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LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
www.washingtoninstitute.org

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury is a registered trade mark of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2021

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 9780755643066
PB: 9780755643059
ePDF: 9780755643028
ePub: 9780755643042

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound in Great Britain

For Henry

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Acknowledgments

The authors of this primary research on the U.S.-SDF partnership owe their gratitude and thanks to every journalist, fixer, SDF official, coalition military official, diplomat, researcher, foreign volunteer, and others who contributed to the book. Many contributed on condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topics covered, but they believed that a fair and comprehensive study on this issue was reward enough.

We especially owe thanks to serving and former U.S. and EU diplomats, military officials from the U.S.-led coalition, U.S. Special Operations Command, and the U.S. State Department for their off-the-record assistance with this study.

Special thanks are due to researcher Selah Mislim, analyst Dr. Nasr Mansour, commander Amed, senior Manbij Military Council commander Mustafa Manbij, SDF official and author of several books Polat Can, SDF media official Siyamend, SDF spokesperson Kino Gabriel, Army of Revolutionaries commander Ahmad Sultan, SDF senior official Cemil Mazlum, Manbij Military Council spokesperson Shervan Darwish, Manbij Military Council head Abu Adel, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi (Kobani), SDF Press Centre head Mustafa Bali, journalist Sores Xelil, researcher Nawaf Xelil, journalist Ahmet Hemo, journalist Sipan Xelil, Fabrice Balanche, Alex Almeida, Nicholas Heras, researcher Mohammad Ibrahim, former volunteers Jim Matthews and Macer Gifford, and others who cannot be named.

The research was also not possible without the assistance of journalists and fixers working on northeast Syria who played a major role in the outside understanding of the SDF. This includes Azad Evdiki, Barzan Isso, Mohammed Ali, Hoshang Hassan, Heybar Othman, Redwan Bezar, Hisham Arafat, Kamiran Saadoun, Ekrem Salih, Mutlu

Civiroglu, Mohammed Hassan, Perwer Ali, and many others. The research was also aided by the Rojava Information Centre, at the time headed by Thomas McClure, and the Washington Kurdish Institute, which graciously helped not only the authors but also media and other institutes with research.

The study would not have been possible without the help and permissions of the SDF Media Centre, headed by Mustafa Bali, and the help of SDF spokesperson Kino Gabriel. The Kurdistan Regional Government also should be thanked for its permissions to cross the border into northern Syria from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We would additionally like to thank OIR spokesperson Col. Wayne Marotto and former OIR spokesperson Col. Myles Caggins III for their help and for arranging periods of embedding with U.S. forces in northern Syria.

Final thanks are given to Michael Eisenstadt, the head of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute, and the many Institute fellows whose rigorous peer reviewing made this a better study.

Finally, Michael Knights would like to thank Jill and Jay Bernstein, sponsors of his Washington Institute fellowship, along with the Institute's executive director, Robert Satloff, and director of research, Patrick Clawson.

Acronyms

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North East Syria
AK	Avtomat Kalashnikova (Kalashnikov's assault rifle)
ASV	armored security vehicle
ATAK	Android Team Awareness Kit
ATGM	antitank guided missile
CJIATF-S	Combined Joint Interagency Task Force–Syria
CJSOTF	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force
CJSOTF-S	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Syria
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve
CTEF	Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund
CTG	Counter-Terrorism Group
DAA	Democratic Autonomous Area
ESSA	East Syria Security Area
FLOT	forward line of own troops
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FST	forward surgical team
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GLOC	ground lines of communication
HAT	Hezen Anti Teror (Anti-Terrorism Group)
HPC	Hezen Parastina Civaki (Civil Defense Group)
HPX	Self-Defense Forces
IED	improvised explosive device
InSF	Internal Security Forces
IS	Islamic State
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JaT	Jaish al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries)
JOC	Joint Operations Command
JOC-S	Joint Operations Center–Syria

KCK	Group of Communities in Kurdistan
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDP-S	Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRV	Khabur River Valley
LCF	Lafarge Cement Factory
MC	military council
MERV	Mid-Euphrates River Valley
MICLIC	mine clearing line charge
MMC	Manbij Military Council
MRAP	mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PKM	Pulemyot Kalashnikova (Kalashnikov's machine gun)
PRISF	Provincial Internal Security Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
QSD	See SDF
RISF	Raqqa Internal Security Force
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
SAC	Syrian Arab Coalition
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
STEF	Syrian Train and Equip Fund
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
VSO	vetted Syrian opposition
YAT	Yekineyen Anti Teror (Anti-Terror Unit)
YBS	Yekineyen Berxwedana Sengale (Sinjar Resistance Units)
YDL	Military Discipline Units

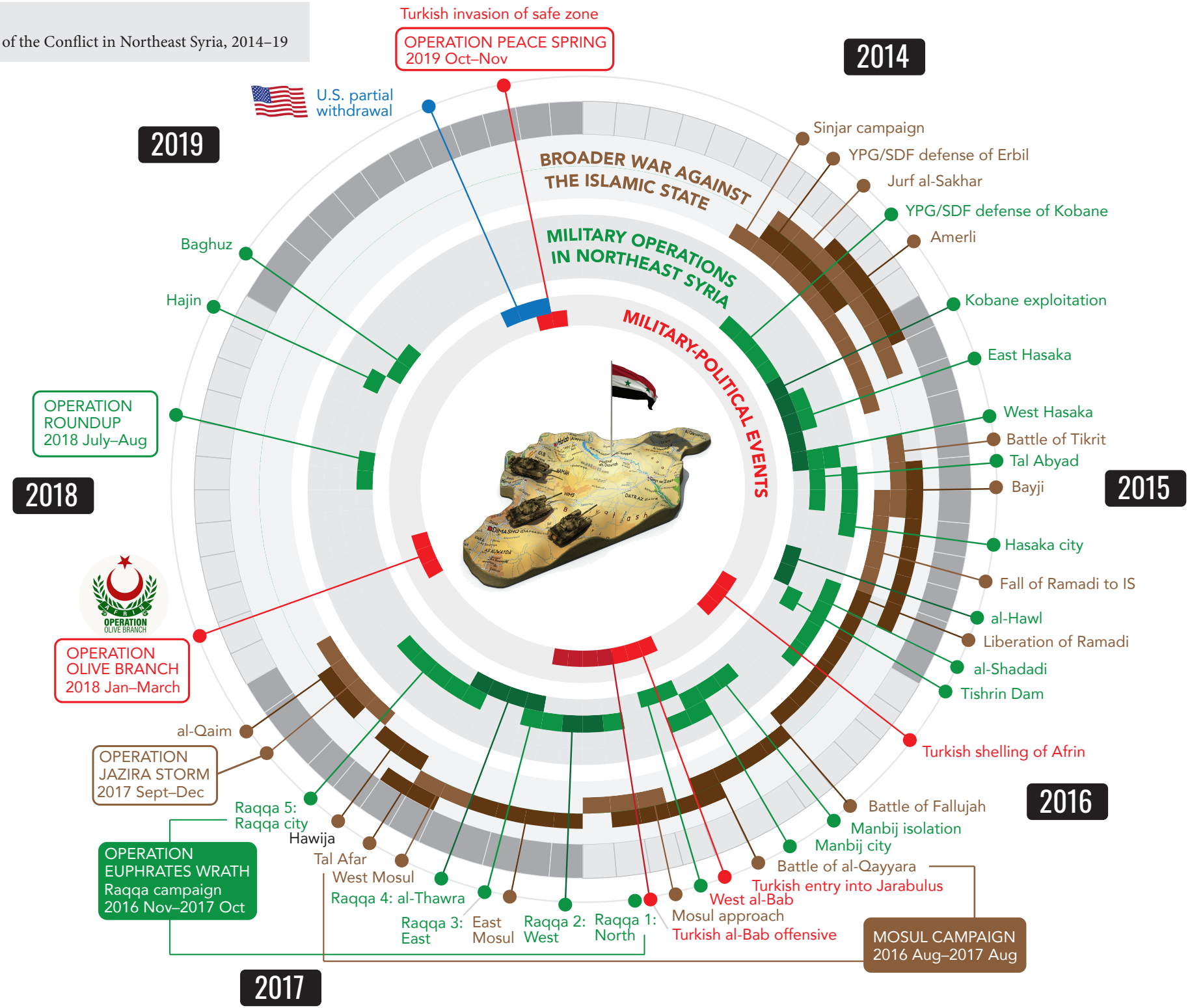
YPG	Yekineyen Parastina Gel (People's Defense Units)
YPJ	Yekineyen Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)
YXG	Yekineyen Xweparastina Gel (People's Self-Defense Units)

Summary of Findings

When the U.S. military fights "by, with, and through" a partner force, this refers to "operations [that] are led *by* our partners, state or nonstate, *with* enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and *through* U.S. authorities and partner agreements."[1] Gen. Joseph Votel, U.S. Central Command (Ret.), has termed "by, with, and through" an "operational approach" that is uniquely tailored to a given conflict, adding that "there isn't a one-size-fits-all model."[2] As Col. J. Patrick Work, U.S. Army, another practitioner of "by, with, and through," noted, the basic thrust of the approach is to help create "a viable host nation partner who owns the fight and the victories."[3] The latter point is important, underlining the key trick of "by, with, and through," which, in theory, involves attaining a degree of control over a partner force and its operations but with reduced risks and costs to the United States, and with lessened U.S. responsibilities in the aftermath of the conflict. This conundrum is what Colonel Work characterized as a fascinating quest for influence without authority.[4]

Much of the discussion of "by, with, and through" in the U.S. security sector followed the commencement in 2014 of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the campaign to defeat the Islamic State (aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and Daesh, its Arabic acronym). Particular interest has focused on the "by, with, and through" campaign in northeast Syria, which saw very limited U.S. forces—ranging from no in-country presence to a maximum of fifteen hundred U.S. personnel—work with a capable partner force, the Kurdish-led Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG, or People's Defense Units), and later the more

Fig. A.1
Chronology of the Conflict in Northeast Syria, 2014–19

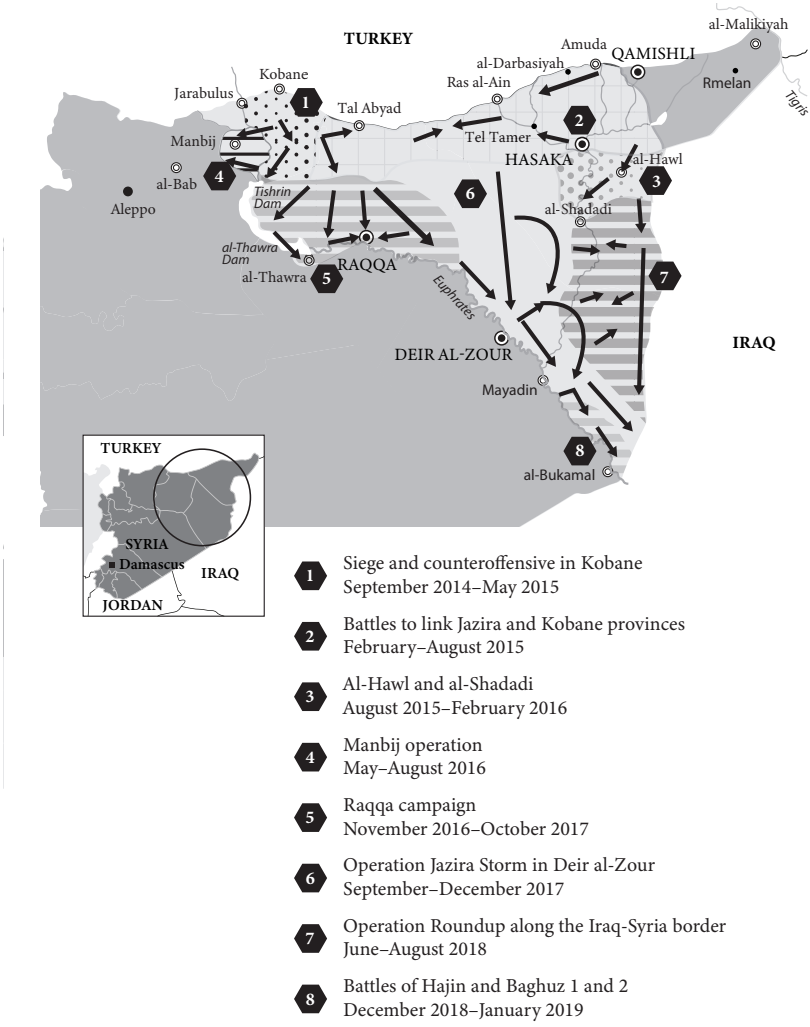


ethnically representative Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This study, which relies heavily on interviews, looks closely at the U.S.-YPG/SDF relationship, ultimately seeking to generate an accurate image of the good, the bad, the inspiring, and the ugly aspects of this military and stabilization partnership.

Studying America's "By, With, and Through" Military Campaign in Northeast Syria

This study adopts a chronological, historical review methodology to uncover the realities of the U.S.-YPG/SDF partnership. This method allows the story to be told as it was experienced, without the influence of hindsight, and to explore the relationship as it evolved. Chapter 1 discusses the basic components of the SDF. Chapter 2 looks at the fighting forces that existed in northeast Syria in 2014, when the United States realized the need for military partners in the area. Chapter 2 also includes an important discussion of the proven role that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) played in galvanizing and reinforcing the mobilization of the Syrian Kurdish military. Next, the chapter describes the first battle jointly fought by the YPG with U.S. support: the epic defense and counteroffensive at Kobane. The chapter paints a clear picture of the first year of U.S. support, which was provided with no U.S. boots on the ground and very little in the way of materiel. Chapter 3 examines how the United States amplified its support, putting a small initial force of five hundred personnel on the ground to bolster the development of the SDF and to close the foreign fighter pipeline into Syria and Iraq through capture of the Manbij area. The chapter further describes how the U.S. military got its first up-close look at the YPG and the SDF, and also how the United States accepted risk in its strategic relations with Turkey in an effort to reap operational benefits in Syria.

Fig. A.2 Chronology of YPG/SDF Campaign, September 2014–January 2019



Chapter 4 tells the story of the SDF at full conventional military power—the campaign to liberate Raqqa, the "capital" of the Islamic State (IS) inside Syria. This chapter includes a discussion on the accelerated provision of U.S. materiel and training, as well as on that support's risk of

escalating tensions with Turkey. The episode also spotlights how vetting of U.S. partners and distribution of U.S. materiel were undertaken. In chapter 5, the narrative shifts to the complex and slower campaign to seize the IS heartland of Deir al-Zour governorate. The chapter focuses on the difficulties inherent in conducting operations with a Kurdish-led force in an almost exclusively Arab province. It concludes with a discussion of the final battles that liberated the last IS-held cities, Hajin and Baghuz. Chapter 6 extends this analysis to the postconflict stabilization challenges that faced the U.S.-YPG/SDF team, and to the growing disruption caused by Turkish incursions into Kurdish-populated parts of Syria in 2018 and 2019. The final chapter concludes with a thematic analysis of the key questions, controversies, and findings of the U.S. "by, with, and through" campaign in northeast Syria.

The story of the U.S.-YPG/SDF military and political partnership is a controversial one. To some, the war is a shining example of an economy-of-force effort that minimized U.S. casualties, wrested control of northeast Syria away from the Islamic State, and even improved the political trajectory of the YPG and of northeast Syria in general. To others, the war is a cautionary tale of a U.S. military that was hoodwinked by a charismatic and capable military partner, with Washington deliberately averting its eyes from the strategic, political, and moral costs of the partnership. This study aimed to adopt a neutral, data-led stance and to follow the facts wherever they led.

The research used to generate this insight included document review and a major interview program. The large body of reporting on the Syrian war by the media and by U.S. congressional oversight committees provided a baseline of data. The authors then undertook a series of interviews in Syria and in the United States. During visits to Syria, approximately fifty interviews were conducted with YPG and SDF military officers and local officials, including Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Christians, and Turkmens. In the United States, around fifty interviews were conducted with senior U.S. officials and military officers who led

Map A.1 Syria

the policymaking for the "by, with, and through" campaign, and also with U.S. Special Forces personnel who undertook the effort on the ground (and who observed the YPG/SDF at close range). All interviews were conducted off the record in an effort to encourage frank discussion of sensitive and emotive issues. A key system was used to endnote the interviews to allow The Washington Institute senior leadership to understand the provenance of quotes.

The two authors of this study had a healthy and lively internal debate on sourcing, objectivity, and the need to dig deeper into the narratives of participants to push them on uncomfortable issues. The Washington Institute's own internal peer review process was rigorous and animated,

resulting in a better paper all around. In addition to the specific findings of the study, which are summarized subsequently, this research effort revealed that the war in northeast Syria is not a well-understood phenomenon. Most observers seem to believe they have a clear picture of the war but in reality have a rather cartoonish view—one that has been colored by either advocates of the U.S.-YPG/SDF relationship or its detractors.

To give an example, the effect on U.S.-Turkish relations of the partnership with the YPG/SDF is not simple: by 2015, the relationship had been trending negative for many reasons, and the United States did much to allay Turkish concerns. Likewise, the YPG/SDF had received very little U.S. materiel, and almost all of the groups' U.S. intelligence and air support could be switched off in a moment, and often was. This study found that the image of Kurdish domination of the YPG/SDF benefited from deeper investigation, ultimately revealing the value that Arab forces had gained from Kurdish leadership and the ways that inclusivity in governance had evolved over time. Most starkly, the investigation of the PKK's function in the YPG/SDF was a fascinating quest; this theme runs through every section of the paper, the investigation having uncovered a changing and arguably diminishing role as a result of U.S. partnership and the rise of a new generation of Syrian nationalist leaders.

Analytic Findings

The analytic findings of this study are split into two main sets. The first set comprises findings related to the strategic and moral cost-benefit of the "by, with, and through" approach in northeast Syria. The second set includes reflections and lessons on the conduct of partner force operations from experiences of fighting alongside the YPG and later the SDF.

The Strategic Cost-Benefit of Working with the YPG/SDF

There is no doubt that the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort in northeast Syria succeeded as an economy-of-force effort that marked a clear contrast to the costly commitments in Afghanistan since 2001 and in Iraq in 2003–11. The U.S. footprint in northeast Syria in 2016–19, the most intense years of the fighting in that part of Syria, ranged from 500 to 1,500 troops, or between 10 and 30 percent of the simultaneous footprint in Iraq, which peaked at 5,275 troops in 2019.[5] U.S. train-and-equip funding in Syria totaled $2.63 billion in fiscal years 2017 through 2021, versus $7.21 billion in Iraq during the same period, and compared to a whopping $406 billion in a similar five-year slice of the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2007–11. The U.S. commitment might have been even more economical if Washington had pressed its allies more successfully to contribute forces in Syria. Fighting "by, with, and through" a YPG-led local force, the United States closed the Turkish border to foreign fighters and liberated all IS territorial holdings in northeast Syria, including the recapture of the so-called caliphate's original capital at Raqqa. Over a fifty-four-month period, seven U.S. combatants were killed in action.[6]

Could these economies have been made another way? Was there a real alternative to the YPG/SDF? The first option was the direct employment of U.S. ground forces, thereby committing a U.S. division to direct combat operations. This option might have accelerated the pace of operations and reduced some costs (by shortening the intervention), but it was politically unpalatable to both the Obama and Trump administrations. A second alternative—further development of the vetted Syrian opposition (VSO) on northwest Syria's Marea Line—was exhausted at great length and expense, but ultimately failed. A third and final option—reliance on the Turkish military and allied militias—was deemed unlikely to work and might have even sparked new fighting with Syria's Kurds. Looking at Turkey's successful operations and

proxy wars in Afrin, Idlib, Libya, northeast Syria, northern Iraq, and Azerbaijan in 2019–20, it is possible that the Turkish option was not given enough weight. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, however, and the first Turkish attempt to operate in Syria—Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016—seemed to show that the Turkish military could not operate confidently and quickly against the Islamic State. Furthermore, Turkish objectives and partner forces were arguably not any more compatible with U.S. interests or values than the YPG/SDF.

More generally, critics of the U.S. partnership with the YPG/SDF have claimed that this approach cost the United States a great deal in terms of weakening ties to a longstanding NATO ally, Turkey. The heart of this critique is that less American blood and treasure may be expended in "by, with, and through" campaigns, but such efforts are not necessarily politically "cheap." Geostrategically and politically, U.S. liability for outcomes is not reduced in "by, with, and through" operations. However, it does not necessarily follow that the U.S.-YPG/SDF relationship is the primary reason for a breakdown in U.S.-Turkish relations. What observers often overlook is that the U.S.-Turkish relationship was already strained and that Turkey had been singularly unhelpful in the fight against the Islamic State. Turkey was also itself transitioning from engaging the Syrian Kurds in 2014 to fighting them by 2016.

The United States chose to seek forgiveness—not permission—from Turkey, but Washington also worked hard to mitigate Turkish concerns. Though this study identifies missteps in U.S. treatment of the YPG/SDF issue, in general the United States was energetic and successful in limiting tactical risks posed by U.S.-YPG cooperation and in dissuading the YPG from threatening Turkey. The United States probably did miss an opportunity to even more actively press the YPG to distance itself from the PKK, and also to press Turkey harder to recognize and reward real efforts to detach from PKK influence. The case of the "by, with, and through" campaign in northeast Syria thus underlines the importance of investing more U.S. diplomatic effort in reducing tension between

U.S. partners. The United States should also draw the lesson that bringing in more support from partner nations, such as European forces, could have added stability to the CJTF presence and to Turkish-CJTF relations, thereby making the mission less vulnerable to unilateral U.S. decisions and improving diplomatic weight with Turkey.

A related criticism of the "by, with, and through" effort in northeast Syria is that it was a purely tactical or operational approach not linked to a broader strategy. Such a critique perhaps sets an unrealistically high bar for intervention, which is not a classroom exercise but rather a deeply chaotic enterprise. If there is justifiable anger about the pursuit of tactical military gains without full consideration of strategic costs, the problem is not principally the "by, with, and through" approach: the problem is the lack of a cohesive U.S. country strategy for Syria, or the lack of a regional and global strategy toward Iranian, Russian, and Turkish actions. The U.S. military will single-mindedly execute the mission it is given: its job is not to make up missions of its own.

The Moral Hazards of "By, With, and Through"

Critics of the U.S. "by, with, and through" relationship with the YPG/SDF view the partner force not only as politically and morally problematic, but also as lacking in legitimacy because of its predominantly Kurdish leadership and apparent unwillingness to share power with non-YPG groups. Most importantly, Washington is accused of erring by selecting a partner force that was too close to a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, the PKK.[7] Clearly, U.S. officials and military officers knew that key members of the YPG and later the SDF had fought in the PKK against Turkey. Vetting procedures and the distribution of U.S. military aid were navigated in creative ways to reflect the reality that the YPG—including some PKK members—was the indispensable military core of the YPG/SDF partner forces.

For U.S. officials, what mattered most was that the PKK-origin YPG

leaders appeared to have stopped undertaking anti-Turkish operations, which fits a U.S historical pattern of cooperating with former terrorists if they detach from militancy and if Washington's objectives seem to require such cooperation. The United States has even worked with militants with American blood on their hands—often from events just weeks or months before, as in the case of the Iraqi *sahwa* (awakening).[8] Washington has cooperated with terrorists who have attacked close partners, such as Israel[9] or Britain,[10] albeit largely when those partners themselves sought accommodation and as part of peace overtures. Nonetheless, the U.S.-YPG partnership is a rather unique case of Washington pressing ahead with a partner force against the active opposition of a NATO ally.

In fairness, U.S. interlocutors did Turkey a good service by ensuring that the YPG would not directly mount cross-border attacks on Turkey or support PKK operations elsewhere—a pledge that this study finds the YPG largely honored. From the outset of U.S. involvement, Turkey was allowed to vet detailed lists of U.S. personnel and materiel being sent into northeast Syria.[11] U.S. provision of armaments was remarkably stingy, with the heaviest weapons provided to the SDF being SPG-9 recoilless rifles, a Vietnam War–era weapon. The Turkish-backed VSO achieved less, got far more advanced arms (including antitank guided missiles), and diverted much more U.S. materiel to Jabhat al-Nusra, other northwest Syrian jihadist groups, and even the YPG.[12]

Equally interesting, the U.S. partnership seems to have altered the YPG's political trajectory, freezing the PKK's rising influence as a new, stronger military partner that had stepped in to help the people of northeast Syria. A new generation of younger Syrian Kurdish fighters matured with the United States, not the PKK, as their main military partner. U.S. pressure and the international spotlight also made it difficult for the PKK to maintain the cultlike conditions found in its camps in the Qandil.[13] This study thus documents the many large and small ways in which the YPG/SDF began to diverge from PKK practices and preferences.

A separate line of criticism of the U.S.-YPG/SDF relationship asserts that the Kurdish-led YPG failed to meet U.S. standards in the fields of human rights, law of armed conflict, child soldiers, resettlement, and inclusivity in postconflict governance. This study finds that the United States explicitly and implicitly brought pressure on its partner force to improve its ethical standards. Although the YPG did not undertake widespread ethnic cleansing, as claimed by Turkey and other anti-YPG commentators, it excluded rival Kurdish and Arab factions and practiced "political or revolutionary cleansing."[14] But the issue of inclusivity is complex and should not be characterized in a "pass/fail" manner. It is also an ongoing process, not a static event, and wartime conditions were the starting point for inclusive governance in northeast Syria, not the end. The oversimplified narrative of a Kurdish-*only*—as opposed to Kurdish-*led*—SDF proved irresistible to many observers of the conflict; in reality, however, the YPG-led SDF did evolve on issues of inclusivity and was welcomed by many local Arab factions for its organizational capacity and outsider status, which placed the group in an umpiring role between other local groups.

Regardless of one's alignment with the aforementioned critiques, the case study of the "by, with, and through" campaign in northeast Syria surely indicates that the United States is morally responsible for the actions of its partners. Reflecting on Colonel Work's description of "by, with, and through" as the fascinating quest for influence without authority,[15] one clearly sees that "by, with, and through" is not a formula for influence without moral or political responsibility.

Trust and Military Culture as Cornerstones of a "By, With, and Through" Effort

U.S. operations in northeast Syria are rich in lessons about how close relations are built and maintained with a partner force. From the outset, the U.S. Special Operations community trusted the Syrian

Kurds, in part because of their close connection to Iraqi Kurdish fighters and the introductions made by those Iraqi Kurds. The linchpin of this trust—of Iraqi Kurds and of the YPG—is often described by participants as *culture*, meaning the YPG *warrior* culture, or, at least, the U.S. perception of it. Members of the YPG were viewed as brave and tough but not cruel, focused on reducing civilian casualties and providing services and governance to Arabs, Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds alike. On the role of women, the YPG was found by Washington to be extraordinarily progressive, unlike the Arab, Afghan, and Pakistani partners the United States had previously worked with. Two other recurring themes—discipline and structure—came along with the YPG's ideological base and made the force seem relatively uncorrupt, at least compared to environments such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa.

This respect for the YPG was built from the top down, starting with Mazloum Kobani Abdi, the SDF commander and a YPG veteran who learned his trade in the PKK.[16] Engagement of key leaders was undoubtedly successful in the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort in northeast Syria. Indeed, Washington rotated the same Tier 1 special operators through northeast Syria year after year to build strong personal relations, institutional memory, and contact networks.[17] The primary U.S. interlocutors with Mazloum believe that they have had, from the outset until today, a very candid relationship with Mazloum, in which U.S. redlines were well understood and largely respected.

Despite the old saying in special operations that you cannot fall in love with your proxy force, it is probably fairer to say that almost everyone does—and that doing so is partly necessary for "by, with, and through" to work. This paper finds that the United States relied so heavily on Mazloum that he became imbued with a pivotal political role—in essence, that of a military governor—that was not originally intended. For the Syrian Kurds, who displayed loyalty and affection for individual Americans, a transactional calculation remained at the heart

of the relationship. There was also a wariness of U.S. abandonment, which proved to be partially justified.

What the untidy October 2019 drawdown of U.S. forces showed is that the ragged end of each "by, with, and through" mission deserves more attention than it often gets. If "by, with, and through" is time-sensitive, transactional, and dependent on a high degree of mutual trust, how should such a mission transition toward its conclusion? Practitioners of "by, with, and through" typically note that future efforts should more carefully consider how the relationship will evolve once the primary mission is undertaken. Specifically, efforts should consider how the engagement will off-ramp without doing harm to either the new partner force or, importantly, U.S. credibility with future partner forces. It is worth asking how the case of U.S.-SDF relations in northeast Syria will be viewed by the next prospective partner force that Washington wants to work with.

Avoiding the Urge to Transform Partner Forces

The SDF case study exemplifies what Mick Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich call the "tactical advantage" model, in which the United States quickly supplements an already capable partner with just enough additional capability so that they can defeat the shared adversary.[18] (Mulroy and Oehlerich contrast this with the more expensive and slower "mirror image" model, whereby Washington seeks to exert more lasting impact on military organization and culture by amassing new conventional armed forces according to a U.S. military template.[19]) The "tactical advantage" model discussed by Mulroy and Oehlerich describes security assistance that does not necessarily transform the partner force in any lasting way. Adopting this wise approach was a conscious decision by the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF), which was the ideal agency to execute a thrifty "by, with, and through" campaign led by a recurring cast of Tier 1 U.S. special operators.[20]

This U.S. approach was pragmatic, because the YPG had a strong and resistant military culture and, rightly or wrongly, felt it had little to learn from Americans about warrior culture and light infantry fighting. The YPG did not want to become a conventional army, so the United States did not try to change the flexible and loose tactical organization favored by the YPG. In fact, U.S. special operators quickly learned to tailor their support to the YPG and SDF's distinctive style. The SDF did not fire *and* maneuver: at best, it fired *then* maneuvered, but it often just maneuvered without supporting fires.[21] However, in a war where getting U.S. partners (e.g., the Iraqi military, Syrian VSO) to maneuver at all was often impossible, the willingness of the SDF to close with the enemy was a refreshing change. Wisely, the United States "took the win" and did not try to change its partner too dramatically.

If the United States changed YPG and SDF tactics in any way, that change was unintentional, in terms of fostering a reliance on U.S.-delivered firepower. The evolution of joint fires in support of the YPG and SDF was an undoubted success story with regard to upping the precise firepower available to even the lowest echelons of the SDF. The first year of U.S. support—when no U.S. troops were in Syria—demonstrated that U.S. joint fires could support a partner force remotely. The relationship was synergistic: the YPG/SDF ground forces prompted Islamic State tactical forces to move, reveal themselves, and demonstrate military signatures, and thus to trigger U.S. strikes in accordance with its rules of engagement. The (temporary) availability of overwhelming firepower quickly changed the YPG's fighting style, tempting the group to (temporarily) become more dependent on firepower, and thus more willing to cause material damage to spare friendly losses.

