



## Ascent of the PYD and the SDF

BARAK BARFI



THE SYRIAN WAR, entering its sixth year, continues to convulse the Middle East. The conflict has spawned the most violent jihadist group in history, become ground zero for the Sunni-Shiite struggle, and sparked clashes between NATO members and Russia. An international community that has demonstrated a reluctance to solve the intractable conflict may well face more widespread threats if it remains on the sidelines.<sup>1</sup>

WASHINGTON has been unwilling to dedicate ground troops to either defeating the Islamic State or toppling the Syrian regime. It has instead limited its involvement to carrying out low-risk airstrikes and enlisting local allies to fight these two adversaries. But in ceding such roles to smaller indigenous groups, the United States has allowed other players with different agendas, such as Iran and Russia, to capture the stage.

When Russia began its Syria air campaign in October 2015, it targeted U.S.-backed rebels fighting the regime. But in a recent twist, a U.S.-supported Kurdish force and its Arab allies have attacked these same groups in the northern province of Aleppo. Both sides are using U.S.-supplied weapons. Although the Kurds have proved the most effective ally fighting the Islamic State, their anti-rebel stance and relationship with the Syrian regime and Russians have posed problems.

The Kurdish expansion threatens to draw Turkey into the Syrian cauldron while affording the Islamic State a much-needed breather from its recent string of losses. As this paper explores, for Washington to stay focused on the Islamic State, it must directly support the group's most effective adversary thus far, the Syrian Kurds. With the resulting leverage, it can temper the Kurds' aspirations for autonomy as well as their anti-Turkish expressions, thus preventing unwelcome Turkish activity in the war.

### ■ Background

Since 2013, a covert Central Intelligence Agency program known as the Military Operations Command (MOC) has been providing arms and funding to vetted Syrian brigades from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella group. The aid was earmarked to

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Barak Barfi is a research fellow at the New America Foundation where he specializes in Arab and Islamic affairs. He has visited Syria on numerous occasions during the civil war and recently spent time with the Kurdish forces in eastern Syria.

fight Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

Yet after the Islamic State (IS) captured Mosul and beheaded U.S. journalists in 2014, Washington turned its efforts to fighting the group. To this end, the Department of Defense began supporting the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG). The PYD is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish group that has been fighting Ankara since 1984 and has been on the State Department's terrorism list since 1997.

In 2014, U.S. airstrikes helped the YPG dislodge IS from the northern Syrian border town of Kobane. Since then, Washington and the Syrian Kurdish fighters have coordinated other airstrikes in the northern provinces of Hasaka and Raqqa. As the YPG increasingly became the most effective fighting force against the jihadists, Washington amplified its assistance. In October 2015, U.S. planes airdropped fifty tons of ammunition in one hundred discrete bundles for a YPG-backed Sunni Arab group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>1</sup> Later that month, about fifty U.S. Special Forces operatives arrived in PYD-controlled territory to train and equip its fighters.<sup>2</sup> And recently, U.S. forces took over an expanded airstrip south of the PYD-controlled town of Rumeilan to more easily resupply the SDF troops and deliver weapons.<sup>3</sup>

### ■ Syrian Democratic Forces

The potentially expanded U.S. presence in Kurdish areas is aimed at propping up an Arab force that could relieve pressure on the YPG. Benefiting from U.S. airstrikes, the YPG, through mid-September 2015, captured 17,000 square kilometers from the Islamic State, according to U.S. Central Command head Gen. Lloyd Austin.<sup>4</sup> But the absence of a Kurdish population in other areas complicated further advances. Moreover, the YPG was no longer facing small IS-controlled villages in Hasaka and Raqqa provinces but instead brushing up against larger, heavily populated towns, such as al-Hawl

and al-Shadadi. In 2013–2014, the group formed alliances with the Sanadid Forces, drawn from the Shammar tribe, and the Syriac Military Council (SMC). Then, on September 10, 2014, the YPG established the Euphrates Volcano, a joint operation room with several FSA brigades.<sup>5</sup> Such Arab-Kurdish cooperation led to the October 11, 2015, creation of the SDF, a purely Arab organization whose entry into IS territory could help dispel the myth of rising dominance by the YPG—a purported Western creation bent on subjecting Arabs to Kurdish rule. Arab-led units could, by this logic, more easily earn the trust of local Arabs.

The SDF was initially formed with six groups, excluding the YPG, and spokesman Talal Silo says the alliance has more than 10,000 fighters.<sup>6</sup> Of the current ten or so SDF brigades, one of the largest is the Sanadid Forces, numbering 4,500 troops, according to its own estimates.<sup>7</sup> The Northern Sun Brigade claims eight battalions composed of 50–200 fighters each,<sup>8</sup> while the SMC has several hundred Syriac Christians, despite the group's claims of more than a thousand. The Raqqa Revolutionaries says it has 1,300 members. Like FSA brigades, these groups exaggerate their troop strength in hopes of receiving more equipment and funding. For his part, Col. Steve Warren, the spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, reported that the SDF has 5,000 fighters spread among eight to ten groups.<sup>9</sup>

On October 9, 2015, Washington announced the end of an FSA train-and-equip program that saw one of its groups captured by Jabhat al-Nusra, the local al-Qaeda affiliate,<sup>10</sup> while producing a mere four or five fighters in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Following the program's demise, Washington was desperate for Arab allies who could take on the Islamic State. Thus, just two days later, the United States urged the YPG to assemble an Arab coalition.<sup>12</sup> Hours thereafter, Washington made the fifty-ton airdrop,<sup>13</sup> with a second weapons delivery reportedly made by land.<sup>14</sup> The decision to shutter the FSA train-and-equip program and shift support to the SDF was likely made during a series of high-level

meetings in September.<sup>15</sup> The groundwork for the program was reportedly laid during the summer, when twenty SDF leaders traveled to Iraq meet with U.S. defense officials.<sup>16</sup>

