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The YPG and the Changing Dynamics of the Fight against IS

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Recently, Turkey and the U.S. signed an agreement for Turkey to join the coalition's fight against the Islamic State (IS, a.k.a. ISIS/ISIL). As part of this agreement an IS-free zone will be created in Syria, but it is not clear yet whether this will encroach on the territory of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the main Kurdish armed group operating in Syria. The YPG has been one of the most successful forces on the ground in the fight against IS and despite the changing dynamics it still remains important. However, Turkey's entry into the battle will lead to every aspect of the YPG being reassessed, as Turkey deems it to be a terrorist organisation. Nonetheless, the YPG still has a significant role to play and abandoning it now could lead to the situation in Syria becoming even more complex.

The People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) came to international attention during their much-publicised defence of the Kurdish Syrian city of Kobane against the Islamic State (IS, a.k.a. ISIS/ISIL), beginning in September 2014.¹ Much of the analysis, as it is primarily media based, has focused on glorifying the heroic exploits of the YPG forces without going into much detail about who they are, what their political beliefs are, and why they have received so little logistical support from those—mainly the EU and U.S.—who have championed the fight against IS.

The YPG is the armed unit of the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD), which was formed in 2003 and is the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) of Turkey.² Both the EU and U.S. consider the PKK a terrorist organisation and although they do not classify the PYD/YPG alongside it, the YPG's close links, both physically and ideologically, to the PKK influences the level of support it is given.

The PYD managed to take advantage of the instability caused by the Arab Spring in Syria and the rise of IS to consolidate its position as the leading Kurdish representative in Syria. Its strong organisational abilities allowed it to take control of the Kurdish territory and establish a de facto autonomous region. Additionally, the success of its protection units in defending Kurdish areas against IS has further enhanced its reputation amongst the Kurds of Syria and beyond. However, its success also plays against it, as the establishment of

¹ See: M. Civioglu, "Kobani: How strategy, sacrifice and heroism of Kurdish female fighters beat Isis," *International Business Times*, 10 February 2015, www.ibtimes.co.uk/kobani-how-sacrifice-local-knowledge-heroism-kurdish-female-fighters-beat-isis-1487358; M. Mahmood, "We are so proud—the women who died defending Kobani against Isis," *The Guardian*, 30 January 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/kurdish-women-died-kobani-isis-syria.

² J. Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Routledge, New York, 2009.

an autonomous region in Syria is not widely supported internationally and has thus resulted in caution in the level of support offered to the PYD by the international community.³

Political Beliefs

The PYD/YPG hold the same political beliefs as the PKK and largely adhere to the ideas of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Although his ideologies were initially Marxist-Leninist, in his more recent prison writings (he has been in a Turkish prison since 1999), Öcalan proposes democratic autonomy for the Kurds.⁴ Democratic autonomy is a change in direction for Öcalan, as it does not call for the creation of a Kurdish state but rather proposes a solution within the current state system. It allows for civil society and direct forms of democracy to replace representative political elites and is implemented by creating village, city and regional councils in order to allow the people to directly engage and collaborate with one another, leading to a form of self-rule/self-governance. The councils mediate disputes, provide services, create cooperatives and organise volunteers in order for the system to work. Currently, this system is in operation in both the Kurdish region of Turkey—operating in a limited capacity parallel to the official state system—and Syria.⁵ In Syria, the PYD has organised these councils in the three main cantons of Rojava: Afrîn, Kobanî, and Cizîre.⁶

Another aspect of these councils is that every chair has a co-chair of the opposite gender and there is a quota of 40% female representation, and thus the PYD is led by co-chairs Saleh Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah.⁷ This gender-balanced representation also exists within the defence units; in each region 40% of the units are from the female branch of the YPG, the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ). Additionally, Öcalan has proposed the idea of democratic confederalism, which has also been implemented to a lesser extent. The confederalism aspect of his proposal consists of linking all the existing councils under one organisation, thus transcending the state and its borders and creating links between the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq without threatening the territorial integrity of these countries (by not calling for a unified Kurdish state). Although this is in operation across all four countries, realistically speaking the collaboration is mainly between the Kurds of Turkey and Syria where the parties involved maintain greater support.⁸

During the start of the Arab Spring in Syria, the PYD/YPG were criticised for not joining in the fight against the Assad regime. However, Assad withdrew from the Kurdish region towards the beginning of the Arab Spring in order to consolidate his position elsewhere, which effectively granted the Kurds autonomy and thus took away their need to challenge him.⁹ More recently, the YPG has been largely receiving attention because of its fight against IS, but this heightened interest again fails to address what its actual political aims are. For the same reason the YPG did not join the fight against Assad, it has led the fight against IS and has been largely successful, the reason being that it is fighting for “democratic autonomy” and thus the protection of its territory is at the forefront of its battle, a fact largely omitted from media analysis of its activities.¹⁰

³ M. Gunter, “Iraq, Syria, Isis and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2015, pp. 102–111.