This model of security cooperation—where little materiel or training is provided, and most assistance comes from intelligence and airpower—can leave a partner remarkably unchanged. Lacking U.S. supporting fires, the YPG was not effective against Turkish attacks

in Afrin, Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye, as it is known in Kurdish), and Tal Abyad. For those concerned that U.S. assistance would boost PKK and YPG capabilities to fight Turkey, these battles should be reassuring. The formula of drip-feeding perishable U.S. intelligence and firepower was, in fact, extremely effective at limiting the risk of overdeveloping the YPG and SDF partner force in a way that could threaten Turkey.

Practical Lessons of "By, With, and Through"

The YPG/SDF case study would appear to provide powerful vindication to Mulroy and Oehlerich's "tactical advantage" model of making local forces "good enough" to defeat shared adversaries. But how transferable, or how unique, was the "by, with, and through" model used in Syria? This study finds that the YPG is one of a small number of highly effective partner forces that the United States occasionally encounters, others being Afghanistan's Northern Alliance and some Iraqi Kurdish forces. (America's adversaries such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have arguably developed Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis in a similar manner.) However, such high-quality partner forces are rare. "By, with, and through" works only when the United States finds a partner with the potential to outperform the shared adversary that both the United States and its partner are attacking. If the adversary is weak, then the partner force does not need to be as good as the YPG/SDF, which was faced by a highly effective opponent (the Islamic State) and by complex operational tasks. There is no absolute standard: the partner force must be relatively capable compared to the enemy and based on the requirements of the mission.

Other partner characteristics are arguably absolute. As noted, trust between the United States and its partner forces is a sine qua non. If U.S. advisors are on the ground, their physical safety must be a priority for the partner force. The partner force must be trusted to distribute and use the materiel and money in the manner Washington dictates,

and to observe U.S. end-user requirements. The partner force must also be trusted to try, to the greatest practicable extent, to observe the laws of armed conflict, to minimize civilian harm, and to be inclusive in postconflict governance. Again, trust is particularly important because any major "by, with, and through" approach will include an aspect of "subcontracting" to the primary partner via "train the trainer" initiatives and creation of indigenous advisor elements capable of accompanying forces to the forward edge of battle. Partner forces in "by, with, and through" campaigns must check as many of these boxes as possible, but should not be expected to check them all immediately. Partner forces should, however, be expected to err frequently, as U.S. forces sometimes do. A baseline level of trust must be available from the start, and it should deepen over time.

Closing Thoughts

What does the YPG/SDF case suggest about the aforementioned quest for influence without authority, as well as about the prospect of a "by, with, and through" campaign that leaves partner forces with primary ownership of or responsibility for political outcomes? This study concludes that the United States had both more control than many observers suspect, and more ownership and responsibility. Indeed, this study finds that the United States maintained quite a high level of control of the YPG/SDF partner forces through explicit instruction, implicit example, and inferred expectations. Washington should not underestimate how much control it can exert over the operations and conduct of partner forces, and must strive to actively shape their ethical practices. Indeed, Washington cannot avoid a significant measure of responsibility for political, moral, and strategic outcomes that result from partner force operations. In that regard, the United States performed quite well in northeast Syria.

The United States should also understand that "by, with, and through" operations will often be just as "sticky" as larger interventions, drawing the country into deep and rich relations with local partner forces. Even when initial shared objectives are met, detaching from such partners often proves difficult because of the personal relationships, perceived responsibilities, and strategic opportunities that are created. Thus, as new "by, with, and through" relationships are considered, the United States should be realistic about how temporary or reversible they really are.

The end of each "by, with, and through" relationship is, in fact, the first act of the next partnership, showing other potential partner forces what kind of relationship is on offer if they were to align with the United States. In northeast Syria, Washington did not do so well in this regard, and lessons should be drawn from its erratic strategic policymaking in 2018 and 2019. The end of each operation should also be the beginning of a new phase of planned U.S. engagement. The "by, with, and through" operational approach does not end wars: it just ends U.S. military involvement in them, and perhaps only temporarily if conflicts keep smoldering. To give an example, ensuring the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Syria is a more complex and long-lasting endeavor—one requiring that the remaining elements of "by, with, and through" security assistance be woven into a cohesive country, regional, and global strategic framework that considers Syria, Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China. The United States must recognize that although its military presence in a conflict zone does not always change the environment or decisively negate risks to stability, U.S. withdrawal is often a transformative event that throws the kaleidoscope back into flux. Far from being the finishing touch, the ramping-down or transformation of each military partnership is one of its most critical moments; thus, it should be prepared for and gamed out well in advance, as much as or more than any other facet of the relationship.

Notes

1 See Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40. Italics in the original.

2 "An Interview with Joseph L. Votel," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 34.

3 J. Patrick Work, "Fighting the Islamic State By, With and Through: How Mattered as Much as What," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 56.

4 Work, "Fighting the Islamic State," 57.

5 As will be discussed later, the United States bore an especially disproportionate amount of the burden in Syria; this is attributable to the far lower participation rate of coalition partners in Syria than in Iraq.

6 Authors' interview with U.S. official 38: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. Four were killed in a single rear-area terrorist attack, and three were killed in movements near the forward line of own troops (FLOT).

7 The PKK has been a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997. "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/.

8 Nick Hopkins, "Inside Iraq: 'We Had to Deal with People Who Had Blood on their Hands,'" *Guardian* (U.S. edition), July 16, 2012.

9 That is, with Yasser Arafat. See Mark Matthews, "U.S. Suspects Arafat Knew of Weapons," *Baltimore Sun*, January 9, 2002.

10 Douglas Jehl, "Clinton to Permit Fund-Raising in the U.S. by Top I.R.A. Figure," *Washington Post*, March 10, 1995.

11 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Gutman uses this phrase in Meredith Tax and Roy Gutman, "The Syrian Kurds and Allegations of War Crimes," *Nation*,

February 21, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-syrian-kurds-and-allegations-of-war-crimes/.

15 Work, "Fighting the Islamic State," 57.

16 Other YPG commanders also left very positive impressions on U.S. commanders—notably, Newroz Ahmed, Rojda Felat, Ciya Kobani, Murad (as he is known), and others. Over the past nineteen years, the authors have interviewed many U.S. officers on their impressions of Afghan and Arab commanders: U.S. views of YPG leaders are far less equivocal and grudging than in other theaters of the global war on terror. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

17 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

18 Mick Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich, "A Tale of Two Partners: Comparing Two Approaches for Partner Force Operations," Middle East Institute, January 29, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/tale-two-partners-comparing-two-approaches-partner-force-operations.

19 Mulroy and Oehlerich, "Tale of Two Partners."

20 The war in northeast Syria fell wholly under the CJSOTF, and this shaped how the United States undertook "by, with and through." It was a thrifty operation—with fewer economies of scale than Iraq but still cheap overall, and with far fewer U.S. personnel. There was no U.S. embassy to perform supporting actions (including effective Leahy vetting) and no large staff to make expansive plans to transform the Syrian fighters into a U.S.-style military.

21 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

1

Building Blocks of the SDF

The fighting group that would eventually become the Syrian Democratic Forces grew from the kernel of small local defense forces in the early years of the Syrian civil war, with the majority of this initial cadre drawn from the Syrian Kurdish community.

Genesis of a Syrian Kurdish Military Force

Syria's Kurds make up only an estimated 10 percent of the Syrian population and thus were a persecuted minority.[1] The Syrian Baath regime and its predecessors repressed the Kurdish cultural identity and language; arrested many Kurdish politicians; revoked the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds, leaving them in Syria but stateless and disadvantaged in terms of property rights and education; and settled Arabs in Kurdish areas on the Turkish border to create a so-called Arab Belt.[2]

Unlike Iranian, Turkish, and Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds initially did not have an armed insurgency against the Syrian state, as the open plains of Syrian Kurdish areas were not favorable for armed resistance.[3] According to a Kurdish proverb, "The Kurds have no friends but the mountains," reflecting their frequent experience of betrayal by external allies.[4] But the Syrian Kurds did not even have mountains. Therefore, the idea of a Syrian Kurdish fighting force was initially dismissed by local Kurdish politicians, with one YPG official recalling that "politicians

in Aleppo, Afrin, Kobane...would laugh at us. They told us, 'We don't have weapons and we don't have a mountain.'"[5]

During the 1920s, Kurdish fighters and intellectuals fled to Syria from a suppressed Kurdish uprising in Turkey. They did not organize themselves in Syria to fight against the Syrian state, however, focusing more on Turkey.[6] The first Kurdish party, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S), was established in 1957, inspired by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq.[7] Moreover, during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the early 1980s, the Baath regime enlisted Kurds to fight against the Brotherhood.[8] According to Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Baath regime's competition with neighboring Iraq and Turkey led Damascus to encourage Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish parties "to talk to Syria's Kurds and dissuade them from making any national claims in Syria."[9]

As a result, Syrian Kurds who wanted to fight for pan-Kurdish unity joined the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga of Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the 1960s and 1970s, and later Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which was established in Damascus in 1975.[10] In the 1980s and 1990s, Damascus also provided a safe haven to the Kurdistan Workers Party and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, as a lever over Ankara in riparian and territorial disputes.[11] Thus, the PKK recruited many Syrian Kurds for its fight against the Turkish state:[12] According to Haytham Manna, a biographer of Kurdish political movements:

> A large number of the party's activists and Kurdish students of Damascus University and Aleppo University trained since the early nineties in PKK camps in the [Beqa] region, and a substantial number of them later joined the fighters in the Qandil Mountains.[13] [In the Qandil], many of them assumed leadership positions within both the PKK and the KCK [Group of Communities in Kurdistan].[14]

The attention of the Syrian Kurdish fighting cadres was drawn back home by the Syrian Kurds' short-lived revolt against the Bashar al-Assad regime in March 2004.[15] Against the backdrop of the formation of the Syrian Kurdish Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD, or Democratic Union Party) in 2003, the regime change in Iraq, and the strengthening of the Iraqi Kurdish quasi state, the Kurdish Syrian uprising started on March 12, 2004, when clashes erupted between Kurds and Arabs at the Qamishli soccer stadium during a match played by a team from Deir al-Zour and a local Kurdish team. The Arab fans reportedly shouted slogans in favor of Saddam Hussein and insulted the Kurdish leaders Talabani and Barzani, to which Kurdish fans reportedly responded with shouts in favor of the regime-changing U.S. president George W. Bush.[16] Syrian government forces used live fire on Kurdish protestors, killing eleven Kurds (alongside four Arabs), with more than thirty Kurds killed and around two thousand arrested before the riots were quelled. Interviews of Syrian Kurdish fighters often point back to the 2004 uprising as an iconic mobilizing event.[17] After the regime crackdown, which was aided by some local Arab tribes, an effort began to create a Syrian Kurdish self-defense force.[18]

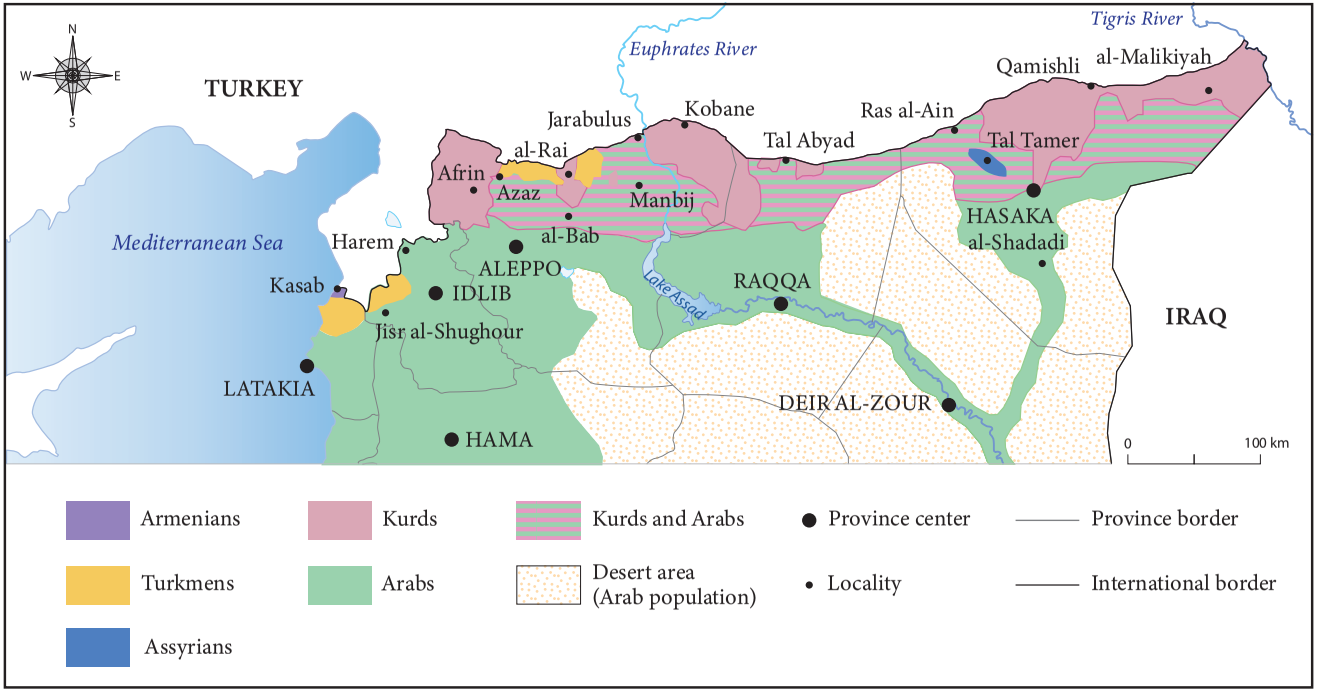
The military expertise used to develop a Syrian Kurdish self-defense force was mostly drawn from PKK veterans from the 1980s and 1990s. Some sources suggest that PKK recruiters had been laying a foundation for an uprising in Kurdish Syria since 2004,[19] but most observers believe that Syrian PKK fighters mostly returned to Syria during and after the 2011 outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Some claim that the Sulaymaniyah area of Iraqi Kurdistan became a center for acclimating PKK personnel from the isolated and monkish PKK redoubt in the Qandil Mountains to the more typical social environment of Iraq and Syria. Sulaymaniyah was a natural hub because of its proximity to the Qandil and because of the relatively good relations in the area between the PKK and the PUK and later the YPG.[20] As one observer from that time noted, "The PKK sent [personnel] down [from the Qandil] to rehabilitate them before they were sent to Syria."[21]

This PKK-based grassroots network was particularly strong in the more Ocalanist communities in Afrin and Kobane, which were connected through familial and tribal links to Kurdish communities across the border in southeast Turkey.[22] Top PKK military leader Murat Karayilan and also Abdullah Ocalan were born in the province of Sanliurfa, which borders Kobane.[23] Many top SDF commanders are also from Kobane, including SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobani Abdi. Ocalan himself visited Kobane in 1979 and 1984.[24] The pro-Barzani parties such as KDP-S and the leftist Yekiti Kurdistani Party–Syria had a stronger presence in Hasaka province, neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan.[25] Masoud Barzani himself was received by a huge crowd when he came to Qamishli in 1996 after visiting Damascus.[26] Eleven of these factions, with Barzani's support, formed the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Qamishli in October 2011; the KNC functions as an umbrella group for the parties.[27] Moreover, the de facto military wing of the KNC, the eight thousand–strong Rojava Peshmerga, was trained by the paramilitary Zerevani forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq but never returned to Syria because of the YPG demand that the brigade be folded within the YPG.[28] As a result, the Rojava Peshmerga instead participated in Peshmerga operations in Iraqi Kurdistan against the Islamic State after 2014[29] and also against the Iraqi army and Iran-backed militias in October 2017.[30]

The War in Northeast Syria, 2011–13

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, following the country's Arab Spring demonstrations, the Kurdish resistance forces were still in rudimentary condition. The first organization, the People's Self-Defense Units (Yekineyen Xweparastina Gel, or YXG), formed in 2011 under PKK veteran Mahmoud Ramadan Muhammad (known as Xebat Derik[31]) and operated in the manner of covert guerrilla cells and "popular committees."[32] One observer recalled the following: "Xebat

Map 1.1 Eastern Syria Security Area



Derik and a group of his comrades/friends initially would hold meetings at houses, and gave military training. These efforts were all done in secret."[33]

Syrian PKK members and veterans, particularly those from the more Ocalanist Afrin and Kobane communities,[34] were available to support the effort. Among them was the recently returned Syrian PKK member Mazloum Kobani Abdi, future commander of the SDF. The force built up from a cadre of thirty persons to around a thousand fighters, including men and women operating in mixed-gender units, which are very atypical of the Middle East but standard practice in the PKK. In 2011, still watched by Syrian government garrisons, the YXG had almost no military weapons—just pistols, air guns, and knives.[35] Armament slightly improved in early 2012 as small Kurdish cells battled the Syrian government in Sheikh Maqsoud, the Kurdish quarter of Aleppo, or sometimes made deals with the regime in other areas.

The YXG also drew on conscripted Kurds from across Syria who had defected from the Syrian army with their rifles. The YXG called on these troops to join to protect their "families, neighborhoods, villages, cities and social institutions."[36] According to the Syrian military service law from 2017, all Syrian men up to age forty-two could be called upon during emergencies for reserve service, even if they had finished their minimum military conscription period. During the Syrian civil war, the age limit was essentially eliminated.[37] Kurds were not appointed to sensitive or senior positions in the Syrian army, apart from some Kurds from Afrin who served as officers but lacked the trust of their superiors.[38]

Formation of the YPG

In July 2012, the People's Defense Units (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, or YPG) was officially announced and held its first conference.[39] (A separate all-female force, the Women's Protection Units, or YPJ, was

formed on April 4, 2013.[40]) With the Syrian regime apparently weakening after several high-ranking officials were killed in the Damascus bombing on July 18, 2012, the civil war actors intensely jockeyed for advantage. Syrian Islamist groups mobilized to seize Kurdish-populated areas, and the YPG prepared a strong defense.[41] Transition to open resistance came on July 19, 2012, when the Syrian government forces began withdrawing from Kobane and other cities, in part because of the need to send forces to Damascus and other core regime assets, and in part because of pressure from the YPG.[42]

The YPG increased in size in 2012 to around three thousand fighters, for the first time using the *tabur* structure of organization (*tabur* meaning battalions, but more accurately described as small forces of thirty to sixty fighters). One commander noted that "voluntary recruitment was increasing and discipline in the military forces was improving."[43] The Kurds took over five cities from the departing Assad regime forces including as Afrin, Kobane, Amude, al-Malikiyah (Derik), and some Kurdish neighborhoods in Qamishli[44] and Aleppo.[45] (The Assad government continued to control the Qamishli airport and border crossing,[46] along with parts of various city centers called "regime squares."[47])

The PKK was also an important source of experienced fighters. As one observer noted, the PKK "sent good communist-educated fighters to Syria: they were effective because they had been fighting the Turks for twenty years and they also brought experience of self-administration."[48] Even so, the veterans had to adapt their austere style used in the mountains to a more standard social setting. In one early example of PKK–Syrian Kurdish tensions, the first commander of the YXG, PKK veteran Xebat Derik, was killed on January 14, 2012. His death came during an armed confrontation with a former PKK member accused of taking one of the PKK's houses as his personal property, after which three of the errant member's sons were killed in retaliation for Derik's death.[49] One Syrian observer, Haytham Manna, noted the following in his account of the early YXG days:

> [Xebat Derik] had returned from [the] Qandil after 27 years of fighting against Turkish authorities and he had trained and been present within an environment of strict behavioral regulations. All of that created a state of fear of the YPG's project, and although its fighters who come from [the] Qandil are the most experienced and seasoned in fighting, their liberation from what Abdullah Ocalan himself once called "excessive violence and banditism" was questionable. Several letters were sent to [the] Qandil after this incident, and internal discussions were held to turn the page of January 2012 and to try [to] make a new start by defining the tasks and adopting self-review, and by forming a better understanding of the special situation in Syria.[50]

In 2013, the PKK began sending platoon-sized (forty-person) reinforcement columns from northern Iraq to join the YPG, with each fighter carrying a heavy backpack full of ammunition.[51] The YPG committed to liberating all Kurdish land in Rojava, and its first action was to take over the 38,000-barrel-per-day Rmelan oil fields from the regime,[52] giving the Kurdish region a source of income.[53] In the first half of 2013, the YPG (including some Arab and Christian fighters) evicted the al-Qaeda–affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and allied groups from Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye in Kurdish),[54] opening up the possibility of connecting the long-segregated and isolated Kurdish population centers in Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira (Cezire in Kurdish). The ultimate goal of the YPG was to establish a contiguous territory on the Syrian-Turkish border, spanning from Afrin to Iraq.[55]

Non-Kurdish Support to the YPG

The growing strength of the YPG triggered a backlash, as Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist forces confronted the YPG, including through the reported movement of tanks and Jabhat al-Nusra fighters through Turkish territory and setup of a field hospital near the border.[56] In July and August 2013, the YPG faced an existential crisis. Until then, by the admission of its own commanders, the group

had still been fighting mainly at night as "a guerrilla combat group, hitting and running."[57] The July 17, 2013, assault on the YPG saw FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra forces attack at around a hundred points of contact. This first real battle triggered the full mobilization of the Syrian Kurds and allied groups, including the closure of schools and the deployment of many young men to the frontlines.

The Syriac Military Council and its two hundred–strong Khabur Guards militia, formed in January 2013, fought alongside the YPG. Despite Arab-Kurdish tensions prevailing across northeast Syria, Arab Shammar tribes also made common cause with the YPG along the Iraq-Syria border, with around five hundred tribal fighters mostly operating under the banner of the Jaish al-Sanadid (Army of the Brave). The YPG also recruited fighters from the Arab al-Sharabiyya and al-Zubayd tribal communities, which opposed Islamist militias in Ras al-Ain, and formed local alliances with tribes in the Hasaka province.[58] Almost from the beginning, therefore, the YPG was a Kurdish-led but not a purely Kurdish force. According to the International Crisis Group, the YPG "agreed to participation of non-Kurdish fighters in the Rojava security system as independent brigades (*kataib mustaqilla*) that keep their own leaders but operate under YPG command."[59] This principle of maintaining the distinct local character of military units would carry over into the formalization of the system as the Syrian Democratic Forces.

By its own admission, the YPG took help from any and all donors. It received emergency weapons and ammunition supplies from a diverse range of sources: the Assad regime, the PKK, the Talabanis (via Kirkuk arms markets), and even officially the Iraqi government under orders from then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Initially, the materiel was rudimentary, described as "Kalashnikovs and bullets, no tanks, no Dushka [heavy machine guns]."[60] When Nusra and Islamist groups drove out the Syrian regime from Ras al-Ain in November 2012, the regime also provided twelve DShK heavy machine guns and a handful of old tanks to the YPG.[61] Another major injection of heavy weaponry

into the YPG followed the October 2013 capture of the strategic Syrian-Iraqi border town of al-Yarubiya, which the YPG took alongside the Arab Shammar tribal confederation.[62] By the YPG's account, the haul at al-Yarubiya included 12 old Russian tanks,[63] 68 ZSU-23 automatic cannons, 35 rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers with 980 grenades, and 2,967 Kalashnikovs.[64] Furthermore, control of the al-Yarubiya–Rabia border crossing gave the YPG a potential alternative supply route (and a source of trade with Iraq), in addition to the Tigris River crossings held by the Barzani-led KDP.[65] The al-Yarubiya-Rabia border crossing was also used for cross-border humanitarian aid until it was shut down by a Russian and Chinese veto in December 2020.[66]

By November 2013, the YPG and its non-Kurdish allies constituted a small army, claiming a strength of around thirty-five thousand fighters but deploying only around 10 percent of this number as fully equipped frontline infantry. Not having experienced a strong YPG indoctrination effort yet, the 2013 force was built almost entirely from nonideological Syrian Kurdish civilians, farmers, and town workers—both men and women—who were organized under former PKK veterans numbering around a hundred fighters.

Military Characteristics of the Early YPG

From 2011 to 2014, the Syrian Kurds developed the civilian and administrative aspects of northeast Syria in parallel with their military campaign. The Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) was founded in 2011.[67]

The PYD's Organization of a Fighting Force

On January 29, 2014, TEV-DEM played the main role in forming the first interim administration of the Democratic Autonomous Area

(DAA) of northeast Syria, in the three Kurdish cantons of Kobane, Afrin, and Jazira (Hasaka province).[68] This move formalized a civilian governing structure over the security forces in the region.

Under an internal affairs board (essentially an interior ministry), urban security was entrusted to the Asayesh (Internal Security Forces). Under the Defense Office, rural and border security was tasked to the YPG and the YPJ.[69] The October 13, 2014, "Duty of Self-Defense Law" proclaimed by the DAA introduced a form of conscription (usually for six months) for all males ages eighteen to thirty. Women can serve as volunteers.[70] A YPG general command of half a dozen senior officers oversaw a very small set of staff directorates and a raft of military councils in the three cantons—Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira.

As a dynamic "first mover," the YPG's early monopoly on violence in the Kurdish-held enclaves prevented Kurdish pro-Barzani rivals from setting up a foothold in northern Syria. Small Kurdish factions tried to set up militias tied to either the FSA or Kurdish parties but were incorporated into the YPG or disbanded.[71] There were attempts by KDP-leader Masoud Barzani to unite the KNC and PYD through political and military power-sharing agreements, including the establishment of the Kurdish Supreme Committee in 2012. But such arrangements failed because of disagreements over power-sharing and because the PYD unilaterally announced plans to set up a local administration in 2013.[72] Since 2013, KNC officials have often faced arbitrary arrests, the shutting down and burning of their offices, and in some cases exile to the Kurdistan region during intra-Kurdish tensions.[73] In response, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) frequently shut down the border to northern Syria.[74] YPG supporters and Western volunteers also faced discrimination (including arrest) in KDP-led areas in Iraqi Kurdistan.[75]

Ocalanist Cultural Traits

As noted earlier, a number of senior leaders of the YPG were drawn from the PKK cadres, often of Syrian Kurdish heritage.[76] The PKK veterans also shaped the YPG's military culture, a process that appears to have moved into high gear in late 2013 and throughout 2014. Observers who embedded with the YPG in mid-2013 and later in 2015 remark on the change that the intervening military crisis had wrought, with the YPG fighters displaying more signs of the PKK's Ocalanist ideological and cultural indoctrination in their latter visits.[77] As one noted, "They were non-ideological, just farmers, when I first met them, but when I went back even the foot soldiers were ideological."[78] The deep military crisis facing northeast Syria drove greater PKK involvement, resulting in the embedding of PKK veterans at the unit and training academy levels. "The commanders were old-school PKK fighters, with thick white mustaches, giving rousing pep talks," one observer recalled.[79]

Collective, Earned Authority

Inherited from the PKK were concepts such as collective decisionmaking and local autonomy at the unit level. Command was, to some extent, meritocratic, with commanders literally elected at the *tabur* level (groups of thirty to sixty); lower-level appointments were made by the *tabur* commander with an eye to combat experience and the trust placed in an individual by the unit. There were no ranks—only commanders and fighters. The combination of structured hierarchy with earned responsibility and local autonomy appears to be clearly linked to Ocalan's ideological doctrine for the PKK.[80] Collective, depersonalized decisionmaking is viewed in the YPG as the antidote to the corruption and infighting endemic in Arab opposition groups in Syria. Indeed, the unique nature of the doctrine is a subject that YPG commanders will discuss at length, as described by an SDF official:

> There was no such thing that all forces would be led by only a person, as if it was a tribal system. It was a council of male and female commanders who were jointly giving the command for the commanders and fighters on the ground. It was always a joint decision, not one man's plan.[81]

Giving insight into how YPG leaders view themselves, another official noted the following:

> If I am a fighter and I am true at my duty, I am skilled, I volunteer before others for a difficult mission, I would be ready to sacrifice for my comrades, and I do not betray the cause—then I am promoted, and entrusted a higher position to hold. We do not have official ranks in YPG or SDF—but the qualities to become a commander are honesty, skill, readiness, experience, etc. Age is not a factor to become a commander—it all depends on efforts, service, and experience.[82]

Discipline

Also inherited from the PKK was a focus on discipline, which was mentioned prominently by almost every YPG and non-YPG interviewee whom the authors canvassed on the military characteristics of the YPG. Discipline is ingrained in the PKK way, with the *cadros* (cadres) swearing off both marriage and the ownership of property, in line with the party's ideological goals. The PKK's obsession with discipline and gender rights[83] carried over to the YPG, to some extent. The sexes were carefully segregated in their accommodations to prevent fraternization, a difficult challenge outside the highly controlled setting of PKK mountain bases. Whereas in the PKK sexual relationships were banned and seen as a grave violation, different rules governed the YPG in Syria.[84] Male YPG fighters could marry, but YPJ female fighters were still prohibited from marrying and having children during their period of service.[85] Corruption, looting, and gross human rights violations were subject to military discipline via "platforms" (tribunals of peers),[86]

and there was significant consensus among observers that the YPG is relatively disciplined and respectful of civilians and property.[87] YPG commanders talk at length about the need for "law and discipline" and also for organization and structure. As one commander put it, "A good system means good control."[88]

Ideology as the Basis of Combat Motivation

A final trait that the YPG inherited directly from the PKK is a culture that values ideological fervor—"true faith," in the words of more than one interviewee[89]—as the basis of discipline and combat motivation. "Belief" was another regularly cited factor among YPG commanders. The YPG feels that its belief in a cause differentiates the group from the "mercenaries" of the FSA and the Syrian government.[90] Reflecting the self-perception of the group's members, one YPG commander is worth quoting at length:

> The war and resistance are not only about weapons and military; it is rather about an idea, ethics, and culture. A mere military training would result in fighters that could loot properties and kill people, but having faithful combatants that are well educated will not have those negative results… It is highly important that these fighters receive cultural and ideological training to learn and practice the way they would approach their respective communities, so that they would not commit any acts of violation against their own people. They have to set an example of a true revolutionary [who] has faith in the cause, and would devote his or her time to serve and protect the people.[91]

The YPG resembled what one collection of authors termed "the devoted actor"[92]—highly motivated combatants with secular or religious "non-negotiable sacred values" and a strong sense of "in-group" cohesion.[93]

The fervor inherited from the PKK admittedly had a harsh edge. "Their ideology trained them to fight until they die," one Iraqi Kurdish observer noted. "It is the PKK mentality."[94] The PKK revered martyrdom,[95] and many fighters even seemed determined to achieve

it.[96] Everyone was expected to do their part—including very young volunteers and conscripts, albeit mainly in rear-area roles.[97] Critics of the YPG tend to feel that ideological fervor is overstressed and that coercive discipline is undervalued in analyses. Assessing the relative importance of sacred values and strong discipline in determining YPG combat motivation is a difficult analytic challenge, and also beyond the scope of this study. Both clearly play a role, as they do in many (if not all) military forces.