A Defense Department press official explained, “As part of the training . . . , [we] trained them in how they can communicate with us . . . information we can use for airstrikes.”<sup>17</sup> For his part, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the YPG “essentially introduced us to some Syrian Arabs whom we thought we might similarly help to fight ISIL [Islamic State] and would be willing to fight ISIL. And this was a mission to explore that possibility and get to know these people.”<sup>18</sup>

Today, Washington touts the SDF as a potential force to liberate Raqqa.<sup>19</sup> Colonel Warren asserted, “This al-Hawl operation really was a validator for that program (to train and equip the SDF).”<sup>20</sup> Further, Operation Inherent Resolve commander Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland boasted that the SDF has “made dramatic gains against the enemy in northern and eastern Syria.”<sup>21</sup> In truth, the group has not proved its battlefield mettle. In February, joint YPG-SDF forces captured the IS-controlled town of al-Shadadi in Raqqa province. At the time, Brett McGurk, the presidential envoy to the anti-IS coalition, said 60 percent of the fighters were Kurds while 40 percent were Arabs.<sup>22</sup> But a Kurdish journalist at the battle reported that SDF participation was negligible. AMC and Sanadid Forces manned theater-reserve positions, while the Northern Sun Brigade was represented by its commander and his aides alone; the Raqqa Revolutionaries were absent. Instead, the Arabs at the front lines were YPG members unaffiliated with the SDF.<sup>23</sup> YPG spokesman Redur Khalil reported that Arabs currently constitute approximately 15 percent of the group’s total fighting force,<sup>24</sup> while the group’s commander stated that Arabs have previously constituted as much as 30 percent.<sup>25</sup>

The SDF’s modus operandi appears to be taking over rear battlefield positions as the YPG advances to prevent flanking operations. The earlier-mentioned Kurdish journalist noted that he observed this tactic on his November 2015 front visit during the battle

for al-Hawl. Colonel Warren noted that only around a thousand YPG-SDF troops participated in the battle.<sup>26</sup> Such a small force would not have required many brigades and can explain why the YPG could carry the lion’s share of the burden. The SDF did, however, participate in the battle for Tishrin Dam in December 2015.<sup>27</sup>

The SDF’s weak position leaves paramount decisionmaking to the YPG, which can thus divide spoils in the territory it controls. Abu Issa, the leader of the Raqqa Revolutionaries, said the YPG controlled the ammunition from the October airdrop,<sup>28</sup> a claim corroborated by the sheikh of the Shammar tribe, from which Sanadid springs.<sup>29</sup> PYD leader Salih Muslim hinted at such a reality too,<sup>30</sup> while YPG official Polat Can, responsible for links with the Americans, noted that his group distributed arms.<sup>31</sup>

U.S. officials, however, have dismissed these YPG claims. A Pentagon press secretary asserted that the airdrop “was successful, and I’ll just restate that. I mean, it’s—it was—it went where it was intended, to the people it was intended—you know, who were intended to receive it...It was intended for the Syrian Arab Coalition.”<sup>32</sup> A senior defense official likewise declared, “We have confirmation from the leadership, including photographic confirmation, that the information—the ammo hit its target.”<sup>33</sup> And Defense Secretary Carter denied that the YPG took possession of the supplies.<sup>34</sup> These episodes have bolstered the belief that the SDF is merely an Arab front doing the YPG’s bidding while allowing Washington to claim it has found a moderate Arab force to battle IS in urban areas.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the SDF does have constituencies vital to future success. The Shammar tribe, which controls the Sanadid, is one of the largest confederations in the Arab world, has influence throughout northern Syria, and is backed by Qatar. Abu Issa, who leads the Raqqa Revolutionaries, is also esteemed in his home city.<sup>36</sup>

Another group to join the SDF is the Revolutionaries Army, formed in May 2015;<sup>37</sup> it claims 1,800–2000 fighters, but its real strength is likely around

700.<sup>38</sup> The Revolutionaries' nucleus was drawn from members of the Kurdish Front, a group that previously fought under the FSA banner; a portion of its members are bandits expelled from FSA units.<sup>39</sup> These fighters took refuge in the PYD-controlled Afrin pocket in northwest Aleppo. In 2015, when the FSA-affiliated Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Hazm Movement, and Division 30 were chased by Jabhat al-Nusra from Aleppo and Idlib, some of their fighters also sought sanctuary in Afrin, with certain Hazm Movement and Division 30 fighters bringing their U.S.-provided equipment with them.

### ■ CIA vs. Defense Department

Washington's reluctance to fight the Islamic State and the Syrian Arab Army on the ground has led it to seek capable local allies to do so. The CIA program is not geared to fighting IS but rather primarily to preventing the regime from overrunning FSA groups in Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia, and capturing border crossings, which would severely curtail the resupply of moderate rebels. These groups are too small to take on both the jihadists and the SAA. Although many—such as the Mountain Falcons and the 101st Division—have some troops fighting IS, most of their forces are concentrated against the regime.

In contrast, the Defense Department program seeks out groups that can exclusively take on IS. They are mostly concentrated in areas where the regime long ago ceded territory. And the unique relationship between the regime and the PYD has ensured that the SAA will not force the Kurdish fighters to divert resources from their battle against IS. This debate between arming the YPG and continuing FSA support has split the U.S. leadership. While CENTCOM reportedly backs enhancing cooperation with the PYD, other government departments apparently do not.

Such disputes are a staple of U.S. foreign policy. When General MacFarland led the U.S. Army contingent in Ramadi in 2006, he was a vocal supporter of working with local Sunni tribes in what became known as the Arab Awakening. The Marine Expeditionary

Force in Fallujah, however, argued that such an alliance would undermine other tribal leaders based in Jordan and the Iraqi central government.<sup>40</sup>

The various positions of these agencies and their division of labor have created a muddled policy stymied by a lack of coordination. This confusion contributed to the February 2016 debacle in which various U.S.-backed groups fought one another in the northern Aleppo countryside, as discussed in the next section.