⁴ See: A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, Pluto Press, Ann Arbor, 2007; A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century*, Pluto Press, Ann Arbor, 2011; A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations*, International Initiative, Cologne, 2012.

⁵ J. Jongerden, A.H. Akkaya, “Springtime: The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Quest for Radical Democracy,” in: M. Gunter, M. Ahmed (eds.), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 2013.

⁶ Rojava is the name given to the Kurdish part of Syria, meaning “west” in Kurdish. “Kurdistan” is divided into the North (Turkey), East (Iran), South (Iraq) and West (Syria).

⁷ J. Miley, J. Riha, “Can the Revolution in Kurdish Syria Succeed?”, University of Cambridge website, 2015, www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/can-the-revolution-in-kurdish-syria-succeed.

⁸ J. Jongerden, A.H. Akkaya, *op. cit.*

⁹ M. Gunter, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ J. Miley, J. Riha, *op. cit.*

The Reality on the Ground

A 55-member Military Council leads the YPG; however, this council only meets every six months, so on the ground each military unit controls itself. Their success can be partially contributed to this flexible system, as they are able to evolve quickly, in line with the developments of the conflict.¹¹ The system allows for an optimal form of guerrilla warfare, which is suited to the territory. The YPG are well-trained, act quickly and are organised. Its troops are dedicated and it has a stream of volunteers from the local community and from Kurds in both Turkey and Europe. However, it lacks much of the basic equipment necessary for battle and has suffered a high number of casualties as a result.¹²

Due to the circumstances in which the PYD/YPG operate, there have been very few reports on the actual operations of their system of “democratic autonomy.” The PYD has repeatedly called for both the U.S. and UK to visit its territory and examine their operations directly; however, as of yet this offer has not been taken up, largely due to the fact that this autonomy is not supported in the first place.¹³ A group of independent scholars did travel to the Cizîre canton in December 2014, giving one of the few first-hand unbiased analyses of the conditions within the self-proclaimed Kurdish region in Syria. They describe a nascent system of democratic autonomy (as formulated by Öcalan), with operational cooperatives, the provision of services and people being involved in the governance project. These academics were also impressed by the inclusiveness, of both women and ethnic minorities in Cizîre.¹⁴ However, the UK government has accused the PYD of not supporting pluralism in the territories it controls and of not respecting rival political parties.¹⁵ Moreover, there have been accusations that the YPG is driving Arabs out of villages following victories against IS. The YPG state that it is doing so in order to protect the safety of the locals but tensions between the various factions in Syria remain high.¹⁶ The main opposition to the PYD still exists due to the fact that it announced an autonomous Kurdish region without the backing of the Syrian opposition and the international community. However, in wartime Syria it is the most successful faction in introducing stability and providing services where the official government does not exist or fails to do so. Furthermore, it is strongly supported by the people living within these autonomous cantons. That said, the PYD needs to work on its relationship with the other opposition parties in Syria, particularly the Arab ones, in order to placate fears of a Kurdish land grab or secession.

The Relationship between the EU, U.S. and the YPG

The U.S. policy for fighting IS, as highlighted by President Barack Obama, is to support and train local forces who in turn will do all the fighting on the ground, which therefore begs the question as to why the YPG have not received arms.¹⁷ Some arms have trickled down to its fighters and have even been airdropped by the U.S.; however, they are old, of inferior quality and are not the larger weapons necessary to defeat IS. Moreover, these weapons are coming from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), who need weapons themselves, and not directly from the U.S. or EU states.¹⁸ This is partly due to the fact that according to

¹¹ “People’s Defense Units (YPG) Internal System,” People’s Defense Units, 2015, <http://ypgrojava.com/en/index.php/ypg>.

¹² M. Stephens, “Analysis: YPG—the Islamic State’s worst enemy,” *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 September 2014, www.janes.com/article/43030/analysis-ypg-the-islamic-state-s-worst-enemy.

¹³ M.A. Salih, “PKK forces impress in fight against Islamic State,” *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/pkk-kurdish-fight-islamic-state.html.