U.S.-YPG Relations on the Eve of U.S. Intervention

The fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the slide toward full-blown U.S. military intervention shifted the YPG from an obscure player in the Syrian civil war to the spearhead fighting force in the war against the Islamic State. By August 8, U.S. bombs were falling to prevent the Islamic State's advance on Erbil city in Iraqi Kurdistan. Soon, U.S. Special Operations Forces were deploying to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq near the Sinjar Mountains, where thousands of Yazidis were surrounded by IS fighters. This episode, in which PKK veterans helped to defend Sinjar at a time when most other potential allies were in disarray, left the U.S. government impressed and intrigued. As one U.S. senior official noted, "We didn't know how to get the Yazidis off the mountain, then suddenly the YPG pops up. They are the ones who got the Yazidis off Sinjar Mountain. Our airstrikes broke the siege and the YPG got them off."[98] Although the YPG's mission in Sinjar was a ramshackle affair involving a few truckloads of fighters driving through the desert from Syria to the Sinjar Mountains, it saved thousands of Yazidis. The United States immediately formed a positive impression of the YPG's ability to quickly get things done.[99]

The deployment of U.S. special operators to Iraqi Kurdistan also tapped into longstanding and preexisting U.S.-Kurdish bonds,

particularly with the Sulaymaniyah-based Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG) led by Lahur Sheikh Janghi Talabani, a senior political leader in the Sulaymaniyah-based PUK. Many U.S. Special Forces units and intelligence agencies had worked with the PUK and the Barzani-led KDP before: either during and immediately after Operation Desert Storm in 1991–92, or later in 2002 against Ansar al-Islam terrorists near the Kurdistan-Iran border and in 2003 during the northern front of the invasion to oust Saddam Hussein. Thus, a high degree of trust existed between the U.S. Special Forces community and the Iraqi Kurds, which made it easier for the United States to quickly build trust with the YPG; indeed, the same pro-Kurdish U.S. special operators were to be given primary responsibility for the Syrian theater throughout the coming war.[100]

The U.S. link-up with the YPG was particularly easy because the CTG and the PUK's Zanyari intelligence service, both commanded by Lahur—as he is popularly known—were trusted by Washington and had been working closely with Syrian Kurdish groups for years.[101] In addition to basing the Syrian Kurdish fighters close to the CTG base at Sulaymaniyah, the CTG had been actively developing communications with the YPG since February 2014, probably at the behest of the U.S. intelligence community. In that month, the CTG provided the first supply of satellite Internet systems, smartphones, and GPS units to the YPG.[102] The secure messaging app Viber became the main communications channel.[103] As a result, Lahur was well placed to recommend the YPG when the U.S. intelligence community was tasked by the U.S. National Security Council in late summer 2014 to find a suitable partner force that would prioritize the defeat of the Islamic State in northeast Syria, as opposed to fighting the Assad regime.[104]

Two senior U.S. Special Operations officers from a special mission unit deployed to Sulaymaniyah. Near the Iraq-Syria border, they met with YPG officials who had visited Iraq—including Mazloum, who was also being actively courted by Iranian intelligence officers at the time.[105]

At this stage, Washington desperately wanted on-the-ground targeting intelligence on the Islamic State, which the YPG could provide. The initial evaluation of the YPG was rudimentary, to say the least.[106] According to a YPG interlocutor with U.S. and coalition officials, Western intelligence agencies asked YPG officers the following five rather simple questions, each of which was undoubtedly teased out in the course of long conversations:

1. Are you a Democratic Union Party (PYD) militia? *We said no*.
2. Are you PKK? *We said no*.
3. Are you working with Bashar al-Assad? *We said no*.
4. Are you working against Kurds in Rojava? *We said no*.
5. Are you willing to work with the opposition? *We said we are willing to work with them*.[107]

The assessment, which was rudimentary, was surely designed to yield answers that would allow the United States to support the YPG. As one U.S. policymaker recalled,

> The vetting was minimal because of the urgency of the matter and the desire to be working with [the YPG]. We accepted the difference between the PKK and YPG, knowing it was an artificial one, but for expediency reasons… I don't know how hard people worked to find [YPG-PKK] ties, or what they would have done if they saw them, because the answer people wanted to come to was that this was a distinct group.[108]

One very senior special operations commander observed that "there wasn't a whole lot of profound discussion at the time about YPG, PKK."[109]

U.S. View of the YPG in 2014

The United States and the YPG could not be called natural partners. In terms of both ideology and behavior, the YPG (and its PKK mentors)

had many features that would cause deep concern in the United States and other Western countries. In addition to forced conscription, including child soldiers, the YPG periodically clashed with other Kurdish groups, especially the pro-Barzani KNC, and resisted power-sharing with Kurdish and Arab groups that Turkey viewed as partners.[110] Key members of the founding cadre of the YPG had been trained in the PKK and had fought Turkey under it.

Conversely, the YPG was an active fighting force that would, as Washington wanted, prioritize the fight against the Islamic State over the fight against the Assad regime. The YPG fit the bill, and the media profile of the group's desperate defense of Kobane was rising, with the prospect that IS could either achieve a new major victory or suffer a first signal defeat.[111] One U.S. official said the following:

> The initiative to support the YPG came from the field with the military themselves. [Central Command] was planning to airdrop supplies to them, but the issue hadn't been reviewed. It was obvious it was a pretty consequential policy decision so it got quickly injected into the policy process.[112]

The debate was escalated to the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, with President Barack Obama at the helm because of the perceived importance of the issue. The U.S. intelligence community confirmed the PKK background of individuals such as Mazloum and outlined likely complications that would result in U.S.-Turkish tensions if America supported the YPG, but did not strongly conclude whether the YPG had a "distinct and formal linkage to the PKK."[113] It was thus accepted that supporting the YPG, even as an emergency action, would anger Turkey. Opponents of supporting the YPG included those with professional equities in the U.S.-Turkey relationship[114] and those generally opposed to deepening U.S. involvement in military operations in Syria and Iraq.[115] Kobane was no different than dozens of other similar towns, they argued, asking, where would this end and why get involved there?

Advocates of the military support included Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant John Allen, his deputy Brett McGurk, and the military, represented by the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kobane was becoming iconic and represented the best opportunity to date to break the momentum and aura of the Islamic State's invincibility.[116] The selection of the YPG as a partner force is also sometimes criticized because of the group's willingness to work alongside the Assad regime and the Russians. Yet Obama administration officials viewed this as a strength, as one diplomat noted:

> We knew the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition very well. They wanted to fight the [Assad] regime and they might have forced Russia into an escalation. There was absolutely no way the Obama administration was going to get pulled into either of those things... The YPG was not trying to capture power at the center. It was not seeking a full-scale war with the regime or the Russians, so the YPG was less risky.[117]

President Obama decided that Kobane could not be allowed to fall and that U.S. military support, including airstrikes, would be authorized as an emergency action.[118] Obama said he would personally call Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to explain the U.S. action and to reassure him that it was a temporary and tactical step.[119]

On the call, Erdogan warned Obama that it would be "dramatically consequential to support the YPG at Kobane" and asked for time to gather together Syrian Kurds with whom Ankara was more comfortable—the so-called Rojava Peshmerga associated with the KNC, currently based in Iraqi Kurdistan and being trained by Iraqi Kurdish and Turkish forces there. However, Obama had called Erdogan "to inform him, not to consult." As one participant in top-level U.S. policymaking recalled,

> The pragmatic view was that we just didn't have other choices. We didn't have time for theoretical forces; we wouldn't insert our own

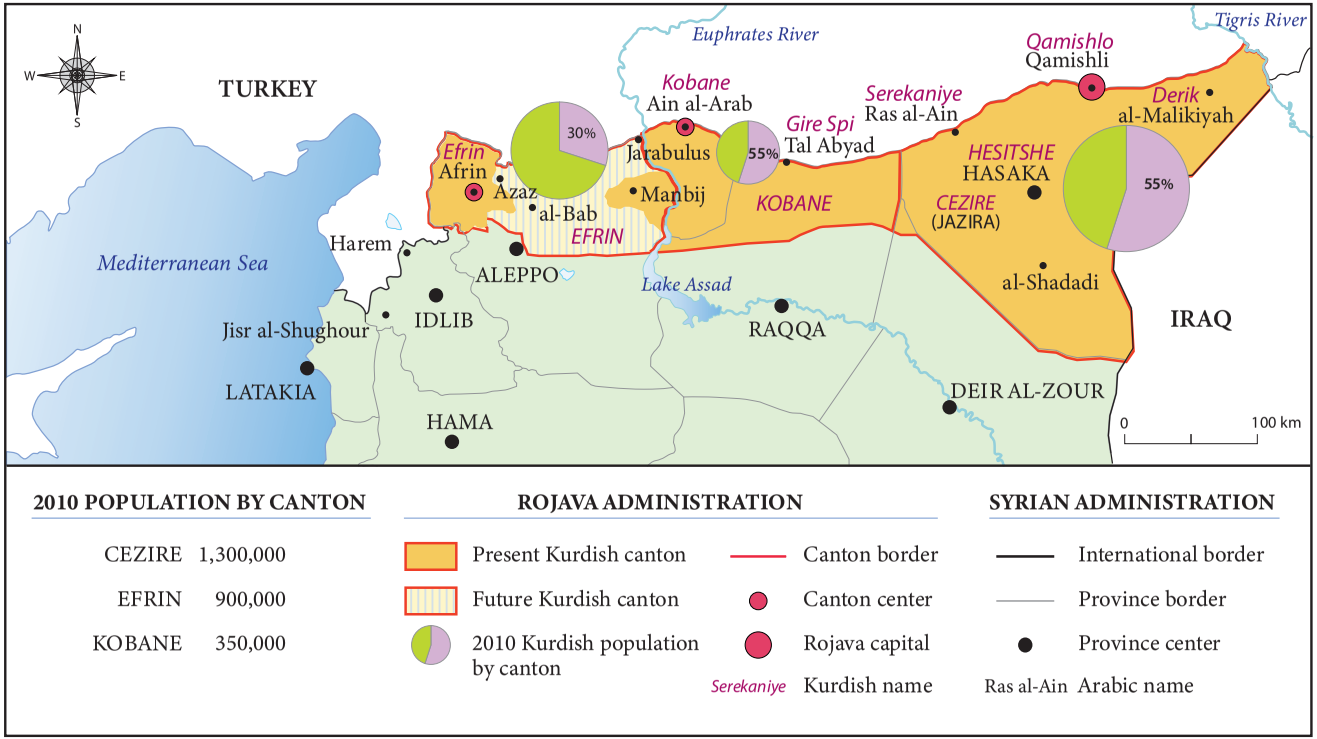
> forces for a range of political reasons. So the YPG was the force. And the U.S. was fully cognizant of the consequences but felt that there was no choice because the fight against [the Islamic State] was such a priority.[120]

Obama told Erdogan that the United States had to act immediately and would support the defense of Kobane with its existing defenders (i.e., the YPG); however, Obama also indicated that Washington was fine with the Rojava Peshmerga being used in subsequent battles in Kobane, at which point U.S. dependence on the YPG would theoretically decline.[121] Ultimately, the Rojava Peshmerga was not used in the next stage, in part because of its unpreparedness and in part because the YPG would not permit the force to operate outside the YPG chain of command, arguing that the creation of two separate military forces between the PUK and the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan had led to a civil war in the 1990s.[122]

The rapid U.S. embrace of the YPG needs to be contextualized against the chaotic backdrop of the late 2014 scramble to contain IS. First, PKK fighters were manning the frontlines alongside the Peshmerga in Iraq in places such as Sinjar, Kirkuk, and Makhmur: "They were part of the soup" of forces fighting IS, one U.S. senior official said.[123] Second, at the time, working with the YPG was not seen as a major diplomatic stretch, at least to the extent that it was later. In late 2014, direct talks were still happening between the PKK and the Turkish state as part of an ongoing peace process that lasted until July 2015.[124] The PYD had visited Turkey and held direct talks with the Turkish intelligence services and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[125] All the critiques that could be fairly leveled at the YPG (e.g., the use of child soldiers and displacement of civilians) could be applied at least as readily to other U.S.- and Turkish-backed armed groups such as the FSA.[126]

By the end of September 2014, the U.S. government was satisfied that it could, without U.S. forces on the ground, approve airstrikes in

Map 1.2 Syrian Administrative Boundaries



proximity to the YPG against a common enemy—the Islamic State. Indeed, there was confidence that the partnership could remain limited:

> The people who were responsible for running this operation claim that they always made clear that this was a distinct and limited operation that would end when [the Islamic State] was defeated. This was their way of not investing in the PKK or creating a lasting political legacy [in northeast Syria].[127]

"It was one small step but a consequential one," a U.S. policymaker recalled, "because once you cross the Rubicon, it's hard to turn back."[128]

YPG View of the United States as a Partner

At this stage in late 2014, the YPG did not know or trust the United States. Although the Syrian Kurds had welcomed the U.S. government's toppling of Saddam Hussein and hoped for a similar action in Syria after 2003, there were also ingrained anti-capitalist ideological reasons why the Syrian Kurds (and, in particular, their PKK cadre) would view the United States with mistrust. The United States was a shadowy and poorly understood player in the worldview of the Syrian Kurds: always in the background in such places as the Kurdish parts of Aleppo, while working alongside Turkey to support proto-jihadist elements of the FSA. It was clear in late 2014 that Washington's "Plan A" remained the Arab vetted Syrian opposition in northwest Syria. As one Syrian Kurdish commander described the Americans in 2014, "There was lots of talk, they wanted intel but they offered no help." The YPG saw the United States as close to Turkey, as well as a potential counterintelligence threat, having periodically supplied the Turks with targeting information on the PKK, not least to enable the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.[129]

At the same time, the YPG needed international help and had been reaching out for most of 2014 to build such ties, with one commander noting the following:

> In 2014, we only had contacts with [the Shammar confederation in Rabia], [KRG], and PKK. We had no contact with Western governments. At that time, Turkey was working very hard to put YPG on the terrorist list, saying they are working with the regime. And the Syrian opposition had relations with a hundred countries, and they were saying YPG is communist, *kuffar* [infidels], PKK. And all journalists were coming to Erbil, and [the Central Intelligence Agency] is helping FSA. We don't have any support from the U.S.[130]

The YPG actively sought to end this isolation. The group made itself more palatable to international partners through actions such as the September 10, 2014, formalization of longstanding YPG-Arab military cooperation[131] in the Euphrates Volcano (*Burkan al-Furat*) Operations Room in Kobane,[132] an area that the Islamic State had begun to overrun earlier that month.[133] That same day, President Obama announced the beginning of expanded military operations against the Islamic State, an effort that was subsequently named Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) on October 17, 2014.[134]

Though ultimately less successful than this military alliance, an October 22, 2014, political agreement was also brokered by the United States in Duhok, in Iraqi Kurdistan, in which the PYD and KNC agreed to share political control and form a joint military force.[135] Following the agreement, Turkey allowed Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces in late October to drive through Turkish land to reach Kobane to support the YPG.[136]

Having ticked enough boxes for the United States, the YPG was poised to begin receiving U.S. air support in the battle unfolding at Kobane.[137] Seventeen days into the formation of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the U.S. National Security Council approved airstrikes to support the YPG. (U.S. strikes had been used to defend Erbil from IS probes on August 7 and to help relieve the besieged Iraqi town of Amerli on August 31.[138]) U.S. airstrikes in Kobane began on September 27, 2014, but still the Islamic

State closed in on the city and pushed the Kurds back to within one mile of the Turkish border.

Though the YPG project had been years in the making, to the U.S. government, desperate for a new partner in the battle against the Islamic State, a fighting force seemed to appear out of thin air. The first test of the partnership would come in the siege of a Kurdish border town. "In terms of direct partnership," one U.S. senior official noted, "Kobane was *the* event [emphasis added]."[139]

Notes

1 Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), 24.
2 Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial*.
3 Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts (Kurdish Studies)* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 58.
4 Kim Hjelmgaard, "Who Are the Kurds? A Middle Eastern People with 'No Friends but the Mountains,'" *USA TODAY*, December 18, 2019.
5 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
6 Christian Sinclair and Sirwan Kajjo, "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria," Middle East Research and Information Project, August 31, 2011, https://merip.org/2011/08/the-evolution-of-kurdish-politics-in-syria/.
7 Sinclair and Kajjo, "Evolution of Kurdish Politics"
8 Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial*, 24.
9 Ibid.
10 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "The Kurdish PUK's Syria Policy," Carnegie Middle East Center, December 11, 2013, https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53884. See also Sinclair and Kajjo, "Evolution of Kurdish Politics."
11 Hafiz al-Assad pressured Turkey by using the PKK to claim the disputed territory of Hatay and to force Turkey's hand on water-sharing disagreements. See Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans, "The End of Pax Adana," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 25, 2012, available at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-end-of-pax-adana.
12 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 58. See also Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial*.
13 The Qandil Mountains in northeast Iraqi Kurdistan have been the main redoubt and leadership hub for the PKK since the late 1990s. In 1982, during the Iran-Iraq War, KDP leader Masoud Barzani allowed the PKK to establish camps in Iraqi Kurdistan. For an account of the history of this location, see Stephen Farrell, Shiho Fukada, and Steven

Lee Myers, "With the P.K.K. in Iraq's Qandil Mountains," *New York Times*, January 5, 2011, https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/05/with-the-p-k-k-in-iraqs-qandil-mountains/. For the PKK moving into the Qandil with KDP permission, see U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Turkey, the PKK, and U.S. Involvement: A Chronology," *In Focus*, December 5, 2019, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11380.

14 Haytham Manna, *Ocalanism: Ideological Construction and Practice* (Geneva: Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights and Haytham Manna Foundation, 2017), 91.

15 Arab tribes participated in the crushing of a Kurdish uprising in Qamishli's football stadium in 2004. In a symbolic turn of events on March 28, 2018, the YPG celebrated the military defeat of the Islamic State in Deir al-Zour in the same stadium. See Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 75.

16 Jordi Tejel, "The Qamishli Revolt, 2004: The Marker of a New Era for Kurds in Syria," chap. 6 in *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008), 115; and Brian Whitaker, "Clashes Between Syrian Kurds and Arabs Claim More Victims," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), March 17, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/mar/17/syria.brianwhitaker.

17 Authors' interview with journalist 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also Hugh Macleod, "Football Fans' Fight Causes a Three-Day Riot in Syria," *Independent*, March 15, 2004.

18 According to a YPG founder, the group first approached Murat Karayilan (PKK), Jalal Talabani (PUK), and the Barzani family. The group was helped by Jalal Talabani, and established a camp in Arbad, Sulaymaniyah province. Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

19 The PKK trainers "were unobtrusive and they organized local forces—in secret, and obviously tolerated by the Baath regime," according to researcher Walter Posch. There were also the local cadres (*cadro mahally*) that numbered as many as four thousand to five thousand. They were

given rudimentary training and were sent as advisors, for instance, from Qamishli to Deir al-Zour to train locals. See Walter Posch, "The New PKK: Between Extremism, Political Violence, and Strategic Challenges (Part 2)," trans. Christopher Schonberger, *Austrian Military Journal*, March 2016. See also authors' interview with SDF official 12: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

20 The logistical connection in Sulaymaniyah was considered important because of the ammunition shortages that prevented any real resistance in 2004. Although Jalal Talabani (the then president of Iraq) was careful not to prejudice his personal or national relations with the Assad leadership of Syria by providing arms, the existence of a Sulaymaniyah base opened up numerous opportunities for the YPG to buy arms and ammunition in the case of a new uprising in Syria. Authors' interview with Iraqi Kurdish official 10: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

21 Ibid.

22 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria,* 40. A KCK leader (PKK leadership member) told the International Crisis Group that "Abdullah Ocalan visited Kobane…in 1997, and from that moment Syrian Kurds began to follow him. [Five thousand] PKK Syrian Kurds were killed in the fight in the mountains. Therefore, there is a natural link between the PKK and PYD." See International Crisis Group, "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria," Middle East Report 151, May 8, 2014.

23 Ocalan was born in the village of Omerli in Sanliurfa province. See "April 4th: The Birth of a People," Hawar News Agency, April 3, 2020, http://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/april-4th-the-birth-of-a-people-1-h15682.html. Karayilan, a Sunni Kurd, is from Sanliurfa province's Birecik district. See Soner Cagaptay and Coskun Unal, "Leadership Reshuffle: PKK Makes Changes in Its Ranks," *IHS Janes*, February 26, 2014, available at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/leadership-reshuffle-pkk-makes-changes-its-ranks.

24 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria,* 61; and "Bijar Mukhtar Recalls the Memories of Ocalan's First Visit to Kobane" [in Arabic], el Diwan, April 6, 2019, http://bit.ly/2MZgcnz.

25 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 40, 61. See also Sirwan Kajjo, *Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics*, Policy Note 86 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020), 7, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prospects-syrian-kurdish-unity-assessing-local-and-regional-dynamics.

26 Patrick Clawson et al., *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally: Cooperation and Complications*, Policy Focus 150 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), 42, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-kurds-us-ally-cooperation-and-complications.

27 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 54.

28 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Rojava Peshmergas Only to Enter Syria in Agreement with PYD: Kurdish Official," ARA News, January 24, 2017. See also Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 58.

29 "Rojava Peshmerga Participate in Battle for Mosul," Kurdistan24, October 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUTEot1ZlCk.

30 Adam Lucente, "Kurds Divided over Blame for Loss of Kirkuk," Al-Monitor, November 12, 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/syria-iraq-turkey-kirkuk-referendum-kurds-loss-blame.html.

31 Some literature also mentions that the YXG was first called the Kurdistan Self-Defense Units (Yekineyen Xweparastine yen Kurdistane [YXK]). See Mehmet Emin Mutlu and Ersin Celik, *Soresa Azadiya Rojavaye Kurdistane-1- Bingeha Sorese* [The new age of revolutions: The freedom revolution of west Kurdistan; Foundations of the revolution] (April 2018), 53, 104, 105. See also "Gedenken an YPG-Mitbegründer Xebat Derik" [In memory of YPG co-founder Xebat Derik], Firat News Agency, January 14, 2020, https://anfdeutsch.com/rojava-syrien/gedenken-fuer-ypg-mitbegruender-xebat-derik-16654.
Finally, the YXG's founding commander, Xebat Derik, was assassinated in Qamishli on January 14, 2012. See Kurdwatch, "Al-Qamishli: PYD Members Kill Three People and Severely Injure One," January 2012, https://kurdwatch.ezks.org/index?aid=2390.

32 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also Beritan

Sarya, "YPG Spokesperson: We Are a Model for Entire Syria," ANF English, July 21, 2018, https://anfenglish.com/news/ypg-spokesperson-we-are-a-model-for-entire-syria-28377.

33 "Li Rojava hêza bingehîn a gelan: Xweparastin—1" [In Rojava, the fundamental force of the peoples: Self-defense], Hawar News Agency, December 14, 2019, http://www.hawarnews.com/kr/haber/li-rojava-hza-bingehn-a-gelan-xweparastin-1-h25830.html.

34 PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan visited Kobane and Afrin on weekends when he was based in Damascus. Ocalan formed a close link to many of the future commanders of the YPG/SDF—notably, Mazloum Kobani Abdi, with whom Ocalan was famously filmed swimming, though it is hard to confirm Mazloum's identity.

35 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also Anja Flach, Ercan Ayboga, and Michael Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 173.

36 Mazloum Abdi and Polat Jan, *Practical Projects for Building the Autonomous Administration*, trans. Laylan Issa (Sulaymaniyah, Iraq: Ghazalnus Publishing Center, 2020), 79.

37 Danish Immigration Service, *Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG* (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, 2015), 8, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/54fd6c884.pdf.

38 Authors' interview with former YPG fighter: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

39 "In Rojava, fundamental force."

40 Beritan Sarya and Axin Tolhildan, "Six Years of YPJ: Growing and Changing Society," Firat News Agency, April 4, 2019, https://anfenglish.com/features/six-years-of-ypj-growing-and-changing-society-part-i-34090.

41 "Syria Conflict: Ministers 'Killed in Suicide Attack,'" BBC News, July 18, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18882149; and "In Rojava, fundamental force."

42 The Assad regime withdrew from most Kurdish-dominated areas without a fight (with a few exxeptions), such as a small clash in Derik

and Qamishli. The regime often left behind important intelligence offices that remained influential at the local level. Critics of the YPG such as Hussein Jalabi suggest a YPG-regime deal that allowed the regime to redeploy forces against other oppositionists. If such a deal happened, it was also exploited by non-YPG Kurdish groups and Arab factions in Manbij. For a detailed set of allegations of a deal, see Hussein Jalabi, *Rojava, The Great Trick of Assad: Studying Kurdish Loss During Six Years* (Istanbul: Maysaloon, 2018). For a critical analysis of the YPG-regime deal, see Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War, Future*, 91.

43 Authors' interview with SDF official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

44 Authors' interview with journalist Sores Xelil, July 17, 2019; International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle," Middle East Report 136, January 22 2013, 3, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/510285552.pdf; and "The Rojava Revolution in 2013: The Success of the YPG," Firat News Agency, December 25, 2013, https://anfenglish.com/news/the-rojava-revolution-in-2013-the-success-of-the-ypg-9062. See also Patrick Markey, "After Quiet Revolt, Power Struggle Looms for Syria's Kurds," Reuters, November 7, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kurds-idUSBRE8A619520121107.

45 Barak Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria," *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 9, 2015, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-syria.

46 Flach, Ayboga, and Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 185.

47 Kajjo, "Prospects for Unity," 12.

48 Authors' interview with SDF official 10: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

49 Kurdwatch, "Al-Qamishli."

50 Manna, *Ocalanism*, 92.

51 Authors' email correspondence with researcher Roy Gutman, September 13, 2019. Gutman's account is based on his interview of a self-described PKK deserter.

52 Tsvetana Paraskova, "Kurds in Syria Share Oil with Government as Part of a Deal, Oilprice.com, July 13, 2018, https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Kurds-In-Syria-Share-Oil-With-Government-As-Part-Of-A-Deal.html.

53 A journalist who lived in the oil fields said the northeast Syrian fields were "home to the country's 2.5 billion barrels of oil reserves and—before the war against [the Islamic State]—[were] capable of producing roughly 387,000 barrels of oil per day and 7.8 billion cubic meters of natural gas each year." Authors' interview with journalist 7: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
According to some sources, the YPG and the regime agreed to split the proceeds of the oil field, with the regime controlling the refineries needed to create fuels.

54 "Syria Rebels Clash with Armed Kurds," Al Jazeera, November 19, 2012, https://www.alJazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/11/201211191755151784 3.html; Erika Solomon and Isabel Coles, "Syrian Kurds' Military Gains Stir Unease," Reuters, November 11, 2013, https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kurds-idUKBRE9AA0E620131111; Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "The Civil War Within Syria's Civil War," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/the-civil-war-within-syrias-civil-war/; and Agence France-Presse, "Jihadists 'expelled from flashpoint Kurdish Syrian town,'" Fox News, July 17, 2013, https://www.foxnews.com/world/jihadists-expelled-from-flashpoint-kurdish-syrian-town.

55 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "U.S. Backing Gives Kurds Cover for United Federal Region in Northern Syria," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 12 (2016).

56 Some observers suggest that the FSA viewed the YPG as a ground-holding force for the regime. Another potential motivation for the attack was Turkey's desire to limit the YPG's power.
See also "Regional Conflict Report: Ras al-Ain," The Carter Center, February 18, 2013, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/Ras-al-AinReport.pdf; and Agence France-Presse, "Kurd-Jihadist Firefights Rage in Northern Syria," France 24, January 18, 2013, https://web.

archive.org/web/20130123074517/http://www.france24.com/en/20130118-kurd-jihadist-firefights-rage-northern-syria.

57 Authors' interview with SDF official 15: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

58 Nicholas Heras, "The Battle for Syria's Al-Hasakah Province," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 10 (October 2013), https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-syrias-al-hasakah-province/.

59 International Crisis Group, "Flight of Icarus?" 8.

60 Authors' interview with SDF official 12: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

61 International Crisis Group, "Flight of Icarus?" 8.

62 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurds Appoint Arab Governor in Hasakah, Bid for International Support," Middle East Eye, July 31, 2014, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-kurds-appoint-arab-governor-hasakah-bid-international-support.

63 Most likely, the YPG captured from Syrian rebel groups a small number of Soviet-origin T-55 and T-62 tanks and armored vehicles, such as the BMP-1. For more, see Carl Drott, "In Syria, Kurds Fight a War Within a War," *Haaretz*, January 11, 2013, https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-in-syria-kurds-fight-a-war-within-a-war-1.5283846.

64 The YPG had a small and unimpressive stock of armored vehicles, comprising "6 effective tanks dispersed from Qamishli to [Kobane], 7 BMP Armored Personnel Carriers, and 10 Police Armored Vehicles provided directly to them by the Syrian Regime." See Masarat No. 25: Syrian Defense Forces, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (August/September 2016): 9. Also see Bedir Mullah Rashid, "Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria" (special report, Omran for Strategic Studies, Istanbul, January 24, 2018), 61, https://omranstudies.org/publications/reports/military-and-security-structures-of-the-autonomous-administration-in-syria.html. See also "YPG Release Balance Sheet of War for 2013," ANF English, December 23, 2013, https://anfenglish.com/news/ypg-release-balance-sheet-of-war-for-2013-9037.

65 The Yarubiya-Rabia border crossing was held by the YPG on the Syrian side, and by Iraq on the Iraqi side. However, in June 2014, KDP

forces took over Rabia. In August 2014, IS took over Rabia. But from September 2014 until October 2017, KDP Peshmerga forces controlled the gate.

66 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Russia Again Blocks Vital Aid to Millions in Northern Syria," Kurdistan 24, July 8, 2020, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c8152573-5951-4a9a-a351-0fc493ea214e.