### ■ Battle in the Aleppo Countryside

The roots of the recent Aleppo blunder can be found in October 2015, when Russian airstrikes began severely degrading local rebel groups and allowing a reinvigorated SAA to recapture territory. Several months later, on February 2, the SAA launched an operation to break the four-year siege of the Shiite villages of Nubl and Zahra in the Aleppo countryside.<sup>41</sup> Moving north from the village of Bashkuy, the SAA attacked Tal Jabin. Under the cover of approximately 120 Russian airstrikes and 500 bombs, the SAA quickly took the village. The same day, regime forces marched west to capture Deir al-Zaytun. On February 3–4, the SAA continued moving west, taking Hardatnin and Marsat al-Khan.<sup>42</sup> Concurrently, foreign Shiite militias holding Nubl and Zahra trekked east to Marsat al-Khan to connect with the SAA, thus lifting the siege.

Exploiting the rebel collapse and continued Russian airstrikes, the YPG and the Revolutionaries Army moved east from the Afrin pocket. On February 8, they took the Kurdish villages of Deir Jamal and Maranaz just south of Tal Rifaat. On February 9–11, they besieged the Menagh Air Base, which had been targeted by the Russians. Since last year, Russian shelling had reduced the number of fighters manning the base to 300. By the time the YPG attacked, the 60–70 remaining rebel fighters could not hold off the attackers. On February 14, the YPG attacked Tal Rifaat and took it the next day.

The YPG claimed the territory it overran was

controlled by Islamic extremists such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham. But at the Turks' request, Jabhat al-Nusra had evacuated its Aleppo countryside bases around August 2015 to facilitate the creation of a jihadist-free safe zone. And although Ahrar al-Sham was present in places such as Menagh, most of the captured area was controlled by MOC-supplied FSA units. Also manning Menagh were the Levant Front and First Legion.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the Islamic Elite and Levant Front controlled Sheikh Issa, the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Gathering operated in Qabtan al-Jabal, and the First Legion was in Tal Rifaat. All these groups receive U.S. aid, and some possess antitank TOW missiles. The Mountain Falcons and 13th Division rushed troops from Idlib to fight the SDF and used their TOWs against them.

### ■ PYD-Regime Links

The YPG's lightning advance sparked claims that it had coordinated its moves with the regime. The YPG, however, contends that it captured these areas to prevent the SAA from dashing toward the city of Azaz to the north, on the Turkish border. Although a U.S. military spokesperson corroborated this claim, Aleppo activists note that the SAA ceased its march northward when it broke the siege on Nubl and Zahra.<sup>44</sup> Thereafter, mop-up operations were conducted only to these villages' south. In truth, the YPG's goal has always been to link the Afrin pocket with the eastern canton of Kobane in order to create a contiguous Kurdish enclave on the Turkish border. The chaos offered a propitious time to do so.

The Kurds have a complex history in Syria, with some having reached the top of the political mountain. In 1949, Husni al-Zaim served briefly as president; Adib Shishakli, who was president in the early 1950s, had Kurdish roots; and the leader of the Syrian Communist Party, Khalid Bakdash, was a Kurd.

But they have no love for the Baathists, who historically have oppressed them.<sup>45</sup> In Syria, the regime has sought to stamp out Kurdish identity through draconian measures aimed at bringing about their assimilation

into the larger Arab identity, the cornerstone of Baathist thought.<sup>46</sup> Among the professional, economic, educational, and cultural slights suffered by the Kurds, they cannot own land in parts of the country<sup>47</sup> and cannot register Kurdish names at birth.<sup>48</sup> In 1962, the government stripped approximately 120,000 Kurds of their citizenship;<sup>49</sup> in the 1970s, it expelled them from villages on the Turkish border.<sup>50</sup> Senior PYD officials such as party chairman Salih Muslim, Hadiya Yusuf, and Anwar Muslim have all spent time in prison.<sup>51</sup> The regime regularly sent informers to spy on Muslim as late as 2011.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, some Kurds have prospered under the Baath Party. Ahmad Kuffaro, the former grand mufti,<sup>53</sup> was a Kurd, as was Sheikh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti, an Islamic scholar on whom the regime often leaned for support.<sup>54</sup>

Despite Baathist-Kurdish tensions, when faced with a rebel onslaught in summer 2012, the regime facilitated the PYD takeover of territory in the province of Hasaka. Today, regime and YPG forces share the cities of Hasaka and Qamishli, and the YPG has received weapons from the regime.<sup>55</sup> Still, the two sides have sporadically clashed. In September 2012 and March 2015, the regime conducted airstrikes against YPG positions in the Aleppo neighborhood of Sheikh Maq-soud. In January 2013, the YPG attacked an SAA base around Rumeilan in Hasaka province. In January 2015, a clash over territory in Hasaka city killed seven members of the PYD's internal security forces.<sup>56</sup> A similar skirmish erupted in Qamishli in June 2015.<sup>57</sup> And when the Swedish journalist Joakim Medin, under PYD protection, was arrested by the regime in Qamishli last year, the Kurds retaliated by incarcerating Baathist security officials.

Although Colonel Warren asserted that no evidence existed of regime-PYD collusion in the Aleppo countryside battle,<sup>58</sup> Bashar Jaafari, Syria's representative to the UN, claimed that the regime is supporting the PYD.<sup>59</sup> British foreign minister Philip Hammond echoed this sentiment, noting that "what we have seen over the past weeks is very disturbing evidence of co-ordination between Syrian Kurdish forces, the Syrian regime,

and the Russian Air Force.”<sup>60</sup> Events in the village of Ihris, southeast of Tal Rifaat, appear to corroborate his claim. The SAA and YPG entered Ihris around the same time, with the regime relinquishing it to the YPG without a fight.