¹⁴ ROAR Collective, “Joint statement of the academic delegation to Rojava,” *ROAR Magazine*, 15 January 2015, <http://roarmag.org/2015/01/statement-academic-delegation-rojava>.

¹⁵ Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, *Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report: UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415796/48533_Cm_9029_Accessible.pdf.

¹⁶ L. Loveluck, M. Samaan, “Syrian rebels accuse Kurdish forces of ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Sunni Arabs,” *The Telegraph*, 15 June 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11676808/Syrian-rebels-accuse-Kurdish-forces-of-ethnic-cleansing-of-Sunni-Arabs.html.

¹⁷ M. Bowman, “Senate Panel Grills US Military Leaders over IS Strategy,” *Voice of America*, 7 July 2015, www.voanews.com/content/us-military-leaders-to-discuss-islamic-state-strategy/2851791.html.

¹⁸ C. Letsch, “US drops weapons and ammunition to help Kurdish fighters in Kobani,” *The Guardian*, 20 October 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/turkey-iraqi-kurds-kobani-isis-fighters-us-air-drops-arms.

U.S. law—and that of some EU states—non-state actors cannot receive arms. However, this rule has not prevented non-state actors from being armed in the past through back channels.

An additional issue the U.S. and EU may have is that although the Kurds have been the most successful local force in the fight against IS, thus far the Kurdish forces (*peshmerga*,¹⁹ YPG, and PKK) have not taken the fight to the heart of IS territory. They have been defending their own cantons and only going on the offensive in areas where Kurds maintain a presence, or as a tactic to consolidate their territory, such as trying to link the cantons. This, in turn, does not help the U.S. and EU in their desire to defeat IS and drive it from its heartland—mainly Raqqa and Mosul. However, it has not stopped the U.S. from arming the *peshmerga* through Baghdad, and many EU states from providing arms to the KRG directly.²⁰ One of the reasons for this discrepancy is that the Kurds of Iraq are seen as a more legitimate entity, whereas the Kurds in Turkey and Syria do not receive the same political support. There are two main motivations behind this differential treatment, which in turn has led to the YPG not receiving arms. First, it is claimed that the PYD has links to the Assad regime, which it in turn denies.²¹ Second, the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation, and thus, for all intents and purposes, so is the YPG by association. Moreover, due to the YPG's links to the PKK and the threat of a Kurdish state in Syria with strong links to Turkey's Kurds, Turkey deems the YPG a bigger threat to the Turkish state than IS.²² Therefore, the U.S. has not armed them despite the fact that it is coordinating with and essentially providing air support for both of these groups—particularly the YPG—in their fight against IS.²³

The YPG and Turkey

Turkey deems the PKK a terrorist organisation due to the fact that the PKK has been waging a war against the Turkish state in response to the assimilation process that Turkey has enforced among its ethnic minorities. For Turkey, the PKK is a threat due to the fact that its existence, as a separatist entity, goes against the Kemalist ideologies of modern Turkey, which are based on installing a strong Turkish identity. As this was an integral part of nation-building in Turkey, the threat of the PKK is seen as a danger to the very fabric of society.²⁴ The PKK is also deemed a terrorist organisation by the U.S. and the EU. From the U.S. perspective, this is very much based on its view on all “terrorist” activity, paired with political alliances and Middle Eastern foreign policy; whereas for the EU, the designation also has to do with the PKK's activities in Europe.²⁵ However, it is important to note that the European Court of First Instance did order the PKK to be removed from the EU terror list.²⁶ For Turkey, the PKK and PYD are one and the same, and although the YPG is not directly listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU or U.S., due to Turkey's influence, the YPG's links to the PKK have an impact on foreign policy directed towards it.²⁷ Therefore, in order to understand the U.S. and EU's position on the matter, Turkey's importance as an ally needs to be assessed.

During the Cold War, Turkey became an ally of some significance to the U.S. due to its help against the Soviet Union and its large troop contribution to NATO. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey

¹⁹ The *peshmerga* are the official Kurdish army in the Kurdish region of Iraq and they are controlled and paid by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

²⁰ S.N. Carmichael, “Dramatic improvement in Kurdistan-EU ties, Kurdish envoy says,” *Rudaw*, 18 May 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/18052015>.

²¹ S. Muslim, “Syrian Kurdish PYD responds to UK government criticisms of the party in recent report,” *EKurd Daily*, 15 April 2015, <http://ekurd.net/syrian-kurdish-pyd-responds-to-uk-government-criticisms-of-the-party-in-recent-report-2015-04-17>.