67 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria,* 65.

68 Ibid., 89.

69 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*. See also the Constitution of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, [1][2] officially titled "Charter of the Social Contract," https://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/.

70 Danish Immigration Service, *Service, Duty and Recruitment*, 3.

71 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 91.

72 Ibid.

73 Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria; and Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria,* 135. See also "KNC Leader Says Nine Offices Burned, 40 Members, Independent Activists Held By PYD," Rudaw, March 11, 2017, https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/110320174.

74 "Tensions Rise as Barzani Closes Syrian-Iraqi Kurdistan Border," Al-Monitor, May 21, 2013, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/security/2013/05/tensions-iraqi-kurdistan-syria-barzani.html.

75 The KDP also allegedly arrested the brother of a YPG commander in 2017 and detained him for several months. See Polat Can (@PolatCanRojava), "Barzani family forces has arrested my brother, Mustafa Miran 5 months ago and until now his condition is unknown," Twitter, June 7, 2017, 9:37 a.m., https://twitter.com/PolatCanRojava/status/872447511226720256. See also Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 135; and "Three Foreign YPG Volunteers Released from Jail, Going Home," Rudaw, April 24, 2016, https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/240420166.

76 The most prominent among them was Mazloum Kobani Abdi, a self-described "former" PKK member from Kobane. The 55-member YPG Military Council (sitting above the General Command) and the General Command were led by such cadres. Other key Syrian former PKK cadres who played passing roles in the Rojava Revolution included Hussein Shawish (Herekol), Aldar Khalil, and Redur Khalil. As writer Haytham Manna noted, "The list is long." See Manna, *Ocalanism*, 91–92. Also see Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Mazlum Kobani called the U.S. 'Comrades in Arms' Against ISIS. Now the U.S. Is Eyeing the Exit," *New York Times,* May 12, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/middleeast/syria-sdf-us-islamic-state.html.

77 Ocalan's leftist ideology was first focused on an independent Kurdish state, but since the mid-2000s, Ocalan has followed the idea of "democratic confederalism," which focuses on creating decentralized autonomous administrations in the states where Kurds live (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria). Moreover, Ocalan developed the idea of "democratic autonomy" as an alternative to the traditional nation-state that enforces cultural homogeneity. "Within the democratic nation every ethnicity, religious understanding, city, local, regional and national entity has the right to participate with its own identity and democratic federate structure," he wrote from prison. He also was inspired by U.S. anarchist Murray Bookchin, who argued for a municipal-based democracy founded on local communes and councils. See Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts (Kurdish Studies) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 63; and Abdullah Ocalan, Democratic Nation (Cologne: International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan—Peace in Kurdistan," 2016), 18, http://ocalanbooks.com/downloads/democratic-nation.pdf.

Guney Yildiz describes Ocalan's "democratic confederalism" as seeking

> autonomous Kurdish areas in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq without necessarily establishing an independent Kurdish state or changing borders of the countries in question. The confederal system Ocalan

> envisions is not a confederal arrangement between states but a model where sub-state "democratically autonomous" administrations are linked in a loose political arrangement. The "democratic autonomy" as Ocalan formulates it, foresees decentralization of the nation-states that the Kurds live in. Autonomous administrations are further divided into autonomous organizations of women, workers, economic units, communes, and religious and ethnic groups.

The model that is implemented in northeastern Syria is composed of this Ocalan/PKK model. The federalism, proposed by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), will not be based on ethnicity but region. Another step Ocalan and the PKK leadership has taken is to propose an alternative to ethnic or civic nationalism in the nations where Kurds reside. By what he calls "democratic nation," Ocalan proposes a flexible approach to the concept of nation. His concept is not necessarily based solely on ethnicity or citizenship of a nation-state. Rather, the concept foresees autonomous organizations of different ethnicities, religious groups, and economic units which can organize themselves as a political entity within Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. See Yildiz, "Kurdistan: A State or a State of Mind?" *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* (Spring 2019), https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/kurdistan-a-state-or-a-state-of-mind/.

78 Authors' interview with journalist 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

79 Ibid.

80 Posch, "The New PKK."

81 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

82 Authors' interview with SDF official 17: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

83 According to Ocalan's theories, freedom and equality cannot be realized without the achievement of women's autonomy and leadership. Thus, women's rights were central to the new PYD system, with a system of co-chairs (both a man and a woman for most positions), gender quotas, and a ban on polygamy (in Kurdish areas). See Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, Kurds of Northern Syria, 80.

84 Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016), 143.

85 Anne Bailey and Erin Trieb, "These Women Are Taking the Fight Against ISIS into Their Own Hands," *The World*, April 28, 2015.

86 Authors' interview with SDF official 15: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

87 Though there are exceptions to this general finding, this was the takeaway from a large set of fairly candid interviews and documentary research. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

88 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

89 Authors' interview with SDF official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

90 Authors' interview with SDF official 19: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

91 Authors' interview with SDF official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

92 Angel Gomez et al., "The Devoted Actor's Will to Fight and the Spiritual Dimension of Human Conflict," *Nature Human Behavior* 1, no. 9 (2017): 673–79.

93 Ibid., 673.

94 Authors' interview with SDF official 10: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

95 The PKK celebrates martyrdom, and one of the most commonly used slogans and phrases during PKK fighter funerals and protests is "martyrs never die" (sehid namirin). (Sehid is also widely used by Arabs, Persians, and Turks, and indeed throughout the Middle East). Dying as a martyr for the revolution was seen as the highest accolade for a YPG/YPJ fighter, especially for those who came from the mountains (i.e., fighters with a PKK background), a British YPG volunteer mentioned. Pictures of martyrs can be seen everywhere in the streets, and special institutions are dedicated to martyrs' families. See "Zilan: Total Resistance in the Face of Colonialism," Komun

Academy [website], February 7, 2019, https://komun-academy.com/2019/02/07/zilan-total-resistance-in-the-face-of-colonialism/; and Jim Matthews, Fighting Monsters: From British Armed Forces to Rebel Fighter; A First-Hand Account of Battling ISIS (London: Mirror Books, 2019), 50, Kindle.

96 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

97 Ibid. The issue of child soldiers is discussed and referenced in chapter 5.

98 The YPG and PKK both maintained links to Yazidi communities in Sinjar, which functioned as a transshipment point for fighters and weapons into and out of Syria. Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

99 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

100 Authors' interview with U.S. official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

101 The PUK was closer to the YPG and PKK than to the other Iraqi Kurdish faction, the Barzani-led KDP. Both PUK leader Jalal Talabani and PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan had used Syria and Lebanon as operating locations in the 1980s and 1990s.

102 Authors' interview with Iraqi Kurdish official 10: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

103 Authors' interview with Iraqi Kurdish official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

104 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

105 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

106 In the uncharitable view of one senior U.S. official who was critical of the decision to partner with the YPG, the consequential early partnering decisions with the YPG were made "by Special Forces

captains who didn't know a damned thing about the politics." Though the situation was arguably less clear-cut than this statement suggests, the reasoning behind the U.S. decision to support the YPG remains hard to pin down, as it is controversial and apt to incite strong arguments between different camps in the U.S. bureaucracy. Authors' interview with U.S. official 3: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

107 In 2014, a YPG officer met with intelligence officers from Denmark, France, Germany, Jordan, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates—before the YPG established a relationship with the United States. Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

108 Authors' interview with U.S. official 44: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

109 Authors' interview with U.S. official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

110 The KNC rejected the announcement of a federal administration by pro-PYD groups in 2016 and refused to recognize laws issued by the PYD-led administration. The groups also had strong ideological and political differences, with the PYD following an Ocalanist model and the KNC adhering to a more Kurdish nationalist model of the Barzani movement. See Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, Kurds of Northern Syria, 135; and Mohammad Abdulssattar Ibrahim, "The Rivaling Philosophies of Barzani and Ocalan Weigh over Syria's Kurds (Timeline)," Syria Direct, February 3, 2020, https://syriadirect.org/news/the-rivaling-philosophies-of-barzani-and-ocalan-weigh-over-syrias-kurds-timeline/.

111 Authors' interview with U.S. official 44: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

112 Ibid.

113 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also authors' interview with U.S. official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

114 Opponents were mainly those in the U.S. Department of State whose

attitudes were shaped by information, at the Policy Coordination Committee level, from the State Department's European and Turkish desks and from the U.S. embassy in Ankara. The National Security Council director for Turkey also argued for restraint. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

115 Among them were National Security Advisor Susan Rice and her senior director for the Middle East, Robert Malley.

116 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

117 Authors' interview with U.S. official 45: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

118 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

119 Ibid.

120 Authors' interview with U.S. official 44: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

121 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

122 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also Hisham Arafat, "Thousands of Rojava Peshmerga Prevented from Battling IS in Syria," Kurdistan 24, November 22, 2016, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/4e7394c6-988d-4ffe-b0a5-c3739d275744/Thousands-of-Rojava-Peshmerga-prevented-from-battling-IS-in-Syria; and Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 73.

123 Authors' interview with U.S. official 40: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

124 Max Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict," Center for American Progress, August 12, 2019.

125 Anadolu News Agency, "PYD Leader in Visit to Turkey Proposes Formation of Provisional Council Until Political Solution," *Hurriyet Daily News,* July 27, 2013, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pyd-leader-in-visit-to-turkey-proposes-formation-of-provisional-council-until-political-solution-51519.

126 For instance, according to the United Nations, there were 283 cases in 2019 of the YPG recruiting and using underage fighters, versus 537 in the other Syrian armed groups, breaking down to "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham...(245), Syrian armed opposition groups (formerly known as the Free Syrian Army) (191), Ahrar al-Sham (26), other components of SDF (23), the Internal Security Forces (ISF) (22), unidentified armed groups (11), Syrian government forces (10), pro-government militia (5), Nur al-Din al-Zanki (3) and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (1)." See United Nations, *Children and Armed Conflict*: *Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2020), 23, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/15-June-2020_Secretary-General_Report_on_CAAC_Eng.pdf.

127 Authors' interview with U.S. official 44: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

128 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

129 Tim Weiner, "U.S. Helped Turkey Find and Capture Kurd Rebel Leader," *New York Times*, February 2, 1999.

130 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

131 Amy Austin Holmes, "Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-Led Syrian Democratic Forces," Middle East Research and Information Project, July 28, 2020, https://merip.org/2020/07/arabs-across-syria-join-the-kurdish-led-syrian-democratic-forces/; "YPG'e li Ebu Rasen tabureke nu ava kir" [YPG sets up new tabur in Abu Rasen], Firat News Agency, December 8, 2013, https://anfkurdi.com/cihan/ypg-e-li-ebu-rasen-tabureke-nu-ava-kir-27624; Barak Barfi, *Ascent of the PYD and the SDF*, Research Note 32 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016):

2, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ascent-pyd-and-sdf; Carl Drott, "Arab Tribes Split Between Kurds And Jihadists," Carnegie Middle East Center, May 15, 2014, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55607; Carl Drott, "In Syria, Displaced Arabs Seek Kurdish Protection," Rudaw, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/11102013; and Heras, "Battle for Al-Hasakah."

132 Mutlu Civiroglu and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish-Arab Rebel Alliance May be Key to Obama's Syrian Strategy," *Atlantic Council,* September 23, 2014. See also Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Obama, 'Appalled' by Beheading, Will Continue Airstrikes," *New York Times,* August 20, 2014.

133 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish Stronghold in Eastern Syria Defies Assaults by Islamic State," *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 18 (2014).

134 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2015–December 31, 2015*, 10.

135 Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, *Kurds of Northern Syria*, 72.

136 Humeyra Pamuk and Raheem Salman, "Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Enter Syria's Kobani After Further Air Strikes," Reuters, July 27 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis/kurdish-peshmerga-forces-enter-syrias-kobani-after-further-air-strikes-idUSKBN0IK15M20141031.

137 Mutlu Civiroglu, "YPG Commander Sipan Hemo: 'Give Us Real Support,'" Rudaw, September 23, 2013; and Ernesto Londono and Greg Miller, "CIA Begins Weapons Delivery to Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post,* September 11, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html.

138 Azam Ahmed, "Waging Desperate Campaign, Iraqi Town Held Off Militants," *New York Times*, September 2, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/middleeast/waging-a-desperate-fight-an-iraqi-town-holds-off-militants.html.

139 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

2

Supporting from Afar: Kobane to al-Hawl

A majority Kurdish district of around two hundred thousand people,[1] headquartered in a border town of the same name with fifty thousand residents,[2] Kobane had been in the Islamic State's sights throughout summer 2014, and was brought under intense assault beginning in mid-September.

The Defense of Kobane

In the fighting, the Islamic State threw its elite foreign cadres at Kobane and its outskirts, while Turkey viewed the YPG defenders as a hostile force and initially allowed no support to reach the besieged pocket. In the suburbs, the YPG could not hold out in the face of IS forces, who were superior in numbers and equipment that included tanks and armored suicide car bombs. In less than a month, by late September 2014, the Kurds were forced out of 350 of 354 villages in the rural outskirts of Kobane.

Kobane was a compact urban battle in which YPG units fought shoulder to shoulder, a force-to-space ratio not seen again until the final battles to reduce IS urban pockets near the Syria-Iraq border. Kurdish fighters from Afrin, Jazira, Aleppo,[3] and even Turkey joined the battle for Kobane.[4] The top YPG commanders and their personal bodyguards were committed in a counterattack role as collapse of the

pocket loomed. The "urban fight is not similar to village warfare. Urban fighting, among all other warfare, is the most hazardous and difficult one. Not everyone prefers to lead an urban fight—it is a battle that requires more professionalism," YPG Kobane commander Mahmoud Berxwedan noted.[5] One of many commanders from Kobane, Mazloum Kobani Abdi identified his own childhood street and home as a "line of no further retreat" for the defenders; even then, his house changed hands twice before it was ultimately destroyed as collateral damage in U.S. airstrikes.[6] In the words of one U.S. senior advisor, "It was 'touch and go,' and the Kurds faced possible defeat right up until the tide turned in December."[7]

U.S. Air Support to the Kobane Pocket

The desperate nature of the fighting and the concentration of valuable Islamic State targets in Kobane was an irresistible draw for the international media and became a fixation for all members of the anti-IS coalition. The battle, the first test of U.S. airpower's ability to operate in direct support of a Syrian Kurdish partner force, had daily attention "all the way up to Obama."[8] The provision of air support was primarily driven by the exigency to fight IS wherever it could quickly be fought, without putting U.S. boots on the ground. In September 2014, that place was Kobane. "This was a golden opportunity to kill [Islamic State members] in large numbers while we worked out our national strategy," one very senior special operations officer recalled. "It was a veritable blood magnet."[9]

Within the pocket were two "tablet-holders"—Iraqi Kurdish Counter-Terrorism Group operators cleared by the United States to operate U.S.-provided Samsung Galaxy tablets with a Google Maps–type application.[10] Using cellphones to communicate coordinates,[11] these individuals requested many of the more than six hundred airstrikes that bolstered the Kobane defense, mostly falling along an urban

frontline three miles long and a few hundred yards deep.[12] The U.S. end of the process—in Sulaymaniyah—was termed the "expeditionary targeting force."[13]

"It was not all unicorns and rainbows," noted one U.S. special operator, who liaised with the YPG from the U.S.-CTG hub in Sulaymaniyah. "It was 'trust but verify,' and we did not always agree on strikes."[14] The system sometimes went wrong, often because of garbled voice transmission of coordinates, and the Kurds believe they suffered "over twenty incidents of friendly fire" from strikes being misdirected or dropping too close to YPG forces.[15] One very senior U.S. Special Operations officer remembered it differently, and is worth quoting in full:

> We were given the green light to target [the Islamic State] just in the immediate vicinity of Kobane, and it was facilitated by YPG personnel who lived with us in Sulaymaniyah. It was kind of unique in that we would show them our [full-motion video] live, they would call back to their guys in Kobane, who would say, "That's us and that's them [IS], you can fire away." It was extraordinary—we did hundreds, if not thousands, of close air support missions, danger close [i.e., in danger of hurting friendly forces] in almost every case because it was street-to-street fighting, and only had two mistakes. In that kind of fight to have only two cases of fratricide was a point of pride, and in both cases the YPG said, "Hey, this was our fault, keep going."[16]

Whatever the exact number, these accidents were readily accepted at a time when individual defenders were engaging in suicide attacks to blunt the assault. Arin Mirkan, a Women's Protection Units platoon commander from Afrin, made an extraordinary stand at the infamous Mistenur Hill, the gateway to Kobane, when IS fighters were rapidly advancing. "Arin told the women of her platoon to pull back. Then she strapped as many grenades and explosives as she could to her body, tied them to a single trigger and ran down the hill towards the jihadists," YPG fighter Azad Cudi noted in his memoir on the Kobane battle.[17]

As the YPG switched over to the offensive, the airstrikes continued

to pave the way. "Every single house they destroyed, then [assaulted] the rubble," noted one CTG observer.[18] Kobane would be the first of many operations in which access to U.S. firepower would not only turn the tide but also change the tactical fighting style of the partner force—and vastly increase the material destructiveness of the fighting. One commander recalled the following:

> In the military field, the YPG forces on the ground have always been ready to sacrifice their lives, and they have gained experience; but, at the same time, without air forces it would have been more difficult. The coalition forces, as our partners, have air forces and can target the [Islamic State] from above, but it would not be useful with a ground force like the YPG. Therefore, the partnership means that we complete each other, and the victories are for the both sides.[19]

Materiel Support During Kobane

The Kobane battle also saw the United States provide two other forms of support to the YPG: the airdrop of supplies and diplomatic pressure on Turkey to open a line of supply to the YPG pocket. On October 19, 2014, the YPG received its much-publicized inaugural U.S. airdrop,[20] which included Eastern Bloc weapons such as AK-type assault rifles, PKM machine guns, and ammunition, plus rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenades. (The RPGs and grenades were destroyed by a U.S. airstrike after dropping behind IS lines.[21]) The delivery—twenty-four tons of arms and ammunition, plus ten tons of medical supplies dropped by three C-130s—would be the last U.S. materiel airdropped to the YPG until October 2015. Meanwhile, U.S. diplomatic actions in October 2014 secured Turkey's grudging agreement to allow 50 Syrian Arab opposition fighters and 150 Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga later that same month to transit from Iraqi Kurdistan through Turkish territory.[22] The troops were sent to reinforce the Kobane pocket and support the counteroffensive that gathered pace until IS broke off its

siege on January 26, 2015. [23] In a nod to Ankara's concerns, the United States provided Turkey with exact listings of all proposed equipment and ammunition that U.S. forces intended to truck into Kobane, which the Turks were able to veto, item by item.[24]

The siege of Kobane marked the first real battlefield defeat for the Islamic State, and a costly one in terms of its experienced foreign fighter cadre.[25] The Kurds had seen what American airpower could do, and the United States had witnessed the Kurds hang on while they defended other frontlines in the Jazira canton. Kobane raised the morale of all forces fighting the Islamic State, but it became a special point of pride for Kurds everywhere. Global attention was seized, propelling images of YPG men—and perhaps more important for Western audiences, women—undertaking what looked like a desperate existential struggle in Stalingrad-type city fighting. "Kobane had about 3,000 fighters after the city was liberated. [A total of] 1,253 fighters were martyred during Kobane's liberation—and there were almost 3,000 wounded fighters," Mazloum said.[26] To the Turkish and U.S. detractors of the YPG, the Kobane battle spelled trouble, threatening to "whitewash" the YPG/Kurdistan Workers Party connection and override concerns about a YPG and ethnic power grab in northeast Syria. The defenders of Kobane had certainly burnished the YPG's international reputation, and any concerns about PKK lineage were far from the minds of U.S. officials.[27] "Kobane made these folks," one U.S. senior advisor noted. "It was their fight."[28] (See Annex C for map of the Kobane operation.)

Expansion of the YPG and YPJ After Kobane

The YPG had begun a mass mobilization in late summer 2013, but this effort did not really accelerate until after Kobane. Volunteers flooded in, especially women. Indeed, the YPJ's key role in the battle of Kobane resulted in a boost both in numbers and in the profile of female

commanders and fighters. Unlike the all-volunteer female force, not all new male fighters were volunteers. Conscription became more tightly enforced and widespread, with "press-ganging" of conscripts at checkpoints and aggressive pursuit of those evading service, many of whom went abroad.[29] Before Kobane, there were only two inductions of trainees (totaling 212) to the Self-Defense Forces (HPX) in 2014, compared with nine courses of trainees (totaling 3,998) held in 2015.[30] Larger forces were necessitated by battlefield attrition and the growing area controlled by the YPG and its partners, and the resultant long and exposed frontline facing the Islamic State. Command academies began preparing to teach *tabur* and *foj* (brigade) commanders' skills related to slightly larger military operations in anticipation of scaled-up force structures.

In training camps for the Syrian Democratic Forces, up to forty-five days of military training[31] would be accompanied by more than sixty days of ideological indoctrination based on Abdullah Ocalan's books.[32] These ideological courses promoted the so-called democratic nation ideology and democratic autonomy in pursuit of a decentralized form of governance within Syria based on local assemblies and communes.[33] Such a system could also be adopted by other ethnic communities, both within and beyond Syria's borders, including those in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. [34] According to the YPG, its ideological indoctrination of Syrian Kurds and non-Kurds was intended to bond Syrians together. "Our intention, guided by the writings of our leader Abdullah Ocalan (aka Apo) was to embrace...difference, and using tolerance to create [a] community, we would break the cycle of tribe against tribe...," wrote Azadi Cudi, a YPG fighter from Iranian Kurdistan.[35]

Arab Motivations for Joining the SDF

Arab trainees tactfully accepted the political instruction but did not tend to show much interest in more abstract elements of Ocalanist ideology.[36] One YPJ commander, Zelal Afrin, noted the failure of such

efforts in Kobane during the early years of the Syrian civil war, when it was hoped that Ocalanist ideology might protect local Arab populations from anti-Kurdish and pro-IS incitement.[37] However, ideology alone failed, with Zelal Afrin recalling, "Despite the fact that we were backed by leader Apo's ideas and our paradigm, we failed to integrate the Arab population in the system. That was the main weakness of [the Kobane] administration."[38]

Combat motivation for Arabs was different from that for Kurds, the YPG learned. Payment was a sine qua non. An Arab commander in the SDF added that "all the Arabs in SDF joined for the salary; not because they believe in the ideology."[39] But such a view may be too cynical, because Arab troops had other motivations. Some joined to defeat IS or defend their towns, including members of the al-Shaitat tribe, more than seven hundred of whom were massacred by the Islamic State.[40] "Many of the youth in Deir al-Zour joined the SDF, ideologically, to fight against [the Islamic State] and liberate their city—that also included the Shaitat fighters who have suffered most," one Arab commander noted.[41] Where Arabs showed more interest in ideology, it related more to practical instruction on local self-administration.[42]

Victory was also a major boon to recruitment. Following the victory at Kobane, the YPG became an even more attractive partner to local Arab factions than it had been in 2014. Not all Arab tribes favored the YPG, however; some still maintained ties to the Bashar al-Assad regime or, later, the Russians, but more Arab factions began to align with the YPG. In addition to its status as a rising military force, the YPG now had a signature victory under its belt and, seemingly, U.S. backing as well. The Euphrates Volcano Operations Room, built on longstanding ties to Manbij Arab militias,[43] began to absorb a variety of Arab micro-brigades (usually with well under two hundred fighters) wearing a bewildering array of unit and subunit patches.[44] In early 2015, Jaish al-Thuwar (JaT, the Army of Revolutionaries), the largest

addition with up to five hundred fighters, formed a tight connection to the YPG.[45]

Command and Control

At this point, the YPG and its command setup were still quite opaque to the United States. The YPG was secretive and untrusting because of the past cooperation between Turkey and the United States against the PKK. Yet the beginnings of a partnership with the United States was changing the YPG. In the PKK, a strong tradition of collective leadership and regular rotation of commanders prevents commanders from creating personal fiefdoms or corruption networks. There are indicators that, after Kobane, the PKK began considering recalling Mazloum Kobani Abdi and Newroz Ahmed, the YPG and YPJ co-commanders. According to multiple U.S. and Kurdish interviewees, this rotation was resisted by Lahur Sheikh Janghi Talabani and the United States.[46] Lahur Talabani successfully argued the case with the PKK that the Americans needed a stable interlocutor. Mazloum and Newroz were kept, albeit with a military council watching over them through the supervision of several *cadros*.[47] The PKK itself may have seen the value of keeping Mazloum as the focal point for engaging the Americans, but U.S. engagement nevertheless forced the Qandil away from its typical modus operandi and outside its comfort zone.

Whether the PKK willingly or grudgingly left Mazloum in place, this deviation from PKK doctrine was an early indicator that the victors of Kobane, under an international spotlight instead of cloistered in mountain camps under tight PKK control, might begin to evolve toward a looser relationship with the PKK "mother ship." Perhaps because of U.S. public use of the title, Mazloum began to be referred to as "General Mazloum," a term that is not used within the YPG or the PKK, neither of which has a traditional military command structure.[48] He developed an unprecedented public profile previously reserved for leaders such as

Abdullah Ocalan and Masoud Barzani, a sign of the "Syrianization" of leadership of the YPG and potentially of a growing distance between the PKK leadership in the Qandil and the YPG leadership in Syria.

Below the level of the YPG General Command, which possessed a negligible staff function, were nearly a dozen subordinate commands, referred to variously as "field," "area," or "front" commands. Each of these combat commands had a frontline or rear territorial area of responsibility and was led by a senior commander. The threadbare arsenal of heavy weapons—including a few old howitzers, mortars, and rocket launchers, some homemade—was grouped at this level, as was onward distribution of ammunition and supplies.[49] The "coordination room" of each front consisted of nothing more than the senior commander, a "right-hand guy" (a man or woman functioning as an executive officer), one or two additional trusted aides who might be tasked as urgent jobs emerged, and the essential tea boy.[50] On the frontline, especially on attacking fronts, each headquarters also had a communications techie (a Syrian who was good with computers, akin to a commander's "help desk") and a "tablet-holder" who fed strike requests back to the Americans.[51] In 2015, the front commands were small battalions by Western standards: as one U.S. advisor noted about the front commanders, "He'll tell you he has six thousand guys, but actually he has six hundred."[52]

Below the level of the front command was a gaggle of *taburs*, the forces of forty to sixty troops that Kurds thought of as battalions and that American special operators referred to as squadrons. The *tabur* leaders—termed "FLOT[53] commanders" by the United States—were elected by their unit. In turn, the *tabur* commander selected *takim* commanders (termed "troop commanders" by U.S. special operators) who led "bunches of squads." The lowest level was the *tim* (team or squad) of three to eight fighters. (For reference, echelon designations such as *tabur*, *takim*, and *tim* are all used by the PKK but differ from those used by the KDP and by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's Peshmerga,

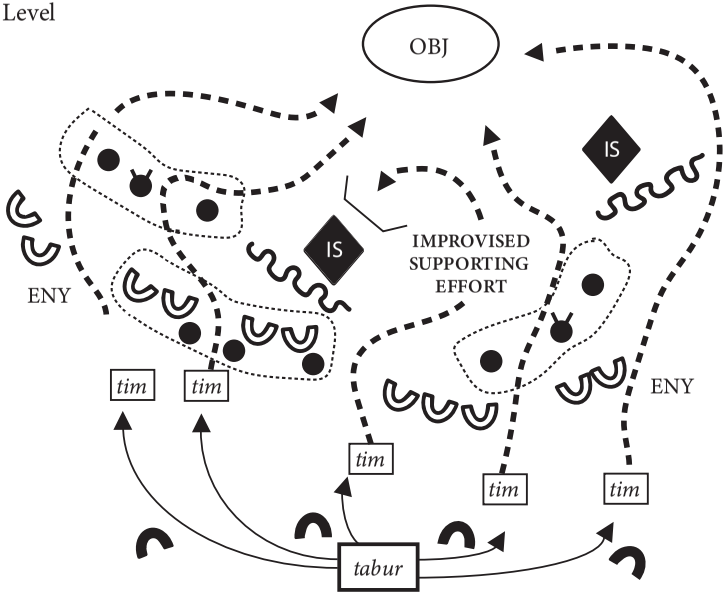
and by the Arab opposition forces; this is another indicator of the PKK *cadro*'s role in structuring the YPG.[54])

Though not a strict distinction, the *tabur* often came in two varieties: local or static *tabur* and mobile *tabur*. The former were geographically tethered village defense guards who held strongpoints at crossroads and town entrances in the rear or along the quieter parts of the front. Armed with rifles and hand grenades, they were teenagers and older men keeping watch on the enemy from multistory buildings and *tals* (raised mounds) with good lines of observation, in the manner of a picket line.[55] They were not expected to put up firm resistance but rather to function as a tripwire for mobilization. One *cadro* (a PKK veteran) might be present to advise such forces.[56]

The mobile or attacking *tabur* were the strike forces of the YPG and YPJ, typically young, fit Syrian Kurdish men and women in their twenties who had undergone YPG/YPJ ideological and military training. These *tabur* often had a couple of dedicated gun trucks ("technicals") mounting a Dushka, and sometimes even jury-rigged wheeled armored vehicles. The *tabur* also had sufficient pickup trucks and fuel to move up to and recover back from the front on a daily basis. Men from the YPG and women from the YPJ fought alongside each other in the *tabur*, with female fighters performing all roles, including light infantry, sniper, and heavy weapons duties.[57] PKK fighters (including female YPJ fighters) would mix in with local recruits, often handling special weapons such as RPGs, PKMs, or sniper rifles.[58] Some accounts exist of specialized *cadro*-only *tabur* and Iraqi Kurdish or Western volunteer units[59] with light infantry skills a cut above those of the YPG mobile *tabur*.[60] Most *tabur* would take an objective (i.e., a village) and then consolidate, handing off the offensive to a new *tabur* when they moved to the next objective. *Tabur* were not expected to keep taking objectives, in constant contact with the enemy: significant rest periods were thus built into their operational tempo, which more often than not was a source of frustration for units that saw only short, sharp episodes of

Fig. 2.1 YPG/SDF Infiltration Tactics at *Tabur* Level

- Islamic State defenses are arrayed in depth, with squad-size observation posts and fighting positions nested within dense barrier minefields.
- SDF infiltrating forces identify an undefended tactical objective such as a multistory building.
- Squad-size tim (teams) cautiously but persistently infiltrate toward the objective (OBJ), avoiding contact with the enemy (ENY) where possible, using cover and concealment.
- *Tim* move independently, without offering each other mutual support and without deliberate use of bounding movement.
- *Tim* do not try to develop a base of fire or win the firefight with the enemy.
- *Tim* consolidate in pursuing the objective, fortifying themselves within a defensible structure.
- *Tim* use Motorola communications to observe enemy movements and call in fire missions.
- SDF presence draws either enemy counterattack or withdrawal, with either eliciting coalition/SDF fire.