Enemy collusion is a staple of the Syrian war. The regime paid some rebel groups to avoid bombing oil pipelines; others escorted oil tankers through rebel territory to regime checkpoints.<sup>61</sup> In Aleppo, the regime has paid Jabhat al-Nusra to keep the water running. And the Islamic State continues to sell oil to the regime.<sup>62</sup>

But unlike these other groups, the YPG has only rarely been targeted by regime airstrikes. A shared fear of the rebels and IS has rendered the regime and the PYD “frenemies”—each deeply distrusts the other, but they are nevertheless warier of their common adversaries. To this end, they have a *modus vivendi* that closely resembles a nonbelligerency pact.<sup>63</sup>

### ■ PYD-Russia Ties

YPG advances have also spurred claims that the group coordinated its advances with the Russians, whose airstrikes preceded the campaign and ceased after the Kurds captured key installations such as Menagh Air Base. But U.S. officials have discounted this possibility. Before the Aleppo countryside campaign began, General MacFarland said no evidence existed of Kurdish-Russian cooperation.<sup>64</sup> After the operation, a State Department spokesperson said the same.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, each side finds the other useful. Moscow sees the PYD’s *de facto* nonbelligerency pact with the regime as beneficial. It views the PYD as a potential ally against Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, which control Idlib province. An expanded SDF could take on these antiregime outfits, thus degrading Assad’s two most effective foes. Further, its relationship with the PYD allows Russia to argue that it can work with the United States to defeat the Islamic State.

But the biggest current benefit the PYD provides Russia is its anti-Turkey bent. The Russians view the PYD as a stick with which to poke Turkey, and an especially

useful one since the uproar over the November 2015 Turkish downing of a Russian jet violating its airspace. Since both Moscow and Washington support the PYD, the illusion has emerged that the two nations are ganging up on Turkey at a moment when the international community is already bashing the Turks for allegedly facilitating IS’ creation.

For various reasons, PYD officials downplay their Russia ties. They have never forgiven Moscow for expelling PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan after he was banished from Syria in 1998. They know the Russians cannot aid them in the way Washington can. And they are deeply distrustful of Moscow’s ultimate motives. But the two parties’ short-term goals of defeating the rebels, degrading IS, and pressuring Turkey dovetail. To this end, Salih Muslim has visited Russia since 2011, and this February the PYD opened a Moscow office. Reflecting the PYD’s tight-lipped approach to its Russia connection, a senior official dodged strikingly when asked about the matter: “The Russians have ended their operations in Syria and have left.”<sup>66</sup>

### ■ Enter Turkey

Since the PYD takeover of northern Syria in 2012, Turkey has viewed the group with distrust. Turkey takes issue with the party because it is a PKK vassal, supports the Syrian regime, and refuses to work with both the Turkish-backed Syrian political opposition and the pro-Ankara Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani.

Viewing the PYD as a PKK extension, Turkey has been alarmed by its takeover of territory on its border. In July 2012, weeks after the PYD began asserting its control in northern Syria, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “We will never allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey.”<sup>67</sup> He warned further that “there will undoubtedly be a response on our part to this attitude.”<sup>68</sup> Days later, Turkey carried out a military drill on the Syrian border.<sup>69</sup>

Yet Turkey had a quick change of heart. Then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu countenanced the possibility of autonomy for the Kurds.<sup>70</sup> To this end, Ankara

initiated contacts with the PYD in March 2013, and four months later Muslim visited Ankara. The Turks also opened a border crossing to allow humanitarian aid into Syria.<sup>71</sup> As long as peace talks between Turkey and the PKK continued, the rhetoric was subdued. But when they broke down last year, Ankara adopted harsher measures. Even before then, Erdogan blasted the U.S. airdrop to Kobane: “Obama ordering three C-130s to airdrop weapons and supplies to Kobane right after our conversation cannot be approved of.”<sup>72</sup>

After the YPG marched on the border town of Tal Abyad last June, Erdogan lamented that “the West, which has shot Arabs and Turcomen, is unfortunately placing the PYD and PKK in lieu of them,”<sup>73</sup> and admonished that this “could lead to the creation of a structure that threatens our borders.”<sup>74</sup> On June 17–18, shortly after the YPG captured Tal Abyad, the Turkish government convened a series of senior-level meetings.<sup>75</sup> Turkey subsequently declared that a YPG move west of the Euphrates River would constitute a redline requiring a response.<sup>76</sup> In July, Turkey shelled Syrian villages under YPG control,<sup>77</sup> although it denied targeting the group.<sup>78</sup> In October, however, Ankara acknowledged striking the YPG.<sup>79</sup> Following the same month’s airdrop, Ankara summoned the U.S. ambassador to voice its complaints.<sup>80</sup>

When Vice President Joe Biden visited Ankara in January, he and his aides were shown maps indicating purported sites of PYD weapons smuggling to PKK cadres in Turkey.<sup>81</sup> And after Brett McGurk, the special envoy, visited Kobane last month, Erdogan challenged Washington to choose between the two sides, saying, “Am I your ally or are the ‘terrorists’ in Kobane?”<sup>82</sup>

The YPG offensive in the northern Aleppo countryside has only aggravated an already tense situation. In response, Turkey exfiltrated Ahrar al-Sham fighters from the province of Idlib and slipped them into Aleppo via its border crossing. Beginning February 13, Turkey shelled YPG positions in al-Malikiyah and Menagh.