²² T. Arango, E. Schmitt, “Turkey Uneasy as U.S. Support of Syrian Kurds Grows,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/world/middleeast/turkey-uneasy-as-us-support-of-syrian-kurds-grows.html?_r=2&referrer.

²³ A. Barrinha, “The Political Importance of Labelling: Terrorism and Turkey's discourse on the PKK,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, pp. 163–180.

²⁴ O. Taspinar, *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*, Routledge, New York, 2005.

²⁵ See: M.P. Roth, M. Sever, “The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 30, no. 10, 2007, pp. 901–920.

²⁶ H. Mahony, “Court annuls decision to put PKK on EU terror list,” *EUobserver*, 3 April 2008, <https://euobserver.com/justice/25917>.

²⁷ M. Gurbuz, “US-PYD rapprochement: a shift in Washington's strategy?,” *Rudaw*, 24 October 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/241020141>.

remained important to the U.S., this time owing to its position in relation to U.S.-perceived threats in the Middle East. During the First Gulf War, the U.S. forces used Turkish bases to mount their attack and following the war these bases were used to enforce a no-fly zone. During this time, the U.S. began helping the Turkish government with its fight against the PKK by supplying intelligence, allowing Turkey to conduct missions into northern Iraq, and by helping with the capture of the PKK's leader, Öcalan.²⁸ Additionally, Turkey was, and still is, an important ally in Afghanistan, with its peacekeeping forces entering Kabul early on in the war.²⁹ Finally, Turkey is also of strategic importance to NATO, due to Russia's aggressive policies towards post-Soviet states.

More recently, the value of this alliance and the cost thereof can be questioned, as Turkey refused the use of its bases for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the Second Gulf War and there were also delays involved in granting the use of Turkey's airspace for the invasion.³⁰ Moreover, Turkey also initially refused to help in Syria and closed its border to Kurds wanting to join the fight in Kobane, as well as preventing arms reinforcements. Although Turkey did eventually allow 200 KRG *peshmerga* to enter Syria, it was a minimal allowance, came late in the battle, and it is uncertain what concessions were made in return.³¹ However, Turkey and the U.S. have recently signed an agreement to fight IS and due to the proximity of Turkey's airbases this further reinstates its importance as an ally. The details as to whether the U.S. will allow Turkey to target the YPG have not surfaced yet, but an IS-free zone will be created, which could encroach on the YPG's territory.

Although the PKK is no longer striving for a Kurdish state and is actively pursuing a peace agreement, its recent attack on dam works in southeast Turkey—effectively ending a ceasefire—has meant that arming the group, although never a real option, became impossible.³² Nevertheless, the PYD insists that while it has links with all the Kurdish parties, not just the PKK, it remains an independent entity and therefore should not be classified alongside the PKK. Additionally, whilst both the YPG and PKK have joined the fight against the Islamic State, Turkey refused to do so unless it could create a buffer zone in Syria—a demand for which it now has the go-ahead.³³ Some analysts have gone further than just accusing Turkey of not joining the fight against IS by suggesting that Turkey was actually helping IS by allowing it to recruit fighters in Turkey, travel through the country, and finance the organisation by selling smuggled oil in Turkey.³⁴ Others go further still and suggest that Turkey was also arming and training IS, as well as offering medical and recruitment help.³⁵ Now with Turkey's entry into the conflict, it is important that its role does not undermine the gains made against IS so far. If Turkey can find some way to work with, or at least not against, the YPG in Syria, its addition could be a turning point in the fight against IS, due to the strategic importance of its air bases, rather than adding another battle to an already messy situation.

²⁸ H. Çancı, Ş.S. Şen, "Turkish Politics and Policies under the Impact of the 1980's PKK Revolt and the Gulf War of the Early 1990s," *European Review*, vol. 20, no. 2 2012, pp. 222–232.

²⁹ M. Gurcan, "Turkish military support to Afghanistan rises," *Al-Monitor*, 20 November 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/turkey-afghanistan-military-presence.html.

³⁰ Q. Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, Walker Publishing Company, New York, 2008.

³¹ C. Letsch, "Kurdish peshmerga forces arrive in Kobani to bolster fight against Isis," *The Guardian*, 1 November 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/01/kurdish-peshmerga-kobani-isis-syria.

³² J. Dettmer, "Kurdish Groups End Cease-fire with Turkey," *Voice of America*, 13 July 2015, www.voanews.com/content/kurdish-organizations-end-cease-fire-turkey/2859910.html.