- Feeding of supports into the fight
- Forward casualty collection point
- Tablet holder coordination of coalition fire requests
- Opportunistic heavy sniping with scoped rifles, heavy machine guns, and occasionally recoilless rifles
- Occasional preattack mortar or rocket preparation or visible enemy strongpoints

combat.[61] This practice probably also maintained the readiness of *tabur* for new operations.

YPG Operations in 2015

The siege of Kobane gave way to an immediate YPG effort to exploit operational momentum and U.S. airstrikes to link the Kurdish cantons at Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira. The YPG had long nursed a desire to unite the cantons in an effort to create a contiguous territory. Yet Turkey presumed the expansion would not stop with one contiguous YPG zone. Ankara feared that a Syrian Kurdish–controlled zone that provided a trade route to the Mediterranean Sea would give the landlocked Kurds more independence from its neighbors and allow them to circumvent a Turkish blockade on Rojava (and to potentially export oil through the sea).[62] Thus, Turkey justified its operations against the YPG by arguing that it intended to "disrupt the terror corridor [that YPG] want to create from the east to the Mediterranean."[63]

This resulted in the first major U.S. input into YPG strategy, with Washington warning the Kurds against immediately going west, across the Euphrates, toward Jarabulus. The YPG had a legitimate concern that the IS crossing point at Jarabulus, just twenty-five miles from Kobane, presented a major threat in the YPG's rear.[64] The United States also wanted Jarabulus closed, but Washington knew that Turkey would react violently if the Kurds crossed west of the Euphrates in what would probably become a broader offensive to link Afrin and Kobane.[65] In the first of many such inflection points, the YPG accepted Washington's ruling and instead turned east from Kobane, trusting the United States to guard its western flank against IS, along the Euphrates River.

Removing the Islamic State from the Kobane-Jazira area meant clearing IS from a fifteen hundred–square-mile corridor between the Turkish border and the M-4 highway. On the Jazira side, the eastern

Hasaka operation came first, in February and March 2015, ultimately clearing the Islamic State from a forty-mile-wide front to a depth of twenty miles. The sequel in May 2015 was the month-long western Hasaka operation, which liberated parts of rural Tal Tamer and Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye in Kurdish) as part of another twenty-mile-deep clearance across a fifty-mile front. Hasaka city was defended against an IS assault in June–August 2015 by the YPG and Christian and Arab forces (including Assad regime troops, who remained in Hasaka after the battle).

After clearing the Kobane countryside by late April 2015, the YPG and allied forces struck out toward the border town of Tal Abyad (Gire Spi in Kurdish) and the administrative center of Ain Issa. The operation was a major success, clearing more than five hundred square miles in forty days of operations at a cost of around fifty fatalities, and linking the Kobane and Jazira cantons.[66] Watching from afar, the U.S.-led coalition got a taste of the operational style of the YPG: quite rapid rates of advance in open country using pickup truck–mounted light infantry; pincer movements on multiple axes; and a growing capacity to liberate small cities in tough urban fighting, aided by coalition air support. Even more important from the coalition's perspective, the YPG and its partners had just closed off one of the Islamic State's main lines of communication with Turkey. Tal Abyad was where Turkey had negotiated the return of its Mosul consulate staff, which IS had held hostage until September 20, 2014,[67] and thus was a key link in the pipeline that brought foreign fighters from Turkey into Syria and Iraq.

The YPG had quickly shut down an important foreign fighter entry point to the Syria-Iraq theater—something that Turkey, a NATO ally, had refused to do, despite repeated entreaties from the United States. As the YPG and its partners advanced in the summer of 2015, senior leaders in Washington saw a force that had received little U.S. support. Furthermore, they appeared to be successfully driving back the Islamic State and picking up significant numbers of Arab recruits from forty-six

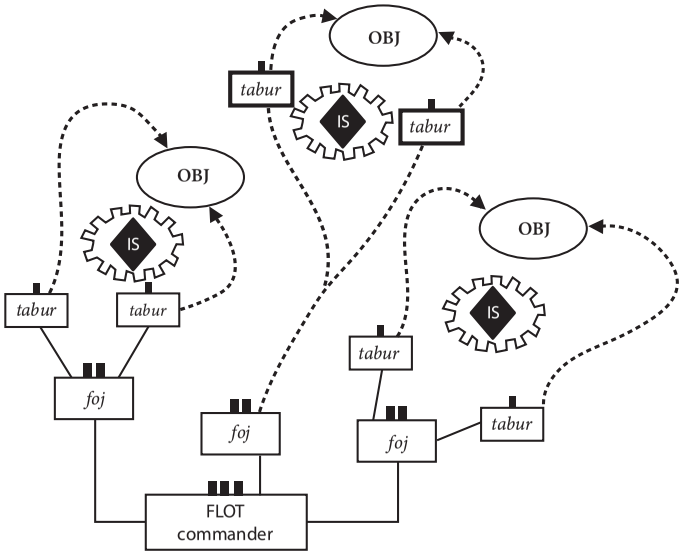
Fig. 2.2 Multi-Axis Envelopments at *Foj* and FLOT Levels

- *Tabur* (battalions) act as the horns of double envelopment attacks, which aim to endanger the enemy line of retreat and resupply.
- The aim is to lever the enemy out of the objective (OBJ), which is preferable to clearing out trapped enemies.
- Each *tabur* identifies daily tactical objectives and consolidates in pursuing the objective.
- *Tabur* attack rarely for subsequent days, instead being relieved by other tabur that maintain forward momentum.
- The disruptive penetrating effect of multiple axes can have a cumulative effect on the integrity of defenses.

- *Foj* (regiment) level will coordinate a multi-tabur advance.
- *Foj* level will have tablet holders.
- Some heavy weapons (ZSU-23, recoilless rifles) will be retained at this level.
- Field kitchens and forward medical air posts will be located here.
- Earthmovers may be allocated at this level.
- Reserve *tabur* will be pushed forward from *foj* level to reinforce success or consolidate gains.

- As new tactical objectives are set, follow-up SDF forces back-clear the areas between the old forward line of own troops (FLOT) and the newly seized objectives.
- Counter-IED and stabilization forces enter the newly cleared area to secure key nodes, deliver water, and undertake emergency reconstruction.

- FLOT commander is often accompanied by coalition joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs).
- May include coalition-trained SDF mortar teams with Android Team Awareness Kit (ATAK) software.
- Tactical quadcopter drones may be operated at FLOT commander level.
- Maintenance/salvage and forward surgical teams are available at this level.



different subtribes along the way,[68] a far cry from the frustrating lack of progress with the U.S.-supported VSO in northwest Syria.[69] The battlefield successes of the YPG and its allies repeatedly confounded the skepticism of the U.S. intelligence community that the force could defeat IS in tactical engagements, and seemed to offer an alternative outlet for VSO funding and weapons.[70]

Allegations of YPG Ethnic Cleansing

Though the YPG was gaining large numbers of Arab recruits, the group was also accused of "ethnic cleansing" or forced displacement of Arabs by a range of actors, from the partial (Turkey[71] and the pro-Syrian-opposition Syrian Network for Human Rights[72]) to the impartial (Amnesty International).[73] In a prominent and controversial two-part series in the *Nation*, journalist Roy Gutman produced detailed allegations of YPG massacres, limits on the resettlement of displaced Arabs, and the deliberate destruction and looting of Arab properties by YPG fighters, citing YPG defectors and Kurdish and Arab witnesses.[74] The YPG issued an incident-by-incident rebuttal to Amnesty International, setting up years of arguing over the facts.[75]

It is clear that numerous individual Arab compounds were razed in areas of Tal Abyad that were perceived as pro-IS, including Tal Hamis, Suluk, and Tal Barak. The authors' canvassing of a variety of interviewees made clear that YPG and allied forces did engage in excesses and lacked battlefield discipline, particularly in some cases where they had met very tough resistance and taken heavy casualties.[76] This view is not an excuse for war crimes but rather a common explanation for troop behavior in civil wars. Amnesty International and the United Nations assessed that such instances fell short of systematic ethnic cleansing. For instance, Amnesty said that people whose properties were taken were targeted as individuals and not as a community, and that Arabs

in other areas were not affected.[77] The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic concluded in 2017 that it found no "evidence to substantiate claims that YPG or SDF forces ever targeted Arab communities on the basis of ethnicity, nor that YPG cantonal authorities systematically sought to change the demographic composition of territories under their control through the commission of violations directed against any particular ethnic group."[78]

If that is true, why did so many Arabs flee their villages and not return until after the YPG was pushed out of those areas by Turkish forces in late 2019? Insight from multiple interviewees suggests that many Arab tribes preemptively fled their villages because of heavy fighting and because they feared reprisals.[79] Immediate return was also limited because the areas were designated "military zones" in which resettlement was not immediately safe and was not permitted. YPG commander Berxwedan credibly claimed that the YPG delayed returns because the areas were riddled with landmines and booby traps (a very real threat to civilians)[80] but also to protect against reinfiltration by IS sleeper cells. Although some Arab and Kurdish families were quickly readmitted, many others did not return until after Turkey's incursion into the area in October 2019.[81] Some displaced people did not have a home to return to, especially in areas where villages were deliberately razed.

Overall, though, if people wished to return to their villages, they were allowed to do so. Recognizing the need to meet international expectations with regard to the return of displaced persons, and at pains to avoid confirming the impression of ethnic cleansing, the YPG did readmit Arab tribes, even those closely associated with the Islamic State. Some instances of house confiscation have been recorded.[82] Those people returning to their original residential areas did not need any special sponsorship or paperwork. To those individuals who wished to reside somewhere other than their original community, or to those traveling long distances back to their home community, however, the YPG (and later the SDF) issued a special identification card that required a local

sponsor.[83] A reconciliation council and joint Kurd-Arab administration was established in Tal Abyad, with two Tal Abyad co-mayors—an Arab and a Kurd—appointed by local leaders.[84] YPG and allied military forces left urban areas, and the YPG-led Kobane and Jazira administrations provided humanitarian support to Tal Abyad towns.[85]

Though one can ponder why more Arabs did not return, one factor is clear: they did not want to return from Turkey or Europe to a war zone, even to places now cleared of IS. Instead, some Arabs chose to live in the comparatively peaceful country of Turkey. This reality is underlined by the fact that there has not been a full return of Arab refugees to the Free Syrian Army–controlled parts of Syria, either, or even to Turkish-held parts of Tal Abyad after the October 2019 incursion. Though nothing is ever fully clear in a civil war, the YPG apparently did enough to prevent the issue of ethnic cleansing from disqualifying the group from receiving international assistance, and instead attempted to meet international expectations.

U.S. Military Support to YPG Advances

The summer 2015 battles were also a validation of the remote model of directing U.S. airstrikes onto Syrian battlefields from bases in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq; Jordan;[86] and the continental United States. Observed through overhead surveillance, the YPG's tactical fighting style became more apparent to U.S. military officials. The YPG and its partners sniped during the day (with a variety of weapons[87]) and maneuvered at dusk and dawn with limited organic fire preparation or fire support. Their maneuver elements were small squads, which were dotted across the front in the manner of a skirmish line, with "supports" fed in as reinforcements to exploit success.[88] One U.S. special operator noted the following:

> Every YPG operation was an "economy-of-force" operation. They rarely massed and they didn't have a lot of crack fighters. It was always just sending five guys into a village. They find the targets and we bomb them. It was expensive munitions-wise, but it worked.[89]

The fire support mechanism was straightforward: CTG-trained tablet-holders in Syria would mark their positions and convey strike requests to the tiny four-man U.S. strike cell in Sulaymaniyah. U.S. analysts based in the continental United States would then use a variety of forms of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to validate the target.

At this point in the campaign, the U.S. air strategy was more focused on destroying IS targets than on directly supporting the YPG's schemes of maneuver, per se. Indeed, the United States aided the YPG in a mostly indirect manner. Whether or not the YPG requested fire, the YPG offensives forced the Islamic State to reposition forces, tactically maneuver, open fire, and communicate—all "military signatures" that spotlighted the Islamic State's otherwise low-visibility forces and justified a strike under the very strict U.S. rules of engagement.[90]

Washington had remarkably little interest in the composition and order of battle of the YPG: the FLOT maps kept by the small U.S. Special Operations team did not even include YPG unit identifiers,[91] because all that mattered was the difference between IS forces and the forward line of YPG troops. "There were red blobs and green blobs," said one U.S. special operator, referring to red (enemy) and green (non-U.S., non-enemy) polygons drawn on the map.[92] One of the most valuable fruits of the Sulaymaniyah-Syria connection was thus the constant updating of the green-marked YPG frontlines.[93]

In the post-Kobane operations of February–August 2015, the coalition undertook 1,467 airstrikes in Syria, of which a significant proportion supported the YPG. According to the Airwars database, the Hasaka operations were directly or indirectly supported by 779 strikes, and the

rapid push on Tal Abyad was supported by 90 strikes.[94] In July 2015, as the urban fights for both Hasaka city and Tal Abyad were underway, the coalition launched 371 airstrikes in Syria, its highest monthly number until that point.[95] Journalists reporting from the frontline in Hasaka city mentioned "constant coalition airstrikes, except when the coalition aircraft were away and the Assad regime nipped in to do barrel-bombing."[96] At the end of each day, a second shift at the Sulaymaniyah strike cell would relieve the dawn-to-dusk crew and "go hunting all night for Islamic State targets."[97] The so-called deep fight struck IS "command and control nodes, pre-attack staging areas, convoys, fighters, ammunition storage sites, avenues of approach, and bomb-making facilities."[98]

The YPG was deeply impressed by U.S. ISR and firepower.[99] The Tal Abyad operation was perhaps the biggest eye-opener for the Kurds, with large swathes of land and tough urban fights concluded in a just over a month, with very few YPG casualties.[100] One YPG commander noted that, by pairing YPG ground forces and coalition airpower and intelligence, "the partnership [meant] that we [completed] each other."[101] As it began to benefit from more coalition air support, the YPG began to adapt its operational tempo to daylight attacks. The group began to depend more on U.S. airpower to reduce the number of casualties, with one Kurdish commander remarking,

> Previously, we would use artillery to target a location, then heavy weapons, Dushkas, and then conduct the ground assault—but now the airstrikes target the enemy lines first. When the fighting intensifies now, our forces will withdraw and the airstrikes...continue.[102]

Formalization of U.S. Support in Late 2015

U.S. support for the Syrian opposition reached an inflection point in late summer 2015, whereupon the focus on the Arab-led northwest VSO

began to wane and Washington's interest in the Kurdish-led northeast Syrian opposition grew stronger and stronger. Frustration was intensifying between the United States and Turkey over Ankara's unwillingness to close the border or otherwise choke off the foreign fighter flow from its side. The proximate catalyst to a new U.S. policy was the increasingly obvious failure of Washington's "Plan A" in northwest Syria, where anti-Assad forces were being chivvied by the United States into a "west-to-east" offensive to close off the Islamic State's Jarabulus entry point from Turkey, through which tens of thousands of foreign fighters were heading to Syria and Iraq.[103]

Throughout 2015, U.S. government and congressional doubts about the Syria train-and-equip program had become increasingly public.[104] In mid-September, U.S. military leadership admitted to Congress that the $500 million effort to train Syrian forces against the Islamic State had resulted in just "four or five"[105] individual fighters being deployed to the battlefield.[106] Oversight of the Department of Defense's Title 10 support to the Syrian opposition unearthed deeply concerning transfers of U.S.-provided weapons and ammunition from the VSO to jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra,[107] a phenomenon—privately coined the "Nusra tax" by U.S. officials—that had also occurred (and gone unreported) in Title 50 intelligence operations with the VSO.[108]

Growing congressional demand for a "new strategy" in Syria coincided with the obvious success of the YPG-led Syrian forces, who had received practically nothing from the coalition except airstrikes since September 27, 2014, and some light weapons and resupply for three months during the Kobane battle. Throughout the summer of 2015, U.S. official commentary on the YPG became more and more positive,[109] reflecting the group's status as the only fighting force in the counter-IS war to deliver battlefield victories[110] at a moment when frontlines such as Ramadi in Iraq and the Marea Line in Syria were deadlocked. U.S. planners referred to the northeast Syrian subtheater in late 2015 as "a war of movement," in stark contrast to other deadlocked battlefields.[111]

Quietly, Washington was also impressed with the YPG's ability to provide accurate intelligence that formed the basis for the first major U.S. "capture or kill" raid into Syria—the May 15, 2015, killing of the Islamic State's oil and financial emir, Abu Sayyaf al-Tunisi.[112]

Also in summer 2015, the YPG sent a delegation of top commanders (including Mazloum) to Iraqi Kurdistan, to meet Brett McGurk, then deputy Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and Lt. Gen. Raymond Anthony "Tony" Thomas, the head of U.S. Joint Special Operations Command. By the account of multiple attendees, the meeting (like all previous U.S.-YPG leadership congresses) was candid, with Washington making no promises but extracting commitments from the YPG to abide by U.S. ground rules, especially an ongoing commitment (in place since Kobane) to not take part in the PKK campaign against Turkey.

Formation of the SDF

The idea of a new umbrella movement of northeast Syrian forces began to take shape in the summer as the United States gathered together eastern Syrian Arab tribal groups under the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) framework, which one U.S. officer memorably termed "the collection of Star Wars cantina guys"[113] because of their motley appearance and because of the difficulty in distinguishing "good guys from bad guys." The Islamic State could be defeated only by offensives into Arab-majority areas, and both the YPG and the United States recognized that such efforts would need Arab-majority forces. Thus, the YPG sought to develop a broader and more permanent governance and military structure than that used for experiments such as the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room. The YPG strongly opposed the parallel operation of separate armed forces in northeast Syria, citing the apparent internecine tensions that such parallelism caused in Syria and Iraq.[114] Recognizing that the YPG was obdurate on this issue, the SAC

accepted the condition of working within a shared umbrella movement, of which the YPG would undoubtedly be the main military player. This basic construct took form in the late summer and autumn of 2015 as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, or the Arabic QSD, which stands for *Quwat Suriya al-Dimuqratiya*).

The latter half of September 2015 saw both the damaging congressional testimony on the failure of the VSO and multiple accounts of U.S. equipment being given over to jihadists. Though some dissenting voices pointed to the likelihood of longer-term Turkish objections,[115] senior U.S. leadership[116] quickly accepted the idea of diversifying the U.S. effort to include more significant support for the YPG and its partners. On October 1, 2015, President Barack Obama approved a new train-and-equip program for SAC forces in northeast Syria, where a new YPG-IS battle for the Iraqi-Syrian border city of al-Hawl was newly underway.[117]

On October 10, the SDF was announced and became the vehicle through which U.S. assistance would be channeled. Although the SDF comprised ten major Kurdish, Arab, and Christian factions[118] upon its launch, it was clear to everyone that the YPG represented, in the words of one SDF commander, "the core column of the SDF."[119] And although it would be easy to view the formation of the SDF as a purely cynical effort to paper over the central role of the YPG,[120] the structure did build on longstanding (if unbalanced) multiethnic military alliances that had existed since the beginning of the war—what a Syrian commander termed the "trickle that became a flood" of Arab recruits.[121] The YPG increasingly became the leadership, administrative, and intelligence cadre at the heart of an increasingly multiethnic fighting force in which local units were encouraged to "keep their features and special status."[122]

On the same night that the SDF was formed, U.S. forces airdropped fifty tons of ammunition that U.S. spokesmen claimed made its way to the intended SAC recipients but that some Arab forces claimed was intercepted by the YPG.[123] Both claims were true. As Washington

noted at the time, the equipment did get to SDF leadership (i.e., the YPG) and was distributed to the SAC, albeit not immediately. Instead, the ammunition was drip-fed in a careful and documented manner. The arms eventually made their way to the SAC—but only on the YPG's terms, which tended to coincide with the manner in which Washington wanted the arms distributed.[124] The episode would be an early indicator of the rivalries and misunderstandings that persisted within a Kurdish-run multiethnic fighting force. Nevertheless, a new era of the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort in Syria had begun. As one U.S. advisor noted, "The program with the SDF rose out of the ashes of the failed train-and-equip effort with Turkey. This was much thriftier. By design, we didn't go big."[125]

Notes

1 Hussein Jammo, "Between Kurdistan and Damascus," *Now*, February 5, 2014, archived at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275142035_Between_Kurdistan_and_Damascus.

2 The authors thank Fabrice Balanche for his guidance on the population in place at the start of the battle.

3 The commander noted that some Kurdish YPG fighters had experiences in urban combat against IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian regime. However, it should be noted that the YPG's first main urban battle was in 2012–13 in Ras al-Ain. See Mehmet Emin Mutlu and Ersin Celik, *Soresa Azadiya Rojavaye Kurdistane-3- Bingeha Sorese* [The new age of revolutions: The freedom revolution of west Kurdistan; Foundations of the revolution (third book: Kobani, Afrin, Aleppo)] (April 2018), 69.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Luke Mogelson, "America's Abandonment of Syria," *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/27/americas-abandonment-of-syria.

7 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

8 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

9 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. Syria would always be the favored U.S. place to kill Islamic State foreign fighters. While IS in Iraq was more indigenous, a larger proportion of IS fighters in Syria were non-Syrian and non-Iraqi. Killing these fighters, and preventing their inflow and outflow from Europe, was a strategic priority for the coalition.

10 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

11 Authors' interview with Iraqi Kurdish official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

12 Jenna McLaughlin, "Most U.S. Airstrikes in Syria Target a City That's Not a 'Strategic Objective,'" *Mother Jones,* January 23, 2015, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/airstrikes-syria-kobani-statistics-operation-inherent-resolve/. Between September 2014 and January 2015, 70 percent of U.S. airstrikes supported the YPG in recapturing Kobane.

13 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

14 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

15 Authors' interview with Iraqi Kurdish official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

16 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

17 Azad Cudi, *Long Shot: My Life as a Sniper in the Fight Against ISIS* (W&N, 2019), Amazon Ebook, location 382, p. 42.

18 Authors' interview with SDF official 10: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

19 Authors' interview with SDF official Mustafa Bali, May 4, 2019.

20 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Airdrops Weapons and Supplies to Kurds Fighting in Kobani," *New York Times,* October 20, 2014. See also Constanze Letsch, "U.S. Drops Weapons and Ammunition to Help Kurdish Fighters in Kobani," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), October 20, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/us-drops-weapons-to-kurds-in-syria.

21 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

22 "The only way to help Kobane, since other countries don't want to use ground troops, is sending some peace-oriented or moderate troops to Kobane. What are they? Peshmerga...and [the] Free Syrian Army," Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu told BBC at the time. However, YPG top commander Mahmoud Berxwedan was not so positive about the FSA or the Peshmergas helping in Kobane, describing them as a Trojan horse and attempting to benefit from

the YPG's victory there. "We have agreed to their (FSA) deployment, thinking that we could manage them. If we said no to their deployment, they could have said, 'See! We want to help Kobane, but the YPG is not allowing us; the YPG wants Kobane to fall!'" Rodi Said and Dominic Evans, "Exclusive: Kurdish YPG Militia Expects Conflict with Turkey in Northern Syria," Reuters, July 5, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-idUSKBN19Q2S0. Also see "Islamic State Crisis: Syria Rebel Forces Boost Kobane Defence," BBC, October 29, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29814135.

23 Constanze Letsch and Fazel Hawramy, "Kurdish Forces Take Control of Syrian Town of Kobani," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), January 26, 2015.

24 Some of the more fragile (and explosive) weapons and munitions, such as RPG warheads, were much easier to deliver by land than by airdrop.

25 The Islamic State may have lost as many as 6,000 fighters because of the intensity of airstrikes. See "The Aspen Security Forum: SOCOM: Policing the World," July 21, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLjSx7M.

26 Authors' interview with SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Kobani Abdi, December 17, 2019; place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

27 Kobane-born Mahmoud Berxwedan and Afrin-born Narin Afrin (aka Narin Engizek), both Ocalanist PKK commanders, held overall command. Narin Afrin knew Ocalan and received ideological training from him. She spent a total of twenty years in the PKK's ranks. See Gareth Platt, "A Kurdish Female Fighter's War Story: 'I Don't Know How Many I've Killed in Kobani—I Don't See ISIS as Human,'" *International Business Times*, October 28, 2014. See also Uzay Bulut, "Frontline ISIS: The Real Story of Narin Afrini and the Kurdish Female 'Lions' Terrorizing Islamic State," *International Business Times*, October 21, 2014. Lower-level frontline commanders such as Zinarin Ahmed, Haqi Kobani, Zahra (as she is known), and Ciya Kobani earned lasting fame at Kobane.

28 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

29 Even advocates of the YPG recognize that forced conscription was aggressively implemented by the group, at some cost to its popularity. Alongside the desire to leave a war zone and find economic opportunities abroad, evading YPG conscription is a major reason that Syrian Kurds left YPG areas. For a useful dialogue, see Meredith Tax and Roy Gutman, "The Syrian Kurds and Allegations of War Crimes," *Nation*, February 21, 2017. For color on the conscription issue, see Roy Gutman, "America's Favorite Syrian Militia Rules with an Iron Fist," *Nation*, February 13, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/americas-favorite-syrian-militia-rules-with-an-iron-fist/.

30 Bedir Mullah Rashid, "Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria" (special report, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Istanbul, January 24, 2018), https://omranstudies.org/publications/reports/military-and-security-structures-of-the-autonomous-administration-in-syria.html.

31 Interviews suggest that forty-five days of basic training was the maximum, but circumstances (battlefield needs, prior training of former soldiers, nonavailability of trainers) often reduced basic training to fifteen days. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

32 The exception may have been foreign volunteers. Journalist Kenneth R. Rosen recalled the following from his reporting from inside Syria: "In international brigades of primarily Western volunteers, the teachings of Ocalan were downplayed and not as prominent." According to Rosen, such volunteers were often "Marxist and other factional groups of Westerners who fought in support of some other politically adjacent ideals." Authors' interview with Kenneth R. Rosen, email, September 27, 2020.

33 Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012), https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4615.

34 Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts (Kurdish Studies)* (London:

I.B. Tauris, 2019), 63. The PKK itself abandoned the idea of a Kurdish state in 1995, opting for a federal solution in Turkey.

35 Cudi, *Long Shot*, location 325, p. 47.

36 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

37 Mutlu and Celik, [New age of revolutions: (third book)], 28.

38 Ibid.

39 Authors' interview with Bandar al-Humaydi, July 22, 2019.

40 Oliver Holmes and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Islamic State Executed 700 People from Syrian Tribe: Monitoring Group," Reuters, August 17, 2014.

41 Authors' interview with Army of Revolutionaries (Jaish al-Thuwar) commander Ahmad Sultan (Abu Arraj), August 18, 2019.

42 Authors' interview with SDF official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

43 The years 2011 to 2014 saw significant Kurdish-Arab cooperation in the Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, and Manbij areas. Some Arab forces (e.g., Jund al-Haramain) retreated from IS through Kobane, sidestepping IS areas to get to and from Turkey. Others, such as Abu Layla's Shams al-Shamal and Kataib Thuwar Manbij, stayed to fight alongside the Kurds in Kobane. Euphrates Volcano and, later, the SDF were broader evolutions of existing Kurdish-Arab cooperative relationships. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

44 The largest units were the Jabhat al-Thuwar al-Raqqa (Raqqa Revolutionaries Front) and Liwa al-Tahrir (LaT, the Freedom Brigade).

45 The JaT was sheltered by the YPG in Afrin in 2014, much as members of the Jaish al-Sanadid, during their short exile from their home districts on the Iraq-Syrian border, were taken in by the Kurds of Hasaka.

46 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

47 If Mazloum wanted to make a large purchase of weapons, for instance, he would be required to get support from a majority of his council of half a dozen or so PKK "generals." Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request

48 In Syria, Mazloum told the co-author in private that he never referred himself as General Mazoum, adding that it was term given to him by the Americans. Authors' interview with Mazloum, December 2019.

49 According to one U.S. YPG volunteer with an eye for detail, YPG fighting units with specialist skills (armor, mechanics, "bomb squads, snipers, Duskha-only units with technicals, mortars, intelligence, and civil affairs") were respected above the others and composed largely of PKK veterans. Jack Murphy, "The PKK's War on ISIS: Organization and Structure," SOFREP, September 26, 2014, https://sofrep.com/news/pkks-war-isis-organization-structure/.

50 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 "FLOT" is the U.S. acronym for the frontline.

54 Dennis Chapman, *Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government* (Costa Meza, CA: Mazda Press, 2011), 75–77, 86.

55 Authors' interview with journalist 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also Murphy, "PKK's War on ISIS."

56 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request; and authors' interview with journalist 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also Murphy, "PKK's War on ISIS."

57 The YPJ appears to have control of administration and discipline of female fighters, while operational control is shared with the YPG.

58 Ibid.

59 One British volunteer recalled that the Iraqi Kurdish and Western *tabur* (called Soran after their commander) had special characteristics, "chiefly that [they] didn't accept women, used Hummers quite heavily, and were more at the forefront of battle than the average mixed YPG unit (disparagingly referred to as '*nobet tabors*' by Westerners,

for the long periods spent doing rotational guard duty)." Referring to one Westerner-only *tabur*, the volunteer added, "The 223 was an all-Westerners unit in 2015 and part of 2016, run by the American [Peter] Shervan. Their guys were mostly ex-military and of a higher professional standard than most Westerners out there. I'd avoid words like "elite" because they're overused and often misused. There's also the issue of how applicable Western tactics actually were, in the wider context of that conflict. But that's a long debate." Authors' interview with former British YPG volunteer Jim Matthews, July 30, 2020.

60 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. One unit, for instance—called Tabur Soran—comprised Iraqi Kurds and Western volunteers. See Baz Andok, "Remembering Heval Ciwan," YPG International (website), January 26, 2021, https://ypginternational.blackblogs.org/remembering-heval-ciwan/. See also Jim Matthews, *Fighting Monsters: From British Armed Forces to Rebel Fighter; A First-Hand Account of Battling ISIS* (London: Mirror Books, 2019).

61 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

62 Mark Townsend, "Syria's Kurds March on to Raqqa and the Sea," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), May 6, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/06/syria-kurds-raqqa-mediterranen.