Unlike Washington, Turkey views the PYD, and only secondarily the Syrian regime, as its war-torn

neighbor’s greatest threat. The Islamic State is at the bottom of the threat list. To this end, the Turks are pushing for a safe zone up to forty-eight kilometers long and ninety-five kilometers wide in northern Syria, to be controlled by brigades loyal to Ankara.<sup>83</sup> In August 2015, Turkish Foreign Ministry undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioglu noted that the zone would be PYD free, supported “under air-protection from any possible attacks by ISIS, PYD or the Assad regime.”<sup>84</sup> Now prime minister Davutoglu acknowledged the possibility that Turkish troops would protect such a zone.<sup>85</sup> In February, Deputy Prime Minister Yalcin Akdogan explained that a safe zone was necessary to prevent “attempts to change the [area’s] demographic structure.”<sup>86</sup> Erdogan vented with the same language following the PYD takeover of Tal Abyad.<sup>87</sup> Akdogan’s message was clear: Turkey’s chief priority was to create a zone safe from PYD encroachment.

### ■ PKK-PYD-YPG Links

Ankara has tried to convince Washington that the PKK and PYD are two sides of the same coin. But Washington has not taken the bait. A State Department spokesperson noted that the Turks “clearly make the link between the PKK and the YPG. We don’t.”<sup>88</sup> In July 2015, a senior administration official emphasized that it “is important to separate out the PKK from the PYD.”<sup>89</sup> In congressional testimony in February, McGurk claimed the PYD is interested in “distancing [itself] from any relation with the PKK.”<sup>90</sup>

These claims, however, belie the truth. Syrians have always been integral to the PKK. Although the regime oppressed its Kurds, it also encouraged them to join the PKK to deflect their local aspirations. An estimated 7,000–10,000 did so.<sup>91</sup> The regime also permitted the PKK to open a Damascus office and to establish training camps in Lebanon’s Beqa Valley under Syrian control.<sup>92</sup> A noted Kurdish analyst contended that more than one-third of PKK members are Syrian.<sup>93</sup> Another claimed that up to 20 percent of the group’s fighters at its base in Qandil, Iraq, are Syrian.<sup>94</sup> Senior PKK commander Cemil Bayik stated that 1,500 Syrians have

died fighting for the PKK.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, a Western diplomat posited that “a former PKK member is buried in almost every Kurdish village in Syria.”<sup>96</sup> In 2009, the Assad regime expressed its willingness to allow 1,500–2,000 Syrian PKK members to return home.<sup>97</sup> And in February 2012, the Turkish paper *Hurriyet* published security services statistics claiming that of the 1,362 PKK members killed from 2001 to 2011, 12.4 percent were Syrian.<sup>98</sup>

After Syria expelled Ocalan and closed Damascus’s PKK offices in 1999, the organization adopted a political approach and founded parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. To this end, the PYD was established in 2003. Ocalan’s brother Osman claimed he formed the PYD and that it takes its orders from the PKK. The PYD’s founders and top members were all PKK figures who had returned from Qandil, where the group’s inaugural congress was held. The PYD’s now-modified charter once declared Ocalan its leader and its subservience to the PKK parliament.<sup>99</sup> In 2011, KurdWatch, a Germany-based organization critical of the PYD, published apparent transcripts of Syrian intelligence service interrogations with several members of the PYD’s women’s movement. Those incarcerated were indoctrinated in PKK thought and received military training in Qandil.<sup>100</sup>

PKK figures are also omnipresent in the YPG.<sup>101</sup> The International Crisis Group has noted that the PKK’s Qandil leadership “exerts authority over the YPG” and that the Turkish group’s Syrian and non-Syrian members have flocked to the YPG.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the YPG’s Kurdish name, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, is almost an exact copy of the PKK armed wing’s *Hezen Parastina Gel*. One fighter boasted, “Sometimes I’m a PKK, sometimes I’m a PJAK [the PKK’s Iranian affiliate], sometimes I’m a YPG. It doesn’t really matter. They are all members of the PKK.”<sup>103</sup> Today, non-Syrian Kurds fill YPG ranks from foot soldier to commander and are visibly present in both command centers and frontline positions.<sup>104</sup> The Atlantic Council, which tracked YPG casualty figures between January 2013 and January 2016, found that 49.24 percent were Turks.<sup>105</sup>

As for the PYD, Muslim and his coleader, Asya Abdullah, hold nominal power. Muslim manages the international portfolio and is rarely in Syria; instead, he passes most of his time in Europe. Abdullah deals with local government matters. The real decisionmakers, a group of fewer than ten senior Syrian PKK members who have spent time with Ocalan, stay out of the limelight and almost never meet with foreigners. They deal with strategy, allowing underlings to manage day-to-day affairs.<sup>106</sup> This model draws on the PKK’s Marxist origins and the Soviet model it adopted. The small politburo making all decisions demands complete allegiance.

For their part, PYD and YPG officials have denied being a part of the PKK. Muslim said, “We do not take orders from anywhere.”<sup>107</sup> He has also said, “You can call us a sister party but we have our own structures in Syria that are not just the structures of the PKK.”<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, YPG spokesman Redur Khalil has affirmed, “We have repeatedly said that there are not any organizational and training relations between us and the PKK.”<sup>109</sup>

Such plausible deniability is a PKK staple, involving the creation of shell organizations to mask its involvement in insurgent operations and to gain appeal beyond its narrow base. It also adopted new monikers when embracing the peace process with Ankara to make it more palatable. At its eighth congress in 2002, the PKK declared it had achieved its aim and was dissolving itself. In its place, the group created the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) to continue a political rather than a military struggle with the hope of becoming a Turkish political party. In 2003, KADEK was itself dissolved and reincarnated as the Kurdistan People’s Congress (KONGRA-GEL), a formation that subsequently became its parliament. In 2005, the PKK established the Confederation Community of Kurdistan (KKK), which in 2007 became the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). This body includes its local parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