³³ V. Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2011; C. Salih, "Kurds demand unity amid battle against Islamic State," *BBC News*, 14 January 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30784547.

³⁴ See: D. Romano, "The Truth about Kobane," *Rudaw*, 9 October 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/091020141>.

³⁵ See more details about alleged Turkish support for IS in: D.L. Phillips, "Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey List," *Huffington Post*, 9 January 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html.

The Shifting Dynamics

Although the YPG will not take the fight to Raqqa, they are still instrumental as an element in the fight against IS. The territory it holds, paired with the territory it is willing to attack, is significant, as it prevents an IS retreat if Arab opposition forces were to enter Raqqa.³⁶ Therefore, the YPG remains strategically important in the fight against IS, and although the fact that the YPG seems unwilling to attack the heart of IS territory in Syria makes the fight against IS harder, for the future stability of Syria it can be seen as a positive. The local population would not support an attack on Raqqa by the Kurds and therefore the forces entering the city should come from the Arab opposition with the support of the Kurds and coalition forces.

Similarly, with Turkey recently entering the battle after IS attacks and activity on its territory, it also has to take on a support role, because if its troops enter the Kurdish areas their presence will be considered occupation rather than emancipation by the local Kurds.³⁷ If Turkey sends ground troops into Syria, it would not be just to fight IS but also to prevent Kurdish gains, as the YPG has continuously been highlighted by Turkey as a threat equal to IS. Furthermore, Turkish plans for a buffer zone in Syrian territory are likely to aggravate the situation by taking territory from those fighting IS, rather than acting as any help in the fight against IS.³⁸

The YPG are a crucial force in the fight against IS; without its troops IS would have gained more territory and forced more innocent people to live under its brutal conditions.³⁹ The YPG have repeatedly been heralded as heroes by the Western press and the coalition forces currently share intelligence with it and cooperate on establishing targets for airstrikes. Yet, for the reasons outlined in this article, this does not extend to supplying the YPG with the arms necessary to defeat IS with minimal loss of troops. Whilst the Kurds in Iraq receive far greater support, the EU and U.S. have chosen to be partial allies with the YPG, which in turn has been responsible for some of the greatest victories against IS. The fractional support the YPG receives is unsurprising due to the wider geopolitical issues in the region—its links to the PKK will always be an issue—however it is important that the U.S. and EU do not abandon the YPG as a result of Turkey's involvement in the fight against IS as this would increase conflict, rather than alleviate it. At the same time, the support of the PYD by the U.S. and EU should include taking up the PYD's offer to send delegations to monitor activities on the ground, as it is vital that pluralism exists beyond theory.

With Turkey now entering the battle, it is important that all sides cooperate, rather than hinder each other, and for this cooperation to happen both the EU and U.S. need to use their alliance with Turkey to negotiate a strategy of collaboration, rather than occupation, especially in light of the renewed conflict between Turkey and the PKK. The initial reports of Turkey also targeting YPG forces in Syria are worrying as they will lead to an escalation of conflict and result in gains for IS, thus only further demonstrating the importance of the EU and U.S. using their influence to develop a coordinated and united battle against IS.⁴⁰ For the PYD's part, it needs to demonstrate commitment to pluralism in its territory and beyond, as well as alleviating the territorial threat it poses by working with the opposition forces and the other allies in the fight against IS.

³⁶ Z. Shekho, "Kurdish fighters regain districts after clashes with ISIS south Hasakah," *ARA News*, 24 July 2015, <http://aranews.net/2015/07/kurdish-fighters-regain-districts-after-clashes-with-isis-south-hasakah>.

³⁷ K. Shaheen, "Turkey sends fighter jets to Syrian border after soldier killed in clashes," *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/23/turkish-soldier-killed-in-clashes-with-isis-across-syrian-border.

³⁸ T. Seibert, "Turkey Plans to Invade Syria, but to Stop the Kurds, not ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, 28 June 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/28/turkey-plans-to-send-troops-into-syria-widening-the-war.html.

³⁹ See: R. Vine, "Dispatches—Escape from Isis review: a story of appalling brutality, and a glimmer of hope," *The Guardian*, 16 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/jul/16/escape-from-isis-dispatches-women-abducted-abused.

⁴⁰ Agence France-Presse, "Turkey shells Kurdish-held village in Syria," *The Guardian*, 27 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/turkey-shells-kurdish-held-village-in-syria.