63 Ari Khalidi, "Turkey's Idlib Move Aimed at Kurds' Mediterranean Ambitions," October 8, 2017, Kurdistan 24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/analysis/61d8ffec-1a62-4e9d-8d44-1351b6c7c8d6.

64 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

65 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

66 "Islamic State conflict: Syrian Kurds 'Seize Tal Abyad,'" BBC News, June 15, 2015.

67 Chris Johnston, "Isis Militants Release 49 Hostages Taken at Turkish Consulate in Mosul," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), September 26, 2014.

68 See Amy Austin Holmes, "Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-Led Syrian Democratic Forces," *Middle East Research and Information Project,* July 28, 2020, https://merip.org/2020/07/arabs-across-syria-join-the-kurdish-led-syrian-democratic-forces/; and Amy Austin Holmes, "SDF's Arab Majority Rank Turkey as the Biggest Threat to NE Syria: Survey Data on America's Partner Forces," Wilson Center, October 2019, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/sdf_arab_majority_rank_turkey_as_biggest_threat.pdf.

69 The VSO, which will be referred to repeatedly in subsequent sections, comprised the Syrian forces who were supported by the United States, from 2014 onward, in an effort to fight the Islamic State. The VSO is separate from the anti-Assad forces recruited earlier by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. VSO-accredited Syrian forces were allowed to receive U.S. lethal aid and air support. The VSO's main military role was to hold the Marea Line, from Azaz to Marea, which denied the Islamic State access to a strategic stretch of the Turkish border. For background on the Syria Train and Equip Fund and the VSO, see Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco, "Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS report R43727, June 9, 2015.

70 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

71 For instance, Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, "The YPG/PYD conduct ethnic cleansing wherever they go." See "U.S. Guarantees No PYD Presence West of Euphrates After Ops on ISIL: Turkish FM," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 7, 2016.

72 The Syrian Network for Human Rights is firmly aligned with Turkish-backed Arab opposition forces; it is not an impartial NGO but rather is associated with a combatant side.

73 "Syria: U.S. Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes," Amnesty International, October 13, 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/.

74 These controversial pieces were published in 2017. See Roy Gutman, "Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?" *Nation*, February 7, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/have-the-syrian-kurds-committed-war-crimes/; and Roy Gutman, "America's Favorite Syrian Militia Rules with an Iron Fist," *Nation*, February 13, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/americas-favorite-syrian-militia-rules-with-an-iron-fist/. See a response discussion here: Meredith Tax and Roy Gutman, "The Syrian Kurds and Allegations of War Crimes," *Nation*, February 21, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-syrian-kurds-and-allegations-of-war-crimes/. See also Gutman's earlier 2015 piece on displacement (which followed shortly after the Amnesty report): Roy Gutman, "Kurds Setting Up to Rule in Syrian Town Islamic State Held," McClatchy, November 1, 2015, https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/article42150300.html.

75 "YPG General Command: Amnesty International Report Is Contradictory," Firat News Agency, October 19 2015, https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/ypg-general-command-amnesty-international-report-is-contradictory-12971.

76 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

77 Amnesty International "Syria: U.S. Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes," press release, October 13, 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/.

78 UN Human Rights Council, Human Rights Abuses and International Humanitarian Law Violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016–28 February 2017, A/HRC/34/CRP.3 (March 10 2017), 21.

79 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also Fabrice Balanche, "Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel of the Syrian Kurdish Belt," PolicyWatch 3059, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/

tal-abyad-achilles-heel-syrian-kurdish-belt; and Mutlu and Celik, [New age of revolutions (third book)], 97.

80 Mutlu and Celik, [New age of revolutions (third book)], 97.

81 According to General Mazloum Kobani Abdi and other SDF leaders, these IS-affiliated families returned after Turkey took Tal Abyad in October 2019. As Mazloum said, "Institutions in North Syria have recorded 146 cases of [Islamic State] commanders/fighters who have returned to that area during [the] Turkish invasion. And some [Islamic State] families are back, as well; the Bello family, for instance—they were all affiliated with [Jabhat] al-Nusra and [the Islamic State]—now they are all back [in the] Tal Abyad region." Authors' interview with SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobani Abdi, December 17, 2019, place withheld at interviewee's request. According to Farhan al-Askar (Abu Wael), Raqqa Military Council commander, the core of IS in Tal Abyad was the village of Qinetra. "I have heard that half of the [Islamic State] families have returned. Faysal Bello, Fayz al-Akal, Muhanad Kichal, Abu Abdullah—all of them have returned to their houses in Tal Abyad." Authors' interview with Raqqa Military Council head Farhan al-Askar, December 11, 2019, place withheld at interviewee's request. On June 20, Akal, the former IS governor of Raqqa, was killed by an unidentified drone strike in Turkish-held al-Bab. Most likely, the former IS official was killed by a U.S. drone strike, but the United States does not confirm drone strikes against IS members in Turkish-occupied areas. See also Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Unidentified Drone Kills 3 Alleged ISIS Members in Turkish-Occupied Zone in Syria," Kurdistan 24, July 22, 2020, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/f4b42e35-8b92-4a69-8406-275f17973de9.

82 As one Carnegie Middle East Center article states, "FSA supporters in Manbij do have grievances against the SDF, which has confiscated the properties of FSA-affiliated members and their families, accusing them of cooperating with Turkish military operations in Syria." Hadid al-Saidawai, "The Meaning of Manbij," *Diwan*, October 5, 2018, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77417.

83 "Syria: Thousands of Displaced Confined to Camps," Human Rights Watch, August 1, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/01/

syria-thousands-displaced-confined-camps. See also UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa" Situation Report No. 6, May 23, 2017, 1–3, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Raqqa%20%20sit%20rep%2026%20May%20-n6_0.pdf.

84 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Young Female Mayor Breaks Boundaries in Syrian Town Freed from Islamic State," *Middle East Eye,* August 3, 2016. See also Mutlu and Celik, [New age of revolutions (third book)], 97.

85 Mutlu and Celik, [New age of revolutions (third book)], 97

86 A two hundred–person U.S. "joint targeting cell" was established in Jordan, drawing on U.S. divisional and field artillery brigade headquarters. This cell focused on developing of IS "deep targets" off the battlefield (i.e., leadership, bulk cash storage, oil, military reserves, and lines of communication), while the Sulaymaniyah cell focused on supporting the YPG scheme of maneuver and on providing battlefield support to YPG troops. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

87 Almost all YPG use of heavy weapons can be characterized as sniping—that is, the engagement of point targets with an individual weapon. In addition to individual marksmen with scoped rifles, the YPG used its Dushkas mostly to take aimed single shots (which also reduced jamming) and undertook "heavy sniping" with mortars, rockets, and other heavy weapons. Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

88 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Use of concepts such as the "skirmish line" with "supports" (reinforcing units fed into the line) harkens back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practices. See Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the American Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 110–12, 152–63.

89 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

90 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

91 The U.S. military never really developed a detailed picture of the YPG order of battle, in part because of the formless nature of YPG units, their gross variance in size, and their lack of differentiating unit names and patches. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

92 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

93 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

94 See the Airwars monthly report archive at https://airwars.org/reports/monthly-annual-assessment/.

95 Ibid.

96 Authors' interview with journalist 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

97 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

98 This list is drawn from a Combined Joint Task Force report from a later period but accurately reflects the kinds of non-FLOT targets struck in the so-called deep battle against enemy rear areas. Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2019–March 31, 2019*.

99 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

100 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

101 Authors' interview with SDF official 21: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

102 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

103 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

104 For instance, even in January 2015, the first detailed critiques were emerging in top-tier media outlets. For an early example, see Adam Entous, "Covert CIA Mission to Arm Syrian Rebels Goes Awry," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582.

105 The Syria train and equip program clearly delivered more than "four or five" trainees, but the numbers were not impressive. "Out of fifty-four graduates of the first training class, nine were still serving with active groups as of September 29, 2015. The second training class yielded seventy-five fighters who returned to the two major opposition groups they had previously served… By October 2015, however, [the Department of Defense] announced it would pause training of Syrian fighters after fewer than one hundred fifty trainees had completed the program." Authors' interview with U.S. official 23: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

106 Spencer Ackerman, "US Has Trained Only 'Four or Five' Syrian Fighters Against ISIS, Top General Testifies," *Guardian* (U.S. edition), September 16, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/16/us-military-syrian-isis-fighters.

107 "U.S.-Trained Syrian Rebels Gave Equipment to Nusra: U.S. Military," Reuters, September 26, 2015; and Nabih Bulos, "U.S.-Trained Division 30 Rebels 'Betray U.S. and Hand Weapons over to al-Qaeda's Affiliate in Syria,'" *Telegraph*, September 22, 2015.

108 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

109 Barak Barfi, *Ascent of the PYD and the SDF*, Research Note 32 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016): 2, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ascent-pyd-and-sdf.

110 Nour Malas, Ayla Albayrak, and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Allies in Syria Cut Islamic State Supply Line," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015.

111 Authors' interview with U.S. official 43: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

112 Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Official Killed in U.S. Raid in

Syria, Pentagon Says," *New York Times,* May 16, 2015.

113 Authors' interview with U.S. official 43: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

114 As one Syrian commander noted, "It was impossible to have two armies. Many were trying to establish independent military forces parallel to the YPG within Rojava's geography—yet it was not allowed. It was not considered an appropriate option, because there have been similar experiences in other countries around the world or even Syria itself where you could see multiple military forces could not agree, and were fighting each other all the time." Authors' interview with SDF official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

115 In the summer of 2015, Turkey was embroiled in its own new phase of military operations against the PKK.

116 That is, President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, National Security Advisor Susan Rice, and the newly appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

117 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

118 These comprised the YPG, the YPJ, the Al-Sanadid Army, the Syriac Military Council (Sotoro, or FMS), the Euphrates Volcano Joint Operations Room, the Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade, the Northern Sun Battalion, Liwa al-Tahir, the al-Jazeera Brigades Gathering, and Jaish al-Thuwar (JaT, including the Kurdish Front, Brigade 99, Special Operations Brigade 455, al-Salajiqa Brigade, Ahrar al-Zawiya Brigade, Sultan Salim Brigade, and Atarib Martyrs Brigade).

119 Authors' interview with SDF official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

120 This impression was encouraged, in part, by the very quotable remarks made by Joint Special Operations Commander Lieutenant General Thomas, who made the on-the-record comment that the adoption of the SDF moniker was linked to a U.S. admonition to "change your

brand," whereupon "with about a day's notice they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a stroke of brains to put democracy in there somewhere." See "The Aspen Security Forum."

121 Authors' interview with SDF official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

122 Authors' interview with SDF official 22: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

123 Roy Gutman, "Syrian Arab Militias Dispute They Received U.S. Airdrop of Ammunition," McClatchy, October 20, 2015, http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/article40543491.html.

124 Authors' interview with U.S. official 23: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

125 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

3

On the Ground: Al-Shadadi to Manbij

The first U.S. military advisors did not arrive in northeast Syria until the first week of December 2015.[1] The visit lasted seven days, including three full days on the Jazira (Hasaka) side and three on the Kobane side.[2]

U.S. Boots on the Ground

U.S. operators, who had been working with the local forces remotely for more than a year, described their physical arrival in the region as "surreal."[3] The handful of U.S. officers on the "contact team" met political, military, and tribal leaders from almost every faction of the Syrian Democratic Forces. At these meetings, the People's Defense Units made another effort to secure U.S. backing for a westward drive from Kobane to Afrin. "The first topic they raised was Afrin," recalled an individual with direct insight into the meeting, "and we told them, 'U.S. policy is not to go to Afrin.' We were always crystal clear on that."[4] U.S. officials were well-briefed on what they could and could not offer. Connecting the YPG cantons to build a YPG-led supercanton was not the aim—given that there were no Islamic State objectives to liberate in Afrin—and there was a conscious U.S. effort to avoid antagonizing Turkey if at all possible.[5] Upon seeing a large portrait of Abdullah Ocalan overlooking their meeting, U.S. commanders joked, "That's the first thing that's got to go."[6]

Weeks later, in January 2016, the first open visit was made to SDF territory (Kobane) by a U.S. civilian policymaker, Brett McGurk. Political and military leaders, primarily from the Democratic Union Party and the YPG, discussed political issues with McGurk, seeking (1) to tie future counter-IS cooperation to a seat at the planned Geneva peace talks, (2) U.S. partnership, and (3) help to reduce tensions with Turkey. McGurk told the leaders to forget about Geneva and to focus on seizing terrain, which would be more valuable in any settlement than a seat at an international conference.[7] The first priority, in the U.S. view, was al-Shadadi, a town south of al-Hawl that was the key switching point for the Islamic State's operational reserves.[8] The capture of al-Shadadi would greatly complicate the Islamic State's ability to shift forces back and forth between Iraq and Syria, and was thus considered "critical" to the U.S.-backed offensive toward Mosul.[9] When the YPG commanders of the SDF noted that their forces had already suffered heavy casualties, McGurk underlined the necessity of future offensive action, saying, "If you stop fighting [the Islamic State], we will not be able to justify continuing to support you."[10] The SDF's first operation, as instructed by the United States, was al-Shadadi.

The U.S. troops who entered northeast Syria were small in number, but they had an exceptionally tight connection to the SDF because they were from the same small Delta special mission unit that had supported the Kurdish-led forces since September 2014. Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Syria (CJSOTF-S) was established, and its commander would be dual-hatted as commander of the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force–Syria (CJIATF-S) in an effort to ensure joint control of other U.S. operations still ongoing in Syria (e.g., intelligence community operations and anti-Assad operations).[11] Arbitrary force limits meant that no more than fifty U.S. persons were allowed in-country at any time, resulting in some personnel "commuting" for part of the day from Iraqi Kurdistan during busy periods, and leaving before the end-of-day count. One group was based with the SDF

leadership at the Lafarge Cement Factory (LCF)—the Joint Operations Center–Syria (JOC-S)—covering high-level leadership engagement and Mid-Euphrates River Valley (MERV) operations. One "local JOC" was based with the Jazira region forces near Hasaka, initially focused on the al-Shadadi fight. Another local JOC, located near Ain Issa and focused on Raqqa and the central area between the cantons, was where the Raqqa Civil Council (in exile) was initially based before Raqqa was liberated.[12] These headquarters facilitated more reliable and higher-volume communications among Syria, Sulaymaniyah, and the continental United States.[13] On occasion, the United States could send small teams forward "in areas where contact with the enemy was not expected" to launch tactical unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and liaise with front commanders. Dynamic targeting of close-in threats, such as IS armored car bombs, became more regular, and collateral damage was reduced.[14]

Acceleration of SDF Advances

The United States immediately began supporting SDF offensives in the east and west. In al-Shadadi, the impact of the tightened U.S. support seemed directly apparent. At al-Hawl, in late 2015, two weeks of aerial bombardment (including 232 strikes, with around 850 munitions) preceded the two-week clearance operation across a forty-mile front, to a depth of thirty miles.[15] By contrast, the tougher nut of al-Shadadi was cracked in half the time, with around 97 strikes.[16] The attack used the typical YPG double-pincer maneuver. SDF strength was rapidly growing, with the five thousand–strong al-Shadadi attack force twice the size of that available for al-Hawl months earlier.[17] As ever, the YPG *tabur* (battalions) did most of the tougher fighting, which U.S. forward observers could see up close for the first time. One U.S. advisor noted the following:

> This was the first time we had really actually seen them in action. They were innovative, tactically proficient. We did detailed "green-force

> tracking" using the tablets. We got to see their Phase IV [stabilization] efforts go in, right after the fighting. Water trucks, police, fixing things.[18]

On the Kobane side, a similar impression was forming at Tishrin Dam, where the SDF undertook a deliberate short-range offensive to seize the strategic crossing in December 2015. Tishrin Dam needed to be preserved from potential demolition by IS; capturing the area would cut one route used by the Islamic State's foreign fighters to transit Turkey. Supported by a U.S. advisor team, the Tishrin operation was remarkably rapid—just four days of major fighting and two weeks overall—and succeeded with a force of fewer than two thousand fighters. As one advisor remarked, "It looked like previous operations but with more ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and [close air support], which made the SDF faster and more effective."[19] To defend a dam, a force must control both sides of the river; thus, the United States negotiated a concession from Turkey that allowed the SDF to cross the Euphrates—but no further than ten kilometers from the dam.[20] When the SDF complained that this condition would leave its bridgehead vulnerable to IS forces on higher ground outside the perimeter, the United States designed a solution: cratering all roads up to the high ground and selecting exact aimpoints for a heavy set of airstrikes on the crest if IS occupied that location.[21]

Often overlooked in discussion of the early 2016 period, these concurrent offensive operations were nearly disrupted by a powerful IS counteroffensive that intended to split the SDF's area in half once again. The February 2016 thrust, originating in Raqqa, sought to drive through Ain Issa and onto Tal Abyad. The SDF was holding a long frontline, and the cream of its offensive troops were at both extremes of that line. "We had a very long forty-eight hours," one U.S. advisor recalled.[22] Another added, "We had some very dark days then. The wheels came off the bus almost constantly."[23] The SDF showed significant defensive

resilience, including rapid defensive consolidation using earthmovers and emplacing IS landmines that had been previously cleared and stockpiled.[24] As important, the SDF's economy-of-force model meant that "they never massed, and, as a result, [car bombs] never had much to hit";[25] this approach was in opposition to the larger Iraqi military units, which tended to place platoons in line abreast, with their headquarters element predictably in the center of the line.

A key lesson emerged from the first three months of U.S.-SDF cooperation in early 2016. It was possible to mount two SDF offensives at the same time if two "lines" of ISR and strike aircraft could be made available. One U.S. officer noted, "We learned that the limiting factor was not the partner. The limiting factor was the ISR and [close air support]. We told them, 'We get you more, you have to do more.'"[26]

Coalition Objectives, Turkish Objections

At the start of 2016, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve had recently completed a campaign review.[27] This included an appraisal of partner forces, legal authorities, command structure, and commander's intent, as well as the design of a concept of operations for the rollback of the Islamic State.[28] The campaign assessment also sought to identify the strategic objectives of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, but quickly found that the coalition lacked shared views about what Syria might look like after a conflict or how to end the civil war.[29] National strategies on Syria (in the United States, France, and other key partner countries) were confused, and joint campaign objectives could not be less so. In fact, the objectives that one could grow into a campaign plan were necessarily simple in focus: the defeat of the military power and governance capacities of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In tangible terms, this meant destroying the Islamic State's fighting forces and stopping the inflow of replacement foreign fighters—and seizing back

control of all the cities, industries, and key terrain held by IS—in an effort to return its finances to that of a small insurgency, not a small country.[30]

The campaign commander, Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, did not have positive strategic outcomes to shoot for, but he had plenty of negative outcomes to avoid. Relations with Turkey, Iraq, and other partners were not to be disrupted.[31] Civilian deaths had to be absolutely minimized.[32] The on-the-ground footprint of U.S. forces was strictly capped at a level that had to be accounted for and proven daily.[33] Though the campaign had no identified end date, General MacFarland clearly felt the pressure to get results and end U.S. commitment as soon as possible,[34] taking into account the strictly limited forces and tactics. Like a surgeon, General MacFarland had to get in, do the job, put things back where they were, and get out.

General MacFarland's remaining choices were largely about sequencing. If an operation is a set of linked battles or tactical engagements, CJTF-OIR was confined to listing its military targets—tactical objectives—and deciding in which order to attack them. The Islamic State's two capitals were Mosul and Raqqa, but which should be assaulted first? The ground line of communication (GLOC) to Turkey acted as the Islamic State's windpipe, through which its reinforcements flowed in and its external attack plots flowed out. Another GLOC connected the two capitals, Raqqa and Mosul, via al-Shadadi.

In the spring of 2016, neither Mosul nor Raqqa was an attainable target, and the urgency of closing the foreign fighter pipeline was growing. In mid-November 2015, the IS attacks in Paris left 130 people dead, and in mid-March 2016, three suicide bombings in Brussels killed an additional 32.[35] The so-called Adnani External Operations Cell (named after the Islamic State's Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani) used Manbij as its "out-processing hub for external operations."[36] In early April 2016, following an unsuccessful meeting between U.S. president Barack Obama and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Washington,[37] the Obama administration gave up on an unresponsive

Turkish government after a year and a half of seeking its aid to close the border, during which time an estimated forty to fifty thousand foreign fighters had entered the Syria-Iraq battlespace.[38] As one U.S. official noted, "The SDF wanted a foothold across the Euphrates, we wanted to cut the external operations chain, and there was no other option but to put the SDF across the river in the Manbij operation."[39] The longstanding "Plan A" for the United States to close the Manbij gap—a west-to-east offensive by the vetted Syrian opposition on the Marea Line—finally ran out of chances.

It was not long before the United States was looking toward Manbij, where the foreign fighter channel could be closed off. Such efforts, however, would violate U.S. assurances to Turkey with regard to Kurdish-led forces not crossing the Euphrates in strength. The U.S. solution was thus to assure Turkey that the Manbij liberation force would be largely Arab and that the YPG parts of the SDF would not establish a permanent presence west of the Euphrates. This solution would also satisfy the Defense Department authorization, dated October 1, 2015, to support the Syrian Arab Coalition, which came before the SDF had even formed. Yet on-the-ground access to the SDF's daily operations made it clear to U.S. officials that such promises would be difficult to deliver in practice. The SDF's general command was dominated by two generals, Mazloum Kobani Abdi and Newroz Ahmed, who Turkey viewed as ongoing Kurdistan Workers Party operators under the command of the Qandil. Mazloum was by now a firm favorite of the U.S. government, viewed as an alliance builder and crisis manager par excellence.[40] Newroz was respected by the Americans as a capable logistician and planner, and she remained officially at the head of the Women's Protection Units.[41]

The U.S. government arguably misjudged Turkey's willingness to accept the Manbij operation. To the United States, the SDF's mainly YPG leadership appeared serious about not attacking Turkey, one of its earliest commitments to the United States. The YPG even supported the

entry of Turkish military forces to relocate the Suleyman Shah shrine (not far from Kobane and Manbij) to Turkey in February 2015.[42] Turkey still allowed U.S. aircraft based at Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to fly strike missions in support of the YPG against IS in Syria, even as the Turkish air force bombed PKK targets in northern Iraq and southeast Turkey.[43] One U.S. policy advisor recalled that the U.S. National Security Council view of the U.S.-YPG relationship was, "'We can sell this' [to Turkey]."[44] What Washington was slow to recognize, however, was that Ankara was quickly becoming ever-more hostile toward Kurdish forces. The PKK-Turkey ceasefire and talks broke down in July 2015, with major urban fighting in Kurdish-majority towns in Turkey (which the International Crisis Group says displaced 350,000 civilians and killed at least 250), and heavy Turkish airstrikes against the PKK underway in Turkey and Iraq.[45] The U.S. assumption that Turkey could live with tighter U.S.-YPG cooperation was quickly becoming outdated, foreshadowing the first Turkish ground operations to prevent further YPG advances in 2016.

Force Generation for Manbij

At the General Command level, Mazloum and Newroz held the most valuable cards within the SDF. The financial resources of the Democratic Autonomous Administration, primarily oil sales, were brokered and administered by the military.[46] As shall be detailed subsequently, arms supplies from all sources were routed through the SDF General Command. Specialist media and intelligence capabilities were held at the General Command level, as was a small but powerful military police function—the Military Discipline Units (YDL)—and its associated military courts.[47] The body of the SDF was Arabizing, but the head was still Kurdish.

Although there were plenty of Arab recruits at Kurdish training camps, neither the U.S. nor the YPG and YPJ commanders believed an Arab-only force would be capable of liberating Manbij. As one U.S.

commander noted, "We only really had confidence in the Kurdish parts of SDF. They were cohesive, they functioned like professional soldiers, they were seasoned and kept attacking."[48] To U.S. officers, it sometimes seemed as if every *cadros* was a Kurd. [49] The reality was more complex. To give just one obvious example, Ciwan Ibrahim, the first head of the Asayesh, was half Arab and known as Ciwan Arab.[50] In many cases, U.S. advisors were uncertain of who was and was not a Kurd, or of who was of mixed background, and thus tended to err on the side of assuming that any capable interlocutors were Kurds.[51]

Strong ties had certainly been established since 2012 between the YPG and a range of Arab tribal and military leaders in the Afrin-Aleppo-Manbij-Hasaka area, but their forces were mostly fragmented, undisciplined, and lacking in combat experience.[52] This is why the YPG, from early 2012 to 2013, started to recruit Arabs in the Hasaka province by, for example, creating the martyr Muhammed Saleh brigade in Abu Rasain in December 2013.[53] Drawing together the leadership in a coordination framework—the Manbij Military Council (MMC), under the YPG's most trusted rebel interlocutor, Abu Layla[54]—was relatively simple because the YPG trusted a number of rebel groups in the council.

As one U.S. officer recalled, the YPG really trusted only Arab groups with which they had worked over a period of time: "It was not a club you could join, because the YPG only trusts individuals they have known for a long time and have fought alongside."[55] In contrast to trusted Arab commanders,[56] the YPG did not trust Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa's Ahmad al-Othman bin Alloush (Abu Issa al-Raqqawi), who in the past had fought against the YPG,[57] or Ahmed Jarba's Elite Forces.[58] These groups were excluded from participation in the Manbij operation.

Kurdish "Advise and Assist" to the Manbij Military Council

In spring 2016, the urgent requirement was to quickly build mostly Arab forces that could break through the Islamic State's fortified line

at Tishrin, advance across thirty miles of open country, and defeat IS in close combat in the largest Arab-majority city yet liberated in Syria—all at close proximity to major IS reserves in Jarabulus and southern Turkey.[59] The quickest way to make such forces available was not for the U.S.-led coalition to build them, but for the YPG to embed its veterans at a low organizational level within trusted Arab units and Free Syrian Army groups from the Aleppo countryside. Such groups included Shams al-Shamal, Jaish al-Thuwar, Jund al-Haramain, Kataib Thuwar Manbij, the Liwa Shamal Demokrati (from Idlib), and the Zaza Forces.

In the spring of 2016, almost no training had yet been undertaken by U.S. forces in northeast Syria, which until then had amounted to a couple of twelve-man Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams[60] from the U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group. By contrast, the YPG had been training Kurdish-Christian-Arab units for years. The YPG ran almost every active training camp and syllabus. It paid the salaries of many Arab forces. The SDF Military Discipline Units, formerly the YPG military police, were used to bolster the authority of chosen Arab commanders, enforce rules of conduct, and prevent or resolve tribal and factional infighting.[61]

Most importantly, the YPG was willing and able to embed its tactical commanders within even the smallest Arab units. With an average claimed strength of around 175 fighters and a real battlefield strength far below that,[62] the twenty or so Arab micro-brigades each received a small team of YPG fighters to advise the unit. "There was always a Kurd close by," one U.S. operator noted.[63] This Kurd "was the guy with the tablet," meaning the person in the unit able to call for the all-important coalition air support. The official U.S. government characterization of the YPG's role as only "logistical support" was clearly not correct.[64] It is true that MMC forces were certainly of an Arab majority, maybe as high as 70 percent according to MMC head Abu Adel.[65] However, these Arab units were "corseted" (a military term meaning interspersed)

with a dense web of Kurdish veterans, in addition to whole Kurdish *tabur* (battalions) that took on the most demanding missions on the battle's northern axis. As one U.S. senior advisor remarked, "Individual Arabs were fine in the Manbij fight because they were operating under Kurdish FLOT [forward line of own troops] commanders as part of a broader Kurdish-led force."[66]

Planning the Manbij Operation

The liberation of Manbij was a greater challenge than anything the SDF's components had faced before. It was a complex operation in which failure was a distinct possibility. The SDF had to breach powerful IS defenses facing the Tishrin bridgehead over the Euphrates, or an alternative opposed river crossing would be required—or both options could be attempted simultaneously. The force had to be largely Arab, and the operation needed to come together quickly, before further terrorist attacks were performed on Europe. Manbij would be a true operational-level maneuver—a series of linked battles serving a broader objective. These factors prompted an unprecedented level of combined planning among the SDF General Command, the non-Kurdish local forces of the MMC, and the coalition.