The PYD has done the same. In 2007, it formed the Central Coordinating Committee to manage political

and societal affairs. In 2011, it founded the People's Council of Western Kurdistan, a locally elected assembly to provide social services. The Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) was established as an umbrella organization incorporating the PYD, youth movements, and other Kurdish organizations. But its key task was to negotiate an ultimately failed power-sharing agreement between the PYD and parties loyal to the Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani.<sup>110</sup> In reality, these organizations are PYD facades. This multitude of front organizations has confused Syrian Kurds and contributed to their political apathy. For their part, U.S. officials have noted that there is no difference between the PYD and YPG.<sup>111</sup>

### ■ Washington and the PYD

Washington has not always differentiated between the PKK and the PYD. Nor did it initially make any positive comments about the latter. Remarks were limited to urging it not to create a breakaway region. In July 2012, when the PYD took over parts of northern Syria, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon noted, "We are equally clear that we don't see for the future of Syria an autonomous Kurdish area or territory."<sup>112</sup> When the PYD announced its autonomy plan in November 2013, a State Department spokesperson said, "We certainly remain concerned by reports of efforts to declare an independent Kurdish region in Syria."<sup>113</sup>

But it was the PYD's links with the PKK especially that kept Washington at arm's length. In November 2007, a U.S. diplomatic cable stated, "The PYD is the PKK's political affiliate in Syria."<sup>114</sup> On August 11, 2012, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton noted, "We share Turkey's determination that Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists, whether now or after the departure of the Assad regime."<sup>115</sup> As U.S. fighter jets supported YPG forces in Kobane, a State Department spokesperson said, "We're certainly aware of the connection—some of the connections between some PYD members and the PKK,"<sup>116</sup> while Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged the former was an "offshoot" of the latter.<sup>117</sup> But the same day,

another State Department spokesperson emphasized that the two groups were different under U.S. law.<sup>118</sup>

Washington's pro-PYD shift coincided with the group's successes against the Islamic State in Kobane, on Syria's border with Turkey. Although Washington carried out airstrikes against IS positions, relations progressed incrementally. On October 8, 2014, the Pentagon press secretary said the United States was not engaging in intelligence coordination with the PYD.<sup>119</sup> The next week, a White House spokesperson explained how the airstrikes in support of Iraqi Kurds differed from those in Syria. In Iraq, the Kurds proved a reliable ally with whom to coordinate battlefield movements. But in Syria, the PYD was not part of the "moderate opposition who can take the fight to ISIL on the ground" or who can "follow up on those airstrikes to end that siege."<sup>120</sup> He later noted that Washington had "limited insight into those particular local fighters."<sup>121</sup>

But as the YPG proved its battlefield mettle, this assessment changed. By October 17, the State Department acknowledged intelligence sharing with the group.<sup>122</sup> On October 19, the military airdropped twenty-eight bundles of weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies for Iraqi and Syrian Kurds fighting in Kobane. After the PYD took a string of towns on the Turkish border in 2015, White House spokesman Josh Earnest did a volte-face, noting that the PYD was a reliable ally that fit Washington's anti-IS strategy. The PYD's efforts were "an indication that when our coalition can back capable, effective, local fighters on the ground, that we can make important progress against ISIL."<sup>123</sup> In August 2015, Brett McGurk likewise noted that the PYD was an integral component of Washington's anti-IS strategy centered on competent local forces that could benefit from U.S. airstrikes.<sup>124</sup>

The YPG's battlefield success led senior U.S. officials to sing its praises. Defense Secretary Carter lauded its fighters for being part of "a capable and motivated ground force [for] taking and holding territory."<sup>125</sup> McGurk noted that "the PYD and the YPG within Syria [have] been very effective" against the Islamic State.<sup>126</sup> And a senior Defense Department

official remarked, “They have learned the skill set through very challenging circumstances.”<sup>127</sup>

During McGurk’s February visit to Kobane, where he met with senior PYD leaders such as Aldar Khalil, Anwar Muslim, and Akram Hisso, he was also welcomed by Shahin Cilo, a member of the coterie of true PKK power brokers in Syria.<sup>128</sup> It is believed to have been Cilo’s first public appearance and illustrates the importance the PYD attaches to its relationship with Washington. In his meetings with party officials, McGurk asked them to improve their relations with Barzani. For its part, the PYD inquired about why it was blocked from attending the Geneva peace conference to end the Syrian war and requested funds for rebuilding Kobane.<sup>129</sup>

### ■ The PYD’S Game

In light of this discussion of Kurdish fighters, a countervailing dilemma can be perceived for the FSA groups. Many of their international patrons want them to fight the Islamic State, but the populations they control view the regime and the supporting Russian air force as a greater threat. They also face herculean geographic considerations. These brigades are squeezed between the regime, the Islamic State, and two other extremist groups, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra—the latter of which imposes taxes on movement through its territory—severely limiting their room for maneuver.

The PYD is not similarly hamstrung. It views the Islamic State as an existential threat to its civilian population that must be contained, rolled back, and ultimately destroyed. The PYD has seen what the jihadist group has done to non-Sunni Arab minorities such as the Assyrians and Yazidis and fears much the same for its own community. Moreover, it operates in a region devoid of other extremist groups, rendering the PYD supreme. And the regime has never posed a threat to its existence. In short, the Islamic State is its primary and sole adversary in Syria.

But the PYD does face other regional antagonists. Syria’s Kurds live in three distinct areas bordering Turkey and have dreamed of emulating their

Iraqi brethren, who have carved out an autonomous zone far from Baghdad’s reach.<sup>130</sup> But Afrin in the west, Kobane in the center, and Jazira in the east are noncontiguous. Between 2012 and 2014, the Syrian Kurds’ geographic dispersion presented an insurmountable obstacle to their ambitions.

An unlikely ally, however, has rekindled these hopes. Washington’s airstrikes supporting the PYD’s campaign against IS have allowed it to dislodge the jihadists from 17,000 square kilometers. But the U.S. actions have concurrently helped realize the PYD’s autonomous aspirations. The Kurds have now linked the two eastern cantons. All that remains is to close the IS-controlled Manbij pocket between Mara<sup>131</sup> and Jarabulus and a sliver of borderland around Azaz.

