluid and unpredictable following a meeting between President Trump and US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. Senator Graham announced that President Trump has reconsidered the withdrawal process in a fashion that ensures that Daesh will be permanently destroyed, Iran will not fill in the void and YPG/PYD will be protected. In line with the Senator Graham's statement, President Trump later acknowledged that a more cautious schedule for the withdrawal of troops will be pursued. In a tweet, Trump stated that US troops are slowly being sent back home while fighting against the final remnants of Daesh. Considered with the resignations over the withdrawal decision, this latest backtrack has further revealed the internal dispute within the US administration over the US's Syria policy.⁶¹

US Military Presence in Syria and its Cooperation with PYD/YPG

The US has 2000 soldiers and 18 military bases across Syria mainly in the northeast of the country along the Turkish border.

In late November, the US army fortified areas of northern Syria along the roughly 100-kilometre border with Turkey's southern Sanliurfa province.

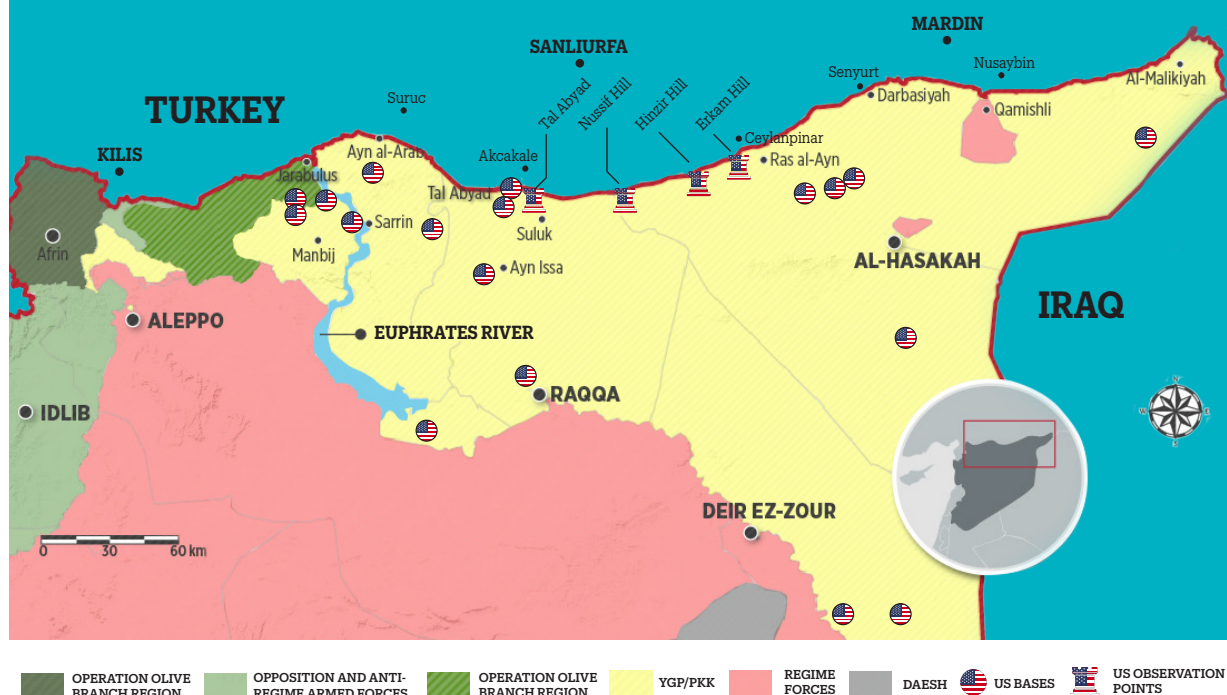
US support helped the PYD/YPG to spread across 1/3 of Syria, thus posing a major threat to Turkey.

The US has provided more than 5 thousand truckloads of arms to YPG including anti-tank missiles, armoured personnel carriers and drones. On many occasions, Turkish forces have captured such weapons in operations against PKK.

According to Amnesty International, the PYD/YPG has forced Arab and Turkmen villagers to leave their homes and threatened to call in US air strikes if they rejected.

In a Senate hearing in 2016, Former Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter admitted that PYD/YPG were linked to the PKK, which is also considered as a terrorist organisation by the US.

The US Chief of Staff announced that they are forming a border army in the region. According to the US plans the 'army' will be composed of 40 thousand men, most of whom belong to the YPG.



Source: Anadolu Agency

Conclusion

The Syrian War has demonstrated that there is a crisis of legitimacy in Syrian Kurdish politics, particularly as it relates to the PYD/YPG. The crisis of legitimacy is derived from the both social and legal perspectives. Firstly, the PYD/YPG has maintained its regime through oppressive means without consent of the local population, including Syrian Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen. Secondly, The PYD/YPG has engaged in activities recognised as a terrorism under international law, reflecting its direct link with the PKK, an internationally recognised terrorist movement. As a result, there have been significant international, regional and local critiques of the normalisation of the PYD/YPG in Syria. The most salient points put forward in this policy outlook are summarised as follows:

- Thousands Arabs, Turkmen, Armenians and Kurds have been forcibly displaced from their homes under the oppressive regime of the PYD/YPG, with thousands more having fled to Turkey and Kurdish region of northern Iraq, thereby altering the demographics of the region.
- Civilians living in northern Syria in territories under PYD/YPG control have become victims of large-scaled human rights violations.
- Renowned and respected Human Rights NGOs, such as London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have documented the PYD/YPG's systematic use of child soldiers and other crimes related to housing, land and property rights in PYD/YPG controlled areas.
- Arbitrary arrests, and ad-hoc trials in courts established by the PYD/YPG has become activity common occurrence.
- The political targets of the PYD/YPG, under the leadership of PKK, threatens the sovereignty of Syria and neighbour countries such as Turkey, Iraq and Iran.
- The Political activities of other Kurdish political groups, such as Kurdish National Council (KNC) and Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (SDKP), have been blocked by oppressive PYD/YPG policies. This includes several unsolved

disappearances and killings of non-PYD/YPG affiliated Syrian-Kurdish political leaders.

- International support, most notably from the US, to the PYD/YPG ostensibly on the basis of fighting Daesh, has been severely criticised from multiple quarters on the basis that supporting one terrorist organisation to fight another is illegitimate and ultimately leads to further instability.
- The YPG/PYD has used the US led coalition to further their own political interests as exemplified by documented incidents of masking coordinates of political opponents as Daesh targets, thereby eliciting US airstrikes on the targets in question.
- Turkish authorities have confirmed that the perpetrators of suicide bombings, which led to death of more than 80 people in Istanbul and Ankara, have received training from the PYD/YPG.
- The PYD/YPG along with the PKK are heavily involved in the trafficking of heroin, with some estimating that 80% of the narcotics trade in Europe is related to PKK activities. The groups is also implicating inhuman trafficking networks encompassing Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Europe, the illegal arms trade and the illegal extraction and sale of oil from the oilfields under its control.

The PYD/YPG holds a Marxist/Leninist ideology that blends ethnic chauvinism with extreme left-wing ideas. In order to further their secessionist objectives, the group embraces terrorism and long-term public war as strategy and despite a re-branding and aggressive PR campaign in the West, the PYD/YPG continue to perpetrate human rights violations and acts of terrorism. Thus, US support for the group reflects a deep contradiction in American foreign policy in that the PYD/YPG clearly espouse tactics and ideas that go against the liberal norms and values the US purportedly upholds. Moreover, the assumption often repeated in media and policy circles in the West that the PYD/YPG is representative of Syrian-Kurds is clearly a no more than a myth at best, and deliberately false at worse.

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