The SDF General Command, led by Mazloum Kobani Abdi, provided what was called "general coordination" from command headquarters at LCF. The Manbij operation would, on a scale unseen thus far, involve operational-level shifting of large reinforcements from the Jazira canton to the Kobane subtheater. To the Americans, the YPG and SDF had always been broken down into "Jazira guys and Kobane guys" (in the words of one senior advisor), but the SDF General Command demonstrated the ability in Manbij to mix these forces and pull them out of their typical home districts. For the first time, multiple YPG *tabur* from Qamishli, al-Malikiyah, Hasaka, and Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye

in Kurdish) came west to fight on the Euphrates. Mazloum, plus the YPJ generals Nalin Afrin and Newroz Ahmed, would also manage the flow of Asayesh and other "hold forces" into liberated areas behind the frontline attacking units, in an effort to maintain momentum. Finally, the SDF General Command was the clearinghouse for requesting and receiving supplies from the coalition, most importantly ammunition, the lifeblood of any military engagement.[67] The SDF General Command had the authority and the political clout to successfully order the transfer of forces, weapons, and ammunition from one front commander to another, as required by evolving circumstances.[68]

Design and execution of the many facets of the Manbij operation were undertaken from SDF General Command at LCF. The operation incorporated U.S. guidance to a significant extent, especially in the design phase. It was agreed that the advance on Manbij would require a new bridgehead north of Tishrin, in keeping with the longstanding YPG preference for pincer maneuvers with multiple axes of advance. Such maneuvers would distract IS reinforcements from the Tishrin area and provide flank security against IS counterattacks from Jarabulus. The team of U.S. advisors at LCF happened to include some experienced amphibious warfare experts, who proved invaluable when U.S. forces participated in their first opposed major river crossing since the Busan breakout in South Korea. In an example of U.S. operational-level planning support, the U.S. advisors and military officials argued against some crossing points on the basis of terrain analysis, traffic control, and road quality considerations, as well as the velocity of river currents. U.S. forces also provided logistical and financial support to secure four ribbon bridge segments and twelve zodiac boats, with intent to (1) practice using them on lakes northwest of Hasaka and (2) secretly move them to the Euphrates. U.S. planners picked the crossing point at Qaraqosh, defined the five hundred–person size of the assault forces, wrote their loading schedule, planned the covering fires to defend the beachhead, and organized a conspicuous feint toward Raqqa.[69] The

so-called wet gap crossing at Manbij took U.S.-SDF cooperation to a new level. As one U.S. amphibious planner noted, the Manbij operation "was complicated but attainable. It was like putting together a Rolex watch and required intense concentration."[70]

Coalition support during the Manbij operation became more effective because of the denser fielding of on-the-ground advisory teams. At LCF, the SDF "Coordination Room" and the coalition cell sat next door to each other. One Delta FLOT team was positioned on each of the Qaraqosh and Tishrin axes, while a French special forces team was also present at Tishrin. Each U.S. team carried generators, satellite communications, and forty-inch plasma TVs on the tailgate of Toyota Land Cruisers. "These vans definitely became 'pacing items," one U.S. operator noted, describing an item that dictates the speed of advance, adding, "They were a decisive piece of equipment."[71] The U.S. convoys had their own tactical drones, which, along with a small fleet of SDF drones, were used to spot for SDF 120 mm mortar platoons that were tied up with the U.S. advisors.[72] (By this stage, some SDF units were using a version of the Android Team Awareness Kit [ATAK], an off-the-shelf application for Android smartphones that was used by the U.S. government to calculate firing solutions for mortars.) The U.S. advisors were well-positioned to guide the contour and pacing of the offensive. One SDF fighter recalled, "There was a discussion. They'd say, 'Take these places.' Then they left the whole thing with us."[73]

The Multi-Axis Seizure of Manbij

The northern axis of the Manbij advance arguably required the most complex tasks at the outset of the operation—including a risky river crossing, followed by the development of a strong flank guard against IS counterattacks from Jarabulus. Thus, the northern axis included more combat power than the southern axis.[74] This meant that the most experienced fighters within the SDF were tasked with the initial

river assault and other risky northern axis operations. "There was no room for error, so they had to use the real shit-kickers for the 'wet gap crossing.' They had to be able to fight isolated. Once we turned it on, it could not be turned off," one U.S. advisor explained.[75]

The lead boats were packed with handpicked YPJ fighters,[76] YPG *cadros*, some chosen Arabs, and even some of the more experienced YPG Western volunteers.[77] The assault wave followed right behind danger-close supporting fire from an AC-130 gunship, which was targeted to kill defenders and detonate minefields.[78] In under five hours, the assault force had secured the beachhead. Old Russian tactical ferries formerly used by the Syrian military were employed to carry multi-*tabur* "fronts" one at a time, with no front larger than three hundred fighters.[79] In all, around twenty-three hundred troops and three hundred vehicles were floated over in the first thirty-six hours, whereupon the crossing became a logistical artery through which supply trucks and even armored bulldozers were shepherded.[80]

The Tishrin axis was somewhat smaller (around two thousand troops) and composed mostly of MMC Arabs. The IS defenses facing the constrained Tishrin pocket were formidable, and included an unusually high concentration of artillery pieces, often hidden inside buildings. "It was like something from the *Guns of Navarone*," one U.S. advisor said, recalling a scene from the war movie in which huge cannons are emplaced in a cliff. The heavy artillery bombardment of the Tishrin assembly area resulted in heavy Arab casualties, including thirty-five killed in the forty-eight-hour fight for the first mile of liberated terrain. Among those mortally wounded was Kurdish-fathered Abu Layla, the Manbij rebel commander most trusted by the YPG.[81] Heavy coalition airstrikes were eventually required to achieve the breakout from Tishrin.[82]

Once the crust of IS defenses was breached at multiple points, "the rates of advance were breathtaking," a senior U.S. advisor noted.[83] The Islamic State had not defended in depth throughout the

twenty-five-mile-deep, forty-mile-wide zone between the river and Manbij city. "If they didn't put in IEDs [improvised explosive devices], you could roll them pretty quick," recalled a U.S. advisor. The differences between the plodding Iraqi security forces and the SDF were apparent: the former had to chip away from one line after another, while the latter could exploit breakthroughs before the Islamic State could reset its defenses. A small flotilla of SDF motorized infantry fanned out, its flanks secured by watchful coalition airpower, which could block local IS counterattacks and—unseen by the SDF—detect and smash major counteroffensives before they assembled.[84] "It was all about penetration," one U.S. advisor said.[85] Each front launched signature YPG double envelopments, an indicator of YPG influence even within Arab units, with little care for the vacant areas between tactical objectives. The SDF General Command received feedback from the fronts, letting each rest between its forward lunges, ordering other fronts to take up the tempo.[86]

U.S. commanders thus got a first close look at the SDF General Command's other major contribution to operations: the back-clearing of liberated areas and the rapid delivery of stabilization services. The SDF General Command was quick to bring Asayesh (security) units into all liberated areas, which allowed attacking forces to keep penetrating and not look back. One SDF commander recalled the following, concerning a large village between the Euphrates and Manbij:

> When the village of Abu Qilqil was liberated, the military forces had to progress forward but also...not empty the villages behind them—who will fill the gap there? The Asayesh, Self-Defense Forces, Anti-Terror. And when there was further advance, the line behind the noted forces would be filled by the Civilian Council staff, to provide the required logistics, food, fuel, water, etc., for the people there. And this Civilian Council must have been able to help [solve] the local disputes in the liberated areas. For instance, some of the defense forces might be suspicious of the young men who looked

> like [the Islamic State] but were not [the Islamic State]. The Civilian Council would intervene, guarantee someone's security clearance, and avoid further dispute in the region.[87]

Once again, YPG leaders were the heart of the effort to build up local administrations and multiethnic councils, as they had been in Tal Abyad. One U.S. advisor neatly summarized the views of many:

> The beauty of the SDF, which really meant the Kurds, was that behind their frontline forces came population pacification, water, and other services. They didn't need much from us. They knew how to self-organize. As soon as they were across the Euphrates, they began floating across water trucks to refill the rooftop water tanks in villages.[88]

Concluding the Manbij Campaign

It had taken thirty-three days to encircle Manbij, and the final twenty-two-day stage of the operation was the liberation of Manbij city. (For a map of the Manbij operation, see Annex C.) With up to one hundred thousand peacetime residents, around five by two miles in size, Manbij was then the largest city to be assaulted by the SDF. One Kurdish SDF commander said the following:

> It was a major step for the SDF to be able to enter a large city like Manbij, just a few months after the SDF was founded. Manbij was a critical corridor for the [Islamic State] terrorists; they will bring terrorists from European states into Turkey and move them into Syria—through Manbij. It was also a difficult task for the SDF to enter Manbij, because they had to cross the [Euphrates River]. The [Islamic State] terrorists had organized themselves in Manbij for several years. It was SDF's first operational experience in an urban environment. There was [the] Kobane fight, but it was [a] resistance and not [an] assault operation. In addition to that, Manbij was a large city with a large population—way bigger than Kobane or Qamishli.[89]

Indeed, Manbij would prove to be a "battle lab" for offensive urban warfare tactics, techniques, and procedures. The SDF General Command effectively delegated the fight to the local front and *tabur* commanders. Coalition officers successfully lobbied for AGM-114 Hellfire missiles to be categorized as a point-detonation system, not an area-effect bomb or missile, thereby allowing the drone-fired micromunitions to be used for "heavy sniping" against individual enemy fighters or parts of rooms. Because of the unprecedented density of IEDs in Manbij city, the SDF quickly amassed significant—but painfully earned—experience in bomb disposal. Said one SDF commander,

> Four hundred eighty to five hundred fighters lost their lives—mainly not in face-to-face confrontation, because the SDF was relatively experienced in the urban warfare. Most of them were martyred in mine and IED and sniper attacks. The [Islamic State] snipers were in the high buildings, and they would shoot at any movement; but this turned into an experience for us, so we could predict their maneuvers in Raqqa...Many normal objects in Manbij were booby-trapped; for instance, tea kettles were booby-trapped.[90]

The localization of Manbij city's liberating force—in which Kurds played key background roles as commanders and specialists, and in which Arab tribal leaders and members were also major players—had one unforeseen effect that the coalition found less palatable. The Arab tribes began to strongly lobby the SDF leadership to agree to a negotiated surrender of Manbij city, with IS forces allowed to leave under a flag of truce, an arrangement long termed the "honors of war" in military sieges. "We were not super thrilled about that," one senior U.S. commander relayed, "but this is what it meant to have Arabs liberating themselves. They did it their way."[91]

Ultimately, the United States and France retained the option of independent action against the retreating IS forces. In the last act of the Manbij operation, after the August 12, 2016, recapture of the city,

the coalition allowed IS to retreat in a convoy. Initially, the honors of war were upheld. Coalition spokesperson Col. Christopher Garver recalled, "We did not conduct any strikes because every vehicle had civilians that we could identify with our systems, and as we [were] receiving reports from our partners on the ground, every vehicle had civilians in it or on it. And so we watched, we kept track."[92] Later, however, the coalition bombed military elements of the retreating convoys once they had passed back into IS territory: this was a lesson that IS and the SDF would remember at the conclusion of the next major battle, in Raqqa.

Notes

1 Undoubtedly, the area had been visited earlier by other U.S. special operators and intelligence operatives, not least those who undertook the May 15, 2015, "Abu Sayyaf" raid; the December 2015 visit, however, was the first official liaison visit to the local opposition forces under Title 10 authorities.

2 The seventh day accounts for travel time between east and west.

3 U.S. operators compared the experience to meeting someone for the first time, after having only communicated previously online. Visiting locations formerly seen only in overhead footage was a more familiar feeling.

4 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

5 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Al-Shadadi, a hub that hosted the Islamic State's best "quick reaction forces," could send two hundred–man "fire brigade" reinforcements either west or east. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

9 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

10 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Each JOC had a large flat-screen TV showing a live common operating picture of the battlespace; the forward line of own troops was marked by "dropped pins" that the SDF forces indicated via their phones' map features and sent to the JOC. Other flat-screens showed full-motion

video surveillance footage. The JOCs used landline fiber optics, satellite Internet, GSM [Global System for Mobile communication] (for Viber and WhatsApp), and radio.

14 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

15 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

16 Ibid.

17 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

18 Authors' interview with U.S. official 12: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

19 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

20 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

21 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. The Islamic State did not occupy the high ground.

22 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

23 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

24 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

25 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

26 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

27 One of the authors worked on the campaign assessment team in September 2015.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid. The objectives of CJTF-OIR were really a laundry list of ways in which the Islamic State could be reduced to its 2011–12 levels, which might then be manageable by local Iraqi and Syrian forces alone.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid. To add to Lieutenant General MacFarland's worries, 2016 was a presidential election year in the United States.

35 Europol, *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)* (Brussels: Europol, 2017) https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2017.

36 Authors' interview with U.S. official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

37 "Security for Turkey's Erdogan Scuffles with Journalists in Washington," Deutsche Welle, March 21, 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/security-for-turkeys-erdogan-scuffles-with-journalists-in-washington/a-19157072.

38 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

39 Authors' interview with U.S. official 14: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

40 Authors' interview with SDF official 22: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

41 Authors' interview with SDF official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

42 Although the Turkish government denied cooperation with anyone, the Turkish army would have been unable to cross into YPG-held territory without coordination. See "Turkey Enters Syria to Remove Precious Suleyman Shah Tomb," BBC News, February 22, 2015.

43 According to Aaron Stein, Turkey still tolerated the U.S.-YPG relationship and allowed the United States to carry out missions from Incirlik. See Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG-PKK Connection," Atlantic Council MENASource, January 26, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection/.

44 Authors' interview with U.S. policy advisor: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

45 By 2016, "around [nine hundred] people, including [three hundred fifty] members of the security forces, [had] been killed in fighting since peace talks [had broken] down [the previous] July." See International Crisis Group, "The Human Cost of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur," March 17, 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/human-cost-pkk-conflict-turkey-case-sur.

46 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

47 Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts (Kurdish Studies)* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 116–17.

48 Authors' interview with U.S. official 20: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

49 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

50 Authors' interview with former YPG fighter: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

51 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

52 For the Manbij operation, the United States developed a shoulder patch recognition guide that detailed twenty different Arab subunits involved in the operation. Authors' interview with U.S. official 28: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

53 "YPG'e li Ebu Rasen tabureke nu ava kir" [YPG sets up new *tabur* in Abu Rasen], Firat News Agency, December 8, 2013, https://anfkurdi.com/cihan/ypg-e-li-ebu-rasen-tabureke-nu-ava-kir-27624.

54 Abu Layla (Faisal Abdi Bilal Saadoun) was the Northern Sun Battalion commander most trusted by the YPG. He was mortally wounded by a sniper shot to the head on the third day of the Manbij offensive.

55 Authors' interview with U.S. official 20: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

56 The YPG trusted Abu Layla's Shams al-Shamal, Jaish al-Thuwar (led by Abu Arraj from northern Aleppo in the Tal Rifaat region), Jund al-Haramain, Kataib Thuwar Manbij, the Northern Democratic Brigade (from Idlib), and the Zaza Forces (led by Hamza Zaza from al-Safira). These groups were given a higher profile and more autonomy than groups that originated in Raqqa and Tal Abyad. See authors' interview with Shervan Darwish, Manbij Military Council spokesperson, August 17, 2019; and authors' interview with Abu Adel, head of Manbij Military Council, August 18, 2019.

57 Carl Drott, "'Extremists' and 'Moderates' in Kobani," *Warscapes*, October 13, 2014, http://www.warscapes.com/reportage/extremists-and-moderates-kobani.

58 In the past, Abu Issa's group was allied with Jabhat al-Nusra, whereas Ahmed Jarba used to be the head of the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition, backed by Turkey and Gulf states. The YPG also briefly worked with the previously U.S.-backed Syrian Revolutionaries Front, which was headed by Jamal Marouf; he later defected back to Turkey and is no longer active. Authors' interview with Abu Adel, head of Manbij Military Council, August 18, 2019.

59 Southern Turkey had, for more than a year, been a sanctuary for IS reserves, immune to attack but close enough to fluidly feed foreign fighter, Iraqi, and Syrian forces into the Syria-Iraq battlespace.

60 These are the squad-sized units employed by the U.S. Green Berets.

61 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request; and authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

62 This number derived from the division of the thirty-five hundred–strong force (mentioned by McGurk in the subsequent reference) and the twenty Arab subunits known to exist in the Manbij battle. *Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on "Global Efforts to Defeat ISIS"* (Witness Statement of The Honorable Brett H. McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to

Counter ISIL) June 28, 2016, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/062816_McGurk_Testimony.pdf.

63 Authors' interview with U.S. official 21: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

64 "[The Department of Defense] has emphasized that the fight against [the Islamic State] along the border near Manbij is an SDF operation led by the Syrian Arab Coalition component and that the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—the SDF's largest group and best fighters—is engaged only in logistical support." See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2016–June 30, 2016,* 40.

65 Authors' interview with Abu Adel, head of Manbij Military Council, August 18, 2019.

66 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

67 Authors' interview with SDF official 24: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

68 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

69 The latter inadvertently became even more widely publicized than intended when U.S. Navy personnel used in the deception operation were photographed wearing YPG patches. Andrew Tilghman, "The Pentagon Has Banned Troops in Syria from Wearing These Kurdish Militia Patches," *Military Times*, May 27, 2016, https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2016/05/27/the-pentagon-has-banned-troops-in-syria-from-wearing-these-kurdish-militia-patches/.

70 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

71 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

72 As U.S. advisors noted, members of the SDF (a mixture of YPG and Arab trainees) were still not effective mortarmen: "The Delta guy would check the bubble [level] and aiming of the mortar, and the SDF dropped the round in the tube," one advisor recalled. Authors'

interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

73 Authors' interview with journalist 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

74 The northernmost front, blocking the road to Jarabulus, was largely made up of Jazira canton YPG units. These units were trusted by the SDF and U.S. forces to guard the north—while staying out of sight and away from the urban liberation of Manbij—though this made the units highly visible to Turkey. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

75 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

76 The YPJ's female fighters subsequently learned that they needed to slow their rate of advance around the Arab fighters from Manbij, as it was driving those less experienced male fighters to try to advance faster, which led to unnecessary casualties. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

77 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

78 Authors' interview with U.S. official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

79 The front level of command, now starting to be called a *foj* (regiment), comprising multiple *tabur*, was hesitant to split when being floated over the Tigris; nor did it want to be mixed with other fronts in each "lift." This preference offers interesting insight into tactical groupings that clearly wanted to remain cohesive and separate: Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

80 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

81 Hisham Arafat, "Syrian Kurdish FSA Commander Died in Manbij," Kurdistan 24, June 6, 2016, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c77a0177-eb37-43db-b757-98d27ca29665/Syrian-Kurdish-FSA-commander-died-in-Manbij.

82 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2016–December 31, 2016*, 29.

83 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

84 CJTF-OIR also told the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General that coalition air assets "play a pivotal role in protecting the SDF, by defeating or preventing enemy counterattacks, reducing [Islamic State] mobility, and conducting maneuvers." Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2016–December 31, 2016*, 54. CJTF-OIR said that coalition air support provides the "offset" necessary for the SDF to have greater freedom to maneuver around the battlefield. Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, March 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 22*.

85 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

86 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

87 Authors' interview with SDF official 24: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

88 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

89 Authors' interview with SDF official 23: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. The interviewee is probably wrong about the comparative population of Manbij (about one hundred fifty thousand) versus Qamishli (three hundred thousand) at the time of the Manbij battle. The authors want to thank Fabrice Balanche for guidance on these population figures.

90 Authors' interview with SDF official 24: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

91 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

92 "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Garver via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq" (transcript), U.S. Department of Defense, August 16, 2016, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/916473/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-garver-via-teleconference-from/.

4

Scaling Up: The Raqqa Campaign

After the liberation of Manbij, the war in northeast Syria slowed a little. It was the 2016 election season in Washington. At the operational level, the U.S. military was internally debating whether Mosul or Raqqa should be liberated first. And after the Manbij campaign, tensions were complicating U.S.-Turkish relations.

After Manbij's liberation, the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces was keen to strike westward toward al-Bab and Jarabulus—a natural-enough instinct to exploit success, but also a step toward linking the Kobane and Afrin cantons, which was a red flag for Turkey.[1] When the SDF established the al-Bab and Jarabulus military councils (MCs),[2] reaction from Ankara and its allied forces was swift. The head of the Jarabulus MC was quickly assassinated by unknown killers.[3] Turkey mounted Operation Euphrates Shield, an armed incursion in the areas between Kobane and Afrin, cantons that then belonged to the People's Defense Units.[4] From August 2016 to March 2017, Turkish forces and Free Syrian Army units undertook a series of grinding advances against the Islamic State, with the al-Bab operation taking more than three months.[5] Turkey rejected U.S. support for its operation,[6] and U.S. Special Forces were even pressured out of some areas.[7] Operation Euphrates Shield ultimately achieved its goals of (1) blunting YPG attempts to unite the Kobane and Afrin cantons and (2) pushing IS from Turkish-Syrian border towns.[8] With Turkey initially threatening to push

through to Manbij, some feared that the southward movement of the SDF toward Raqqa could cease.[9]

Complex diplomacy saw the United States broker a line of division between the Turks and the SDF on the Sajur River, dividing Jarabulus and Manbij, with an agreement that the YPG would leave Manbij.[10] The YPG announced on August 25, 2016, that it had withdrawn from Manbij, though the announcement probably referred to YPG *tabur* and not to individual embedded YPG personnel.[11] Turkey simultaneously agreed to the presence of Russian forces on a dividing line south of al-Bab, and the United States agreed with the Russians that neither the SDF nor the Russian-backed Assad forces would cross the Euphrates. Early in March 2017, after Turkey threatened to move into Manbij, Russian and regime forces moved into Arima (near Manbij), thus stopping a possible Turkish offensive. [12] At the same time, the U.S. military also deployed a small number of troops to serve as a buffer between the SDF and Turkish forces,[13] though Turkish threats to attack Manbij would continue in the near future. Washington was distracted by the battle of Mosul and the U.S. presidential election.

In the month following Donald Trump's November 2016 victory, the outgoing Obama administration faced a key decision on Raqqa. As the Islamic State's capital city, it was a tempting target, only fifty miles south of SDF frontlines. In Iraq, the urban fighting in Mosul city, like that in Ramadi years earlier, was exceedingly hard. Looking at Raqqa, the U.S. military concluded that it would likely need to provide "campaign accelerants" to the SDF, including its YPG core attack force, if it was to capture the five-by-three-mile city. The Trump transition team's national security advisor, Michael Flynn, had asked the Obama White House to leave the decision to the new administration because of Turkish sensitivities.[14] Indeed, the urgency of clearing Raqqa was increasing as the city's external attack operations and complex bomb-making—manifest in the electronics and laptop checks on airplanes and in official buildings that still endure today—intensified. As one senior

U.S. official noted, "Counterterrorism airstrikes would not work, as the Islamic State was basing out of apartment buildings holding hundreds of people."[15] Only a ground operation would do the job.

For the first five months of 2017, the issue of the composition of the Raqqa attack force was subject to a fresh strategic review. The options were (1) a U.S.-Turkish force (with ten thousand rebel troops, Turkish soldiers, and a large number of U.S. forces totaling ten thousand to fifteen thousand),[16] and (2) a YPG-led SDF attack force with a slight reinforcement of five hundred U.S. artillerymen and special operators. The Obama administration did not believe that Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's military could do the job. [17] Ambassador James Jeffrey told the U.S. Congress at the time that the "Turks are not seen as capable of carrying out this mission themselves, and their stalled anti–[Islamic State] offensive in al-Bab strengthens such an assessment."[18] Furthermore, any Turkish plan would require a logistical supply line from the SDF-held border town of Tal Abyad south toward Raqqa, which would in turn require the SDF admitting Turkish forces into Tal Abyad—or Turkey "fighting [its] way through SDF-held areas to get to Raqqa."[19]

In May 2017, President Trump, fresh from fruitless dialogue with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan, viewed the YPG-led SDF option as a no-brainer. "He made his mind up in about two minutes," one participant commented, noting that Trump selected a boosted "by, with, and through" effort via the SDF. No one among Trump's senior leadership—Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster, or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford—argued against the verdict.[20] Indeed, if anyone among senior U.S. leadership believed that Washington could deploy a major force to Syria, or that Turkey and its militias could liberate Raqqa, they gave no indication in their collective meetings.

Training and Equipping the Whole SDF

From the outset of the war in northeast Syria, the United States had drawn on funds and stockpiled weapons that were originally intended for the vetted Syrian opposition in northwest Syria. A large-scale Title 50 (intelligence community) train-and-equip mission was underway with the VSO, providing one low-visibility channel for rapid paramilitary support to the YPG and later the SDF. From the fiscal year 2015 National Defense Authorization Act onward, there were also funds set aside (under Title 10) for the U.S. Department of Defense to train Syrian oppositionists, which included the YPG and non-Kurdish YPG forces in northeast Syria.[21]

The Syrian Train and Equip Fund (STEF), later folded into the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), saw each U.S. administration begin negotiations for its requested funds up to two years before those funds would become available. For example, the funding available at the beginning of the Raqqa campaign in the second half of 2017 had first been requested in late 2015 as the SDF formed, was authorized by Congress in late 2016, and was published in the defense budget in January 2017.[22] This time lag in each year's funding meant that neither the Office of the Secretary of Defense, nor Central Command, nor the U.S. Army G-8 staff (which managed the funds) expected the equipment lists and spending plans in the annual budget "request book" to closely resemble the *real* use of funds during military operations.[23] Reprogramming funding was quite easy and in fact expected in fast-moving campaigns, with "actual delivery of arms and ammunition very different from what [stakeholders] first envisaged and requested."[24]

Did the United States Arm the YPG Before Mid-2017?

From the beginning of the war until May 2017, U.S. official commentary and interviews stated that there had been no direct U.S. Department of

Defense arming of the YPG.[25] In Kobane, where U.S. arms had clearly made their way to the YPG, such deliveries had been achieved under Title 10 intelligence community authorities or indirectly via long-term U.S. partners such as the Iraqi Kurdish Counter-Terrorism Group. Kobane aside, is it credible that the U.S. did not arm the YPG until May 2017? The United States certainly had ordered its personnel to observe some extraordinary ground rules prior to the battle of Raqqa. Only two State Department officials—Brett McGurk and Michael Ratney[26]—were authorized to interact directly with the YPG and Democratic Union Party leaders, and such officials were literally warned not to even buy tea for YPG officials, let alone provide any other kind of assistance.[27] Likewise, the U.S. military did not formally and directly send any U.S. supplies to the YPG from the end of the Kobane battle until the Raqqa campaign. This lack of direct support is explained by the fact that, in 2017, the YPG was still classified only as Moderate Syrian Opposition, meaning it was neither vetted nor trained by the United States and thus was ineligible for Section 1209 arming and equipping under the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act (i.e., the defense budget).[28] Washington agreed with Turkey that only the Syrian Arab Coalition subunits of the SDF would field the provided weapons and equipment.[29] (Many SAC commanders had been certified as VSO since 2015 and were therefore eligible for U.S. aid.) From the beginning, however, the arms were centrally stored and dribbled out, engagement by engagement, by the SDF command.[30]

In reality, this meant that nonvetted and ineligible YPG leaders were central to the arming of the SAC, and often functioned as intermediaries in the divestment of U.S. arms to SAC units. "We were approved to give weapons to the SAC, which the YPG distributed to them very effectively," one U.S. advisor noted.[31] As the heart of the SDF command staff, talented logisticians of the Women's Protection Units, such as Newroz Ahmed and Sozdar Derik, maintained depot control of the U.S.-provided weapons and ammunition in 2016 and early 2017. As

the SDF authorized offensives, the depot would release arms and ammunition to SAC forces. One former SDF official described the process:

> The coalition provides what I mentioned to you—the Humvees, Dushkas, AKs, bullets, [rocket-propelled grenades], etc. And all of these are trusted to the SDF forces on the ground through the General Command. For instance, if an operation is planned to initiate in the next twenty days, the coalition commander will hold a meeting with the SDF commanders and make a list of any equipment required for the operation. The equipment will be provided from the depots of the U.S. forces and provided to the SDF commanders, and the commanders will distribute among their fighters.[32]

In the view of U.S. advisors present at the depot level, the effort was efficient and resulted in arms getting to the SAC units, as intended. "They kept a very organized inventory, which we verified. There was no hoarding and no stealing," one advisor recalled.[33] Were these U.S. advisors in a position to judge? In later years, the U.S. military explained some of its methods to inventory and track arms depots in Syria, which included conducting periodic serial number inventories and requiring photographic evidence of the presence and use of heavy weapons such as mortars and recoilless rifles.[34] Considering the rough-and-ready conditions and slim manning of the U.S. Special Operations mission in Syria, there is reason to doubt that logging and verification were very thorough. As one Pentagon official remarked, "It's a campaign: you're not bringing along the procurement officers, and accountants, and the bureaucracy, and Congress was okay with that."[35]

It is worth keeping in perspective, however, that even the "high-end" or "sensitive" weapons that were delivered were vetted by Turkey and could be vetoed by Ankara, and were not very impressive in any case. The heaviest weapons provided by the U.S. military to the SDF in 2016 were eleven SPG-9 recoilless rifles,[36] plus RPG-7s, mortars, and

Dushkas. The antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) authorized by the U.S. Congress were blocked by Turkey and were never delivered.[37] The small numbers of ATGMs held by the YPG or SDF were those purchased off the black market in Syria and Iraq using the YPG's own funds.[38] (Ironically, some of these were Central Intelligence Agency–supplied ATGMs sold on the black market by members of the VSO.[39]) The heaviest firepower supporting the YPG was always U.S. airpower, which could be switched on and off at a moment's notice.

The issue of Leahy vetting is another area where the devil is in the detail. In theory, all Department of Defense train-and-equip funding requires that the recipient unit be vetted under the Leahy laws for evidence of gross violations of human rights.[40] The unit commander (at the battalion level) would be vetted through information gathered from open-source and classified feeds. In northeast Syria, around thirty predominantly Christian and Arab SAC unit commanders from the Euphrates Volcano forces were Leahy vetted in Erbil in mid-2015 and became VSO, and thus eligible to receive U.S. arms and training.[41] Underlining the slightly ridiculous, token nature of the vetting is the fact that senior leaders such as Mazloum Kobani Abdi and Newroz Ahmed were not vetted, because the United States was not *directly* training or *personally* equipping them.[42] In the chaotic environment of Syria, Leahy vetting was an ad hoc "box-ticking" exercise (even more so than in sovereign state settings) for U.S. forces, who were working without a U.S. embassy to undertake vetting and operating with nonstate armed forces of a blended nature.[43] Neither Kurdish commanders nor newly identified Arab SAC commanders from IS-held areas were easy to vet.[44] Where there were still question marks, the Leahy laws provided exemptions to allow vetting to be waived during "national security emergencies."[45]

As one former SDF official noted, the United States certainly did not support YPG-only units, but did support YPG-led SAC units:

> It did not make a difference for the coalition that it was Arabs or Kurds joining the SDF. One differentiation is that the coalition is not providing any military or civil assistance to the areas under the control of the YPG/YPJ or Kurdish areas—but in areas that the SDF and the coalition together have liberated from [the Islamic State], there is no discrimination between the Arab [and] Kurdish components. In those areas, the coalition supports all local forces of a region—Arab, Kurds (YPG/YPJ), Sanadid, etc.—because the logistical support has been specifically designated for those regions.[46]

Arming the YPG Directly for Raqqa

These were the broad margins that allowed the United States to arm a YPG-led SDF in 2016 and early 2017, but a more explicit U.S. relationship with the YPG was being considered to meet the special demands of the Raqqa operation. The extraordinary difficulties of grinding down the IS urban defense in Mosul pointed to the need to draw together all the SDF's military strength, including the YPG-only *tabur*, and to provide a range of U.S. campaign accelerants for the urban battle in Raqqa, including boosted force protection, combat lifesaving, mine clearance, and urban combat capabilities. As one U.S. ground observer remarked, the disparity in arming and equipping looked unsustainable in the lead-up to Raqqa:

> These guys had no helmets, no armor. They had hardly any [armored personnel carriers]. It was meager. We really didn't equip these guys at all...It made you kind of sick to your stomach. Until Raqqa, we'd asked these guys, "Are you an Arab, are you a Kurd?" but those distinctions were not feasible anymore. We knew the people who would do the fighting and dying were the Kurds.[47]

As the inspector general report to Congress noted (in the report that covered the battle of Raqqa city):

> President Trump authorized the [Department of Defense] to directly arm the Syrian Kurdish People's [Defense] Units (YPG), which are fighting as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to liberate Raqqa. The YPG provides the leadership and most experienced fighters to the SDF. Previously, the U.S. military stated that it supplied weapons only to the Syrian Arab Coalition faction of the SDF to avoid conflict with Turkey, which considers the YPG a terrorist organization.[48]

At that time, and still at the time of writing, the United States had not designated the YPG a terrorist organization,[49] as Washington had done with the Kurdistan Workers Party in 1997.[50] The underlying U.S. premise remains that the two organizations are separate and that the YPG does not present a threat to Turkey—and has not conducted an attack against Turkey since the YPG was formed. Knowing that Turkey would leak Washington's direct arming of YPG units, and mount a lobbying effort against it, the United States decided to be fully transparent about its intention to directly arm YPG units for the Raqqa campaign.[51]

Developing the Raqqa Attack Force

The final stages of the Raqqa campaign would be the most complex operation undertaken by the SDF throughout the war. The Raqqa campaign was fought in parallel with other SDF attacks south of al-Shadadi into the Khabur River Valley, and also with the defense of the long SDF frontlines against possible IS counteroffensives. The Raqqa campaign would involve around seventy-five tactical engagements, each biting off twenty-mile-deep chunks of territory to isolate Raqqa on both sides of the Euphrates, usually with four or five fronts active at any time. Whereas Manbij was fought on a front rarely exceeding twenty miles, the Raqqa operation frequently stretched across an active frontline more than sixty miles wide. The battle for Mosul

city gave a sense of how the final months of the campaign would unfold: in a grinding, high-casualty urban fight that would quickly wear down SDF units.