Until now, the PYD’s short-term goals of fighting IS in Hasaka and Raqqa have aligned with Washington’s endgame objective of destroying the group. But the PYD’s long-term ambitions differ from those of Washington. Empowered by U.S. airstrikes, the Kurds have achieved their aims in those provinces. Their primary goal is now to close the remaining border gaps, not march on Raqqa city, as Washington wants.<sup>132</sup> This would allow them to establish an autonomous zone from which no future Syrian government could dislodge them. The PYD is reluctant to spill blood over Arab territory devoid of Kurds. Today, their principal adversary hindering this goal is Turkey, not the Islamic State. The PYD has not previously shuddered before Turkey’s threats and military actions and will likely continue to pursue its objectives, whatever Ankara’s response.

To this end, the YPG’s moves in Aleppo have split U.S. agencies, and the dispute is playing out in public statements. Thus, a State Department spokesman criticized the YPG, saying, “We’ve been very clear that these moves by the YPG on the ground are counterproductive and undermine our collective efforts in northern Syria to defeat ISIL...the YPG needs to stop its own actions on the ground that we believe [raise] tensions.”<sup>133</sup> But Colonel Warren, who provides a weekly Defense Department briefing about anti-IS efforts,

defended the YPG's actions as steps to prevent further territorial gains by the regime. He refused to condemn the YPG advance, noting, "We certainly understand it," and said the Defense Department would "consider" airstrikes to support the group's actions in Aleppo.<sup>134</sup>

U.S. objectives are further complicated by PKK ideology. A lone wolf, the group has historically distanced itself from other Kurdish parties in both Iraq and Syria. It has an uneasy relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani and has periodically clashed with his forces since 1995.<sup>135</sup> Today, each group has arrested the other's supporters.<sup>136</sup> And although the PKK's Qandil base is in territory controlled by Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the two sides have not always coexisted amicably. Indeed, Ocalan's brother and his forces were allegedly incarcerated by the PUK,<sup>137</sup> and intergroup clashes have occurred.<sup>138</sup>

The PYD has followed a similar path. Before 2011, the group did not cooperate with other Syrian Kurdish organizations even though the regime oppressed them all in equal measure. A U.S. diplomatic cable noted that the more militant PYD "has avoided cooperation with other Kurdish factions within Syria, viewing them as less committed to Kurdish independence."<sup>139</sup> In truth, however, the PYD shunned these factions because their acronyms lacked the letters PKK.

The PYD has clung to this position during the Syrian war. Whereas other Kurdish parties have joined the Syrian opposition, the PYD has not followed suit. And it refused to join the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), an umbrella organization comprising political parties under Barzani's aegis. The KNC and PYD eventually established the Kurdish Supreme Committee, but it soon broke down over mutual recriminations. Given the PKK-PYD proclivity to shun partners, any attempt to integrate the latter into a larger Syrian structure it cannot control, whether as an opposition council or a future state, is bound to fail.

## ■ Policy Recommendations

At times, Washington's Syria policy is driven by tactical opportunities rather than strategic considerations.

The battle for Kobane and the subsequent relationship with the PYD illustrate this reality. As late as October 15, 2014, Gen. John Allen, McGurk's predecessor as special envoy, rejected calling Kobane "a strategic target" even though Washington was increasingly pouring resources into the city.<sup>140</sup> McGurk admitted, "We never really focused on Kobani when we put the strategy together, and then Kobani became an opportunity for us."<sup>141</sup>

Washington has repeatedly articulated its anti-IS policy, including its Iraq component, for which it works in tandem with the central government.<sup>142</sup> But it has found the task much harder in Syria given the diverse groups operating on the ground and the lack of a state partner.<sup>143</sup> Washington must therefore clearly delineate its objectives—whether to degrade and destroy the Islamic State, topple the regime, or save the Syrian state from disintegration. As it stands, these objectives and Washington's current policies are sometimes mutually exclusive. Solely focusing on IS risks alienating the FSA groups and the local population needed to effectively fight the jihadist group. Likewise, arming FSA brigades to combat the regime does not further the goal of destroying IS. And working with the PYD risks replicating Washington's Iraq policy, described by McGurk and General Allen as "'functional federalism,' which is the devolution of power to the governors."<sup>144</sup> Such an approach weakens the central government by unleashing centripetal forces future governments may be unable to control.

Washington's expressed desire to respect Syria's territorial integrity rings hollow when no state remains to protect. And the regime will never fall now that Russia has entered the conflict, regardless of its claims to have withdrawn. Given that the Islamic State is the conflict's greatest threat to the U.S. homeland and its European allies, Washington's Syria policy must focus on uprooting this cancer from the region. This is both the most logical and most achievable goal given that all rebel groups agree the jihadist organization must be destroyed. To this end, the United States must increase support to the PYD, the only entity that has

consistently proven it can benefit from Washington's limited military involvement.

Needless to say, such a policy risks alienating Turkey. The escalation of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict may eventually put Washington in a bind, forcing it to choose between an ally that has repeatedly frustrated it in the IS campaign and a potential ally that has exceeded all expectations. On this count, Turkey has worked closely with Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, extremist organizations anathema to Washington. In particular, Ankara has facilitated Jabhat al-Nusra's decimation of U.S.-backed groups, such as Division 30 and the Hazm Movement. Despite IS's attacks in Turkey, the government has been reluctant to bomb the group. Washington's tolerance of Turkey's moves is often attributed to its vital geographic position. The Turkish border with Syria allows it to control the flow of U.S.-backed fighters and war materiel. Turkey hosts the Incirlik Air Base, which Washington believes is crucial to the anti-IS campaign. After Turkey allowed the United States to use the base in August 2015, McGurk noted, "That's a real game-changer. The flight from Incirlik Air Base to Syria is about 15 minutes. The flight from an aircraft carrier in the Gulf or from Bahrain to Syria is about three hours."<sup>145</sup> Colonel Warren elaborated that aircraft are "able to do more turns, quicker turnover. They're able to loiter longer."<sup>146</sup> In truth, however, the use of Incirlik merely eases what was a difficult, but not insurmountable, situation.

If the PYD can capture the approximately sixty-eight-mile-long and forty-mile-deep Manbij pocket, it will cut off IS from the outside world. But Kurdish control of these Arab areas will likely enhance the jihadist group's narrative that it is the defender of Sunni Arabs and thus enhance its support among locals. Such a move will also draw Turkey's ire by leaving the PYD in control of virtually its entire border with Syria. Ankara has repeatedly called this a redline that would require a response. And Turkey has proved historically that it will take the fight to the PKK beyond its borders. In 1995, it launched a ground campaign in northern

Iraq, and it has intensified airstrikes there since the peace process broke down last year.

Regarding President Erdogan's fears that the PKK will use PYD territory to attack Turkey, these have proven unfounded. But Turkey also worries that the YPG will move against Aleppo-based Turkmen, with whom Ankara shares ethnic links. Sultan Murad, one of the FSA groups attacked by the YPG, is composed of Turkmen. According to the commander of the Syrian Turkmen Fatih Sultan Mehmet Brigade, there are 500,000 Turkmen spread across 152 villages in the province of Aleppo.<sup>147</sup> Even if this is an exaggeration, Turkmen are still a large presence in Aleppo and protecting them can provide the pretext for Turkey to invade Syria. Ankara can also deem the PKK's presence in Syria a violation of 1998 Adana Agreement between the two countries.<sup>148</sup> This would allow Turkey "the right to exercise her inherent right of self-defense" and enter Syria, as it threatened to do before the agreement was signed. The Turkish parliament has consistently voted to provide the government a legal basis to attack PKK bases in Iraq and has recently sought to extend the mandate to Syria.<sup>149</sup> Erdogan demonstrated his willingness to act in his country's perceived interests when he ordered a military operation into Syria to transfer to Turkey the remains of the grandfather of the Ottoman Empire's founder.<sup>150</sup>

As of today, however, Turkey and the PYD have not reached the brink. This provides Washington an opening to nudge the two sides to reduce tensions and find common ground. Such options would include urging the PYD to refrain from sending weapons into Turkey, pledging to avoid allowing PKK fighters to enter Turkey from its territory, PYD cooperation with the Syrian political opposition, a more vocal PYD call for removing Assad, and renewed PYD ties with Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani. Given that the PYD is almost as isolated from the outside world as the Islamic State, it will eventually need to work with its neighbors. But such collaboration will only come in the framework of Turkey-PKK peace talks, which could become a U.S. priority.

Given this overall assessment, Washington should

expand its relationship with the Kurds from its current focus on largely military matters to the political track. Although PYD leader Salih Muslim has met with U.S. ambassadors since 2012, little tangible progress has resulted from such encounters. Both Muslim and his coleader Asya Abdullah have failed to secure U.S. visas. Affording them entry into the United States would allow them to explain the PYD's position to policymakers and the media. And Washington should welcome the PYD's participation in peace talks in Geneva rather than taking its cue from Ankara, which is hell-bent against such inclusion.

On the military level, Washington should directly provide the YPG with arms and training. The Sunni Arab SDF is too weak to conquer territory without the Kurdish group's backing. YPG commanders have lamented their lack of nonlethal military gear, such as night-vision goggles and secure communication equipment. Gas masks would protect fighters from IS's increased use of chemical weapons. Transport vehicles such as armored personal carriers, desired by the group, would likewise provide a boost. And Washington should supply more heavy weapons to the YPG, such as the Javelin missile, but not provide anti-aircraft weapons. As for the former, Washington could try to place restrictions on its use west of the Euphrates, but the YPG is unlikely to heed such calls wherever it operates, leading to possibly undesirable military escalation.

Stepped-up support for the PYD certainly has its pitfalls. Its cozy ties with the regime mean that the Kurds will never be part of a rebel effort to topple it. The Turks, already piqued with Washington's tepid dedication to this cause, will be further infuriated by a policy that both supports their chief adversary in the Syrian conflict and neglects their secondary one. It will

be difficult to reintegrate the Kurds into a Syrian state once the war ends. No doubt, Arab-Kurdish enmity will persist in Syrian politics for decades, much as it exists in Iraq. But this phenomenon reflects a larger Middle East crisis rather than simply a local one.

In the 1940s, "Why die for Danzig?" was a motto coined by a French socialist and adopted by politicians reluctant to enter a conflict far from their borders. The German enclave in Poland was a rallying point for Nazi irredentists. Today, Danzig is a completely Polish city, the drive for ethnic purity having been an outcome of World War II. The Middle East is witnessing a similar turn. The countries carved from the dying Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I are convulsing. From Lebanon to Iraq, Christians have fled and the Shiites and Sunnis have cleared out mixed towns, transforming them into bunker enclaves. Today Syria, with its myriad ethnic groups and religious sects, is the conflict's epicenter. If the Shiites are the stepchildren of the Arab world, then the Kurds are its orphans. The Kurds are trying to reclaim what was promised them by the postwar Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 and stripped away by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Nevertheless, the desire to retain Syria's territorial integrity is strong in a region where the nation-state barely exists. Whether Syria becomes the first Arab country to collapse or merely limits itself to population transfers remains to be seen.

A closer relationship with the PYD would give Washington some leverage over the group. The PYD will never cut ties with the PKK, but it might be persuaded to reduce tensions with Turkey and respect Ankara's interests. Such an outcome can only help refocus all the parties' efforts toward their common goal of defeating the Islamic State.

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