These factors led the SDF command to make an unprecedented effort to draw forces from every corner of northeast Syria to take part in the Raqqa campaign. And so the fall of the Islamic State capital at Raqqa took on a certain symbolism. It was intended to rock the morale of the IS fighters, and to be a battle that would unify the factions of the Democratic Autonomous Administration and define their western border along the Euphrates River. As one former YPG official noted, an unprecedented number of Kurdish forces left their homes to travel to the fight:

> All YPG/YPJ forces from Kobane joined the operation in Raqqa to take revenge for the massacres that [the Islamic State] carried out in Kobane. Several forces from [the] Jazira region also assisted the operation in Raqqa to avenge for the massacres [the Islamic State] had carried out in [Sinjar] and Kobane. And another symbolic participation was made by the [Yekineyen Berxwedana Sengale (YBS, or Sinjar Resistance Units)] forces from [Sinjar], the Yazidi men and women who had formed their units after the liberation of [Sinjar]. A major propaganda [campaign] was made by the [Islamic State] media that the Yazidi Kurdish women were enslaved and sold at the Naeem Square and the Black Stadium in Raqqa. The male and female forces of the YBS joined to [seek] revenge for those women, no matter how small the numbers of their units were, but it had a morale significance.[52]

In an effort to boost near-term intake of recruits, conscription was extended from six months to nine months, or to twelve months for recruits who failed to sign up before December 1, 2016.[53] The near-full mobilization of Kurdish manpower to support the Raqqa campaign—directly and by facilitating the release of units from all other fronts—shed light on the powerful growth of the YPG, YPJ,

and HPX (conscripted self-defense units) that had occurred largely independently of any aid from the United States. One U.S. advisor said that "there were always two sets of training numbers: the coalition training numbers and Mazloum's own numbers,"[54] with Mazloum's numbers invariably much higher. Table 1 gives a sample of figures provided by the Democratic Autonomous Administration. The YPG/YPJ operated its own basic training camps, mainly in the Tal Baydar area, both for volunteer YPG and YPJ forces and for conscripted HPX recruits. At this stage of the war, members of the YPG/YPJ were paid around 70,000 Syrian pounds ($135) per month, plus allowances for dependents; members of the HPX were paid 25,000 Syrian pounds ($115) per month for their conscripted service of one to two years. These costs appear to have been partly paid out of Autonomous Administration funds.[55] Those funds, which were gathered by the YPG, stemmed from thirty thousand barrels per day of oil or oil products,[56] plus wheat sales. Such products were marketed both to the Assad regime and to buyers in Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[57]

Fig. 4.1 Trainee Numbers for SDF, YPG, and HPX Forces in the Lead-Up to and During the Raqqa Operation

	Q4 2016	**Q1 2017**	**Q2 2017**	**Q3 2017**
SDF	936	2,425	1,163	658
YPG	0	0	1,278	270
HPX	1,335	3,305	2,100	0

SDF = Syrian Democratic Forces; YPG = People's Defense Units; HPX = Self-Defense Forces.
Source: Lead Inspector General Report for Operation Inherent Resolve to the United States Congress in Q4 2016, Q1 2017, Q2 2017, and Q3 2017.

Training for the Raqqa Campaign

In late 2016, the outgoing Obama administration dropped its arbitrary one hundred–person force manning limits for the Syrian operation (up from fifty earlier), bringing the number of U.S. boots on the ground to around three hundred by early 2017.[58] These reinforcements, largely Operational Detachment Alphas from the U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group, were optimized for training indigenous forces in the Middle East. Some ODAs had been providing fifteen to twenty days of tablet, fire support, medical, counter-IED (improvised explosive device), and mortar training to SAC units in northeast Syria since early 2016, and to the new Raqqa Internal Security Force (RISF) units more recently.[59] By early 2017, about a dozen U.S. teams ran a total of three to six training courses at any time.[60] U.S. forces also provided some officer training for *foj* (regiment) level groups, roughly akin to a small U.S. battalion.[61]

Before undergoing this U.S. training, the SDF took three precautionary steps. First, the group secured the trainees' biometric data and identification documents for vetting by the United States. Second, the YPG itself put the recruits through thirty days of basic soldier training, aided by SAC trainers who themselves had been prepared by the United States as future mentors in "train the trainer" courses in 2016.[62] During the final portion of the U.S. training, the SAC recruits were issued with U.S. equipment and given the first paycheck of their U.S.-provided salaries. (By May 2017, the stipends of all SAC forces of the Manbij Military Council, the Deir al-Zour Military Council, the RISF, and various SDF engineering units were paid by the United States.[63])

Third, added efforts were made in the lead-up to Raqqa to weed out underage recruits (i.e., child soldiers)—"for the world outside," as one Arab SDF officer recalled.[64] The YPG had a historic practice of recruiting and even allegedly conscripting underage fighters.[65] The United Nations, which annually reports documented child recruitment by the YPG/SDF, noted in 2019 that the YPG had recruited 283 children (of 820 total

children recruited by armed groups and Syrian government forces).[66] Journalist Roy Gutman reported from interviews on the suppression of local media coverage of the issue and protests against child enlistment. The YPG had signed a commitment to ban the practice in June 2014, but Human Rights Watch reported a year later that the ban had been loosely enforced.[67] According to a 2016 UN report, the YPG "continued to recruit boys and girls as young as 14 years of age for combat roles, with pressure and coercion by communities reportedly a factor."[68] Although some improvements are apparent,[69] and the SDF and Autonomous Administration have taken more measures to combat the practice,[70] some use of underage fighters probably continues at the time of writing.[71]

In 2016, the United States also undertook its first large-scale training of the YPG. (Some YPG special forces assigned to perimeter security for U.S. operators had previously been informally trained by them.) The U.S. teams focused on advanced training,[72] including combat lifesaving skills, counter-IED operations, and marksmanship, plus radio and tablet use. More than one thousand YPG fighters were trained and provided with new AKs, PKMs, RPGs, ammunition, and nontactical vehicles for logistics and casualty evacuation. Some accounts suggest that YPG fighters who deployed to the Raqqa battle from their homes in Kurdish areas were given extra danger pay.[73]

By July 2017, when the Raqqa city battle began, the SDF (including an increased number of absorbed YPG units) had grown to around forty thousand combat troops, including a sixteen hundred–strong RISF ready to garrison newly liberated urban areas with local forces.[74] Every component of the SDF would take part in the battle: YPG/YPJ fighters from as far away as Afrin;[75] nearly 100 percent Arab units from the Manbij Military Council; mixed YPG and Hasaka Arab units;[76] HPX conscripts strongly urged to fight beyond their normal duties; a hodgepodge of Christian, Turkmen, and Arab micro-militias; various Kurdish special forces units; and a smattering of veteran Western volunteers. (For a map of the Raqqa campaign, see Annex C.)

Increasing the Resilience of SDF Forces

Alongside U.S. training—which was short and of uncertain value—a more important class of support was the new authorizations for the Raqqa campaign to provide vital force protection equipment and materiel to all components of the Raqqa attack force. With the now-secure ground lines of communication,[77] the United States, Britain, and France had developed the C-17-capable Kobane Landing Zone[78] to help feed artillery ammunition and heavy equipment into the Raqqa battle.

"Protected mobility" was one new aspect of the U.S. equipping of the Raqqa campaign. For the first time, the coalition provided a range of armored vehicles to the SDF, including to the YPG *tabur*. In addition to increased provision of lightly armored "technicals" (pickups with armored Dushka turrets), the United States and Germany also provided Humvee armored trucks and ambulances, and even U.S. M1117 Guardian Armored Security Vehicles (ASVs).[79] The latter were the first mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) received by the SDF. Guardians and Humvees were used as armored fighting vehicles and for ferrying ammunition, food and water, and casualties. By providing vehicles, equipment, and training, the United States began, perhaps for the first time and only temporarily, to mold the SDF into more recognizable tactical units. As one former SDF official noted about the Raqqa battle, the provision of equipment encouraged some unit standardization because "there were two hundred new fighters, and they must be equipped with two hundred AKs, ten Dushkas in ten pickups, two logistic trucks, and one water tanker—all within a battalion."[80]

Along with protected mobility, the United States also beefed up the SDF's combat engineering capabilities, with more armored bulldozers and the first trained SDF engineering brigade on the M58 Mine Clearing Line Charge (MICLIC), a rocket-projected explosive line charge capable of blasting a path through the dense IED belts laid by the Islamic State.

The Raqqa campaign also saw the United States increase its medical support to the SDF. In Manbij, the U.S. Army had deployed a forward surgical team (FST) and saved many lives. According to a British volunteer, an FST position (triage center) had been staffed during the Manbij operation with a "British doctor, a French nurse, and then a number of American soldiers protecting them, and they then treated all of the casualties coming out of members on that front."[81] In Raqqa, there would be two U.S. Army Reserve FSTs, plus the SDF's own attempt at an FST, manned by a Swedish-trained Syrian doctor and Western volunteers.

With the U.S.- and German-provided Humvee ambulances, some manned by Western volunteer medics, the SDF had, for the first time, robust capability for casualty evacuation. According to a former British volunteer, the Humvees increased the rate of survival for injured SDF fighters because dedicated, armored casualty evacuation vehicles were always available.[82]

U.S. helicopters moved the most serious casualties to U.S. FST locations, and aided the movement of casualties to hospitals in Hasaka and Kobane, and even to Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.[83] In the words of one U.S. officer, these mobile, far-forward surgical elements meant the difference between "almost certain death for wounded SDF fighters and a successful [medical evacuation]."[84] "We moved mountains to save their people—not just fighters, but the unbelievable amount of civilians hurt by IEDs," recalled another.[85]

Command and Control in the SDF's Largest Campaign

The unprecedented scale of the Raqqa campaign—which was codenamed Operation Euphrates Wrath—coincided with the maturation of the SDF's command-and-control system. At the top was Mazloum, now fully playing an Eisenhower-type role of coalition commander, putting out political fires and focusing on the next problem, not today's

crisis.[86] Based out of the Lafarge Cement Factory, Mazloum's reasonably large staff of around thirty persons led a collaborative planning exercise before each phase of the campaign.[87] Each phase was then executed in a decentralized manner, with Mazloum's staff managing by exception and intervening only when higher-level coordination was required.[88]

Below Mazloum were the senior operational commanders who controlled the campaign. One was "Hayman," a lawyer from Aleppo University who was Mazloum's chief of staff, charged with daily crisis management and interaction with the coalition. "Kindal" was Mazloum's intelligence chief. Newroz was, in effect, the chief of operations and logistics, a first-among-equals of the front commanders. She was initially based north of Raqqa, within reach of both the western and eastern flanks of the offensive. U.S. advisors were present at LCF and at Newroz's small ten-person forward headquarters, to provide intelligence and logistics support to the campaign.[89]

A More Recognizable Tactical System

The culminating phases of the Raqqa campaign saw an unprecedented number of veteran front commanders attacking in a single operation. The YPJ commander Rojda Felat was on the western side, where she was later joined by three other YPJ commanders—Newroz Ahmed, Klara Raqqa, and Zinarin Kobani. The east side would be led by YPG commanders Murad and Omar, as they were known, plus Abu Amjad of the MMC, the most senior Arab front commander, who was killed in the battle for Raqqa city. Thus, "almost all commanders of SDF military forces participated in the Raqqa campaign," a former SDF member said.[90] Supporting these five- to ten-person front command groups were three coalition forward advisor teams: two American (north and west) and one French (east). Whereas the French team stayed with its traditional host unit, the MMC, the American teams shifted to wherever the main effort was on a given day.

Below the front level, the *foj* level of command had been developed as a way to flexibly arrange multiple *tabur* in battle groups of between fifty and three hundred fighters. The *foj* structure also made sense for what was anticipated to be an unprecedentedly dense urban fight; indeed, for the first time since Kobane, numerous *tabur* would be fighting "shoulder to shoulder," with defined geographic boundaries and the need for tight tactical control. One SDF official noted the following:

> During the battle for Raqqa, we started joining small *tabur*; before, we used to have thirty to forty or sixty *tabur* in one area, but we wanted to move to a more official military style. So every few *tabur* were joined together in one location. We needed to protect every area, so every group had its area to protect and they were very close to each other.[91]

Management of the battle zone of each *foj* also seemed to become more organized. Small teams of fewer than ten fighters were still sent toward tactical objectives in the manner of a skirmish line, with a second line of "supports" to reinforce success. A third line now comprised forward medical aid posts and a denser network of *tabur*-level tablet-holders and tactical drone operators, who were able to call for fire support.[92] In a new fourth line, the SDF provided rudimentary field kitchens, fuel, and maintenance.[93]

Trial Run at Tabqa

The fourth phase of the Raqqa campaign, following the north-, west-, and east-approach phases, involved crossing the Euphrates and isolating Raqqa from both sides of the river. Seizing this area before tackling Raqqa city not only isolated the city from enemy reinforcements but had the added benefit of denying Russian-Assad forces control of the strategic Euphrates dams, which could provide powerful leverage over all the Euphrates districts in a postwar settlement. To achieve this aim, the SDF command proposed another water crossing operation

similar to that at Manbij, but U.S. planners calculated that the eight-mile round trip for slow tactical ferries (moving at four knots) would result in a dangerously slow buildup on the enemy shoreline. Instead, U.S. forces suggested an air assault involving five hundred handpicked SDF troops, in an effort to secure high ground across the river that the SDF had identified as the crossing's immediate objective.[94] After making the logistical calculations for the SDF, and accounting for Chinook and Osprey loads of forty to sixty fighters each trip, the United States stepped back from the planning process and let the SDF run all other aspects of the operation.[95]

The Tabqa operation, undertaken between March and June 2017, was led by the SDF's most talented tactical leaders. Rojda Felat was the senior front commander, supported by famed leaders including Klara, Amude, Zinarin (as they were known), Abu Khawla al-Dayri, and Ciya Kobani, among others. One U.S. observer watched the SDF practicing the operation, remarking that "they never stopped planning, rehearsing, and preparing" for a sixty-day period before the air assault.[96] U.S.-trained operators from Lahur Sheikh Janghi Talabani's Counter-Terrorism Group also accompanied the assault.[97] Rehearsals brought together U.S. helicopters and tilt-rotor aircraft from the Kobane Landing Zone, with fighters staged at two camps on the south bank of the Sajur River, who then air-assaulted a set of hills near Manbij that simulated the terrain around Tabqa.[98]

When the Tabqa crossing was launched on March 20, it was preceded by nearly one hundred airstrikes and accompanied by U.S. Apache helicopter gunships.[99] The air assault successfully emplaced an SDF force behind Tabqa's north-facing defenses—a daring use of maneuver that was initially conceived by the SDF general command and refined and facilitated by the United States. The so-called SDF navy then began floating earthmovers across Lake Assad, and the SDF forces advanced on Tabqa Dam and Tabqa city. These movements gave a sense of what awaited in Raqqa city: the Islamic State had sealed off

the city by blowing up two bridges, and the SDF encountered even denser IED belts than had been emplaced in Manbij.[100] As in Manbij and later Raqqa, only a combination of fighting and an arranged IS withdrawal[101] could clear the strategic Tabqa Dam, irrigation facilities and bridge, and Tabqa city.

The SDF at Full Power: The Liberation of Raqqa City

The beginning of the fifth phase of the Raqqa campaign started with the SDF moving into the eastern district of al-Meshleb in June 2017.[102] The July 4 breaching operations through the ancient walls of Raqqa city[103] underlined the ways in which the SDF and its components were greatly facilitated by U.S. assistance, yet often were stubbornly unchanged by the experience. For U.S. planners, the simultaneous and carefully "weaponeered"[104] delivery of GBU-31 bombs was the starting gun for a "D-Day type flood of forces into Raqqa, to exploit shock and surprise," in the words of one U.S. observer.[105] But a U.S. advisor, who was present in a front command on July 4, contrasted this with the reality:

> That was not how it worked out. After a few hours, we saw three fighters probe through the gaps. Three turned into six; six turned into twelve. They got some footholds, and the guys behind did the back-clearing. It wasn't pretty but it worked.[106]

The SDF forces moved forward in their familiar way. YPG units, YPG *cadros* embedded with Arab units, and YPG foreign volunteers led the way. No amount of U.S. prodding to "fire and maneuver" could change the Syrian fighters' tendency to "do what they know."[107] SDF units very rarely used covering fire to enable simultaneous maneuver or outflanking; if they fired at all, they fired, then moved, usually directly toward the target.[108] Penetration was key, with tiny squads selecting one building as a tactical objective for the day.[109] Tablets became increasingly

useful as navigation tools in the dense urban landscape. Bearded Arab SDF fighters demonstrated a knack for undertaking close-target reconnaissance within IS areas by donning jihadist clothing such as *hisba* (religious police) waistcoats and "Kandahar" baggy pants.[110]

The extraordinarily dense network of IEDs was cleared with a variety of expedients. Although the U.S.-supplied MICLICs were useful, they were too few in number to support multiple lines of advance. The charges were also hard to use in tight spaces, so the SDF purchased sheep, which it drove through mined areas, or even rolled tires down booby-trapped streets and alleys.[111] Coalition counter-IED equipment was taken apart for its component C4, which was fused and wrapped in cellophane to make greater numbers of simple, cartoonish, "Wile E. Coyote" concussion bombs that could be thrown into areas to detonate IEDs.[112] The SDF took its earthmoving front loaders and "'Mad Max'd' them up really quick," in the words of one U.S. advisor, to be used as mine-rollers, with deafened drivers capable of detonating scores of IEDs in a row.[113]

Once each structure was cleared, the uppermost story was "strongpointed" for defense at night, but little was done to secure or watch the areas around the house, or between the new gain and the friendly lines to the rear. A "taxi service" of hastily up-armored (or "supermaxed") Humvees ran food, water, and ammunition forward, and brought casualties back. U.S. airpower and artillery provided flank security against major counterattacks, but the Islamic State often moved wholly inside buildings or through tunnels. At night, IS would often penetrate into the lower floors of "liberated" buildings and set fire to them, or engage in close-range firefights in which the coalition was powerless to assist.[114]

Optimization of Local Intelligence and Coalition Fires

By the time of the battle for Raqqa city, the SDF and the coalition had perfected a range of fire-control techniques to support close-range

tactical engagements. On the SDF side of each U.S.-Syrian operations center were sixty-inch flat-screen TVs; these projected the friendly-force tracking of the SDF tablet-holders, who were now present in every small *tabur* of sixty or so fighters. These tablets now ran the Android Team Awareness Kit software, which allowed more accurate requests for fire. Reports of enemy forces were passed on Post-it Notes from the SDF side of the operations center to the U.S. side, where they were investigated, verified, and assessed as targets. Friendly forces were marked as polygons on the classified U.S. tablets: little islands of friendly turf ("the green blobs" of "really cleared areas") versus everything else ("the red blobs").[115]

The process of approving fire support requests had become highly sophisticated. Instead of approving just a set of coordinates, the U.S. frontline teams prequalified and refined fire requests, which now often included GPS coordinates, azimuth, direction, and distance to target, and sometimes photographs.[116] U.S. drones obtained tactical imagery with tremendous granularity—akin to a military version of Google Street View—with rooftop-level, close-range recordings of buildings, each of which had been assigned a unique number. These drone excursions were not without risk, as all drones in Raqqa city airspace tended to be presumed hostile and to be targeted by all sides, including by Islamic State GPS jamming (which scrambled drones' ability to detect their precise location or to use preprogramed routes).

When SDF troops requested a strike on a building, the U.S. strike cells were able to rewind close-up imagery of the building from mere days prior, in an effort to qualify the fire support request. If SDF troops wanted to bomb a building in response to fire coming at them from a small embrasure (a "murder hole," in the words of a U.S. advisor), U.S. forces could check if the building was the likely source of the fire:[117] "Sometimes we could find the 'murder hole' in the wall and say to the requesting unit, 'There's no way that house is firing on you. It's not physically possible.'"[118] In a range of areas—notably, near the hospital,

stadium, clinics, and water treatment plants—almost no supporting fires were used. Areas off the immediate frontline were still subject to "a very responsible 'soak' of [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance]" to ensure, in a weeklong survey, that civilians were not inside structures.[119]

Yet despite such sophisticated measures, the greater availability of U.S. firepower undoubtedly had its downsides. The battle utterly destroyed the inner two-mile-square center of Raqqa city, with a U.S. government report citing "shocking" levels of destruction and "almost total devastation."[120] Civilian casualties had increased because of the Islamic State's method—as in Mosul—of keeping civilians in the city as human shields.[121] Some strikes did more damage than expected. U.S. weaponeers eventually learned that the lower-quality concrete used in Raqqa, compared to that used in other cities, made local structures less able to absorb multiple impacts without collapsing.[122] A *Washington Post* study using UN satellite imagery reported that eleven thousand structures were destroyed, severely damaged, or moderately damaged by a reported twenty thousand munitions impacts.[123] Amnesty International claimed that sixteen hundred civilians were killed in Raqqa city during the battle, mostly by coalition joint fires.[124] The number of coalition airstrikes in Syria in one month went from 878 in June (before the urban battle) to 966 in July, 1,463 in August, and 1,278 in September.[125] As one U.S. fire controller recalled, the U.S. Marine Corps 155 mm artillery unit supporting the urban battle "fired the most 155 mm rounds of any battery since the Vietnam War. We actually broke some of the guns."[126] Apaches, armed drones, artillery, and airstrikes were combined with unprecedented lethality and precision, but also with unparalleled material destructiveness. "The application of fires was very precise," one U.S. fire controller said, "but [the Islamic State] was so entrenched, in tunnels and with IEDs, that we did have to shoot the SDF onto their targets."[127]

The Cost of Liberating "By, With, and Through"

The tremendous level of material destruction in Raqqa was likely attributable to two related factors: (1) the delegation of target approval to the local U.S. observers who had the best situational awareness, and (2) the war-weariness of the SDF assault forces. In Raqqa, as one U.S. observer noted, "There was no question of the outcome—just how costly it would be in SDF lives."[128] Another U.S. fire controller commented, "This was not like Kobane. They were war-weary. For the Kurds—and they were the main attacking force—there was an unwillingness to do high-casualty building clearance outside the Kurdish areas."[129] The Arab components of the SDF were equally reliant on bombardment, calling down airstrikes and dropping whole buildings in an effort to remove individual enemy snipers and foreign fighters who would not surrender.[130] As one U.S. senior official recalled, "It was apocalyptic, but that is the price of not doing it yourself."[131] That officer may have forgotten that when U.S. forces did "do it themselves," they also sometimes flattened cities, such as in Fallujah in November 2004.[132]

Another aspect of liberating "by, with, and through" was that the SDF, the Raqqa Civil Council, and tribal leaders in the area, after consultation, pushed for another "honors of war" truce, which would allow IS forces to withdraw along with their families, who were still stuck in the hospital and the Raqqa football stadium. As at Manbij, the truce at Raqqa would permit IS fighters to evacuate the city as an armed force.[133] As a result of the deal, thirty-five hundred civilians came out of Raqqa, including three hundred fighters.[134] Once again, though the United States preferred to let no IS fighters escape encirclement, the "by, with, and through" dynamic of the campaign required compromise.

Both the coalition-SDF and the Islamic State immediately turned their forces south toward Deir al-Zour, the final battlefield in northeast Syria. Although the Kurdish leaders of the SDF did not hesitate to

switch their best attacking forces to the lower Euphrates River settlements along the Syrian border, the United States immediately cut its new direct and open training and arming support to the YPG, with all future support to be once again provided under the rubric of the SDF. The United States directly supported the YPG for only the minimum time possible—that is, for the duration of the Raqqa urban battle—then reverted to its prior stance. Referring to direct and acknowledged U.S. support, one U.S. senior official noted that "October 2017 was the last time we ever gave the YPG anything."[135]

Notes

1 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "U.S. Backing Gives Kurds Cover for United Federal Region in Northern Syria," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 12 (2016), available at https://www.refworld.org/docid/576262754.html.

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26 An Arabist, Ratney was the only U.S. official to hold meetings in Arabic with Mazloum in the 2015–16 period. Authors' interview with U.S. official 45: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

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30 Ibid.

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87 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

88 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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of Tabqa field of operation), and commander Khalil Mohammad. Heval Luqman, Ciya Kobani, Abu Khawla and many others were also involved in the operation.

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92 Authors' interview with U.S. official 28: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

93 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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108 Ibid.

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110 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

111 Authors' interview with U.S. official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

112 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. These devices were also used in Manbij city.

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114 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

115 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

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129 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

130 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. Also see authors' interview with SDF official 19: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

131 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

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5

Outside the Comfort Zone: The Deir al-Zour Campaign

Relations between the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces probably reached their zenith in the immediate aftermath of Raqqa. The U.S. Department of Defense gushed about the SDF in its reporting to Congress, noting:

> The SDF had shown more battlefield successes than any other vetted Syrian opposition force. [The Defense Department] credited the force not only with liberating territory from [the Islamic State's] control, but also with pushing [IS] from the Turkish border to prevent foreign fighters...The [Defense Department] reported that the SDF liberated an area the size of Vermont and New Hampshire and predicted that the SDF would clear [IS] from land east of the Euphrates River, effectively ending [the Islamic State's] physical caliphate in Syria. According to the [Defense Department], the SDF had demonstrated both offensive combat capabilities and the ability to hold terrain after it was liberated from [IS]. The SDF has also borne the brunt of the casualties in the fight against [the Islamic State].[1]

Blitzkrieg into Deir al-Zour

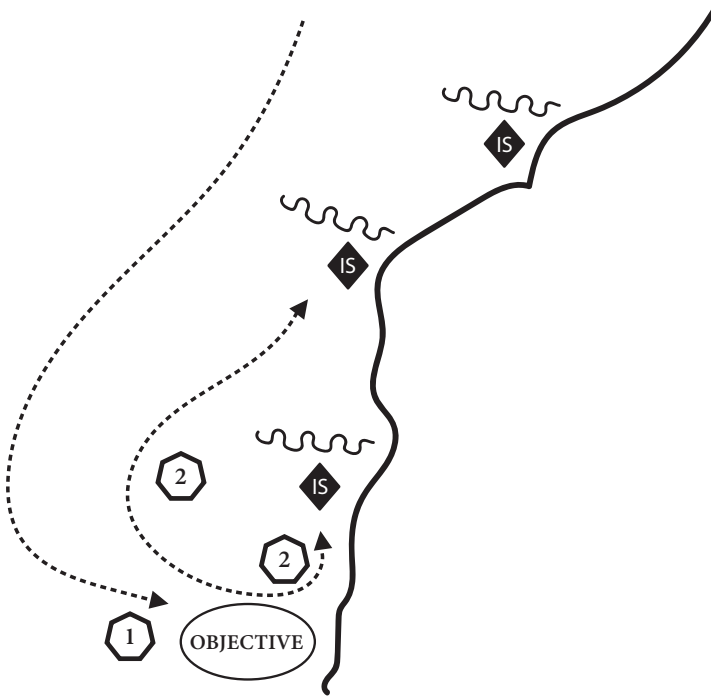
The SDF leadership was on a roll, ready to rush straight into new battles to pursue overlapping objectives with the United States. A senior U.S. official recalled that "one week after Raqqa, we told Mazloum

[Kobani Abdi] we needed to step on the gas, and the SDF understood the urgency."[2] Jazira region YPG forces had moved west to join the SDF in the Raqqa battle, and now Kobane region YPG forces went east for the first time to kick off the Deir al-Zour campaign. In addition to striking the Islamic State while it reeled from the loss of Raqqa, the SDF had a similar desire to exclude the Assad regime from Syria's Mid-Euphrates River Valley. The SDF even proposed a river crossing to seize Abu Kamal (on the west side); that was to be a precursor to linking up with the U.S.-backed Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra forces at al-Tanf to the southwest, in an effort to create a contiguous line of U.S.-backed forces all along the strategic Iraq-Syria border.[3] Geopolitically, the SDF sought to align with the United States against the Assad regime, Iran-backed Shia militias, and Russia.

For the U.S. special operators, the SDF's lightning thrust to the MERV in September 2017 was an exhilarating rush after the slog of Raqqa. Disengaging before the end of the fight for Raqqa city, commanders Newroz Ahmed and Murad, as they are known, gathered the SDF's east Raqqa command group and their U.S. advisors, plus around one thousand fighters largely from the People's Defense Units, and relocated 120 miles to Hasaka. Islamic State defenses were rapidly profiled and subjected to a very intense two days of airstrikes, while Newroz and Murad's forces joined with the SDF al-Shadadi commander Ciya Kobani and those of Abu Khawla al-Dayri, Arab commander of the Deir al-Zour Military Council.[4] (For a map of the Deir al-Zour campaign, see Annex C.)

The opening phase of Operation Jazira Storm saw the SDF mount a rapid five-day, seventy-mile blitz to the MERV north of Deir al-Zour.[5] There were two axes: Highway 47 from al-Shadadi and another via the Abu Khashab route.[6] The attack used desert tracks to bypass Islamic State towns in the Khabur River Valley, once again emphasizing deep penetration and the use of airpower as flank security.[7] Flowing around urban nodes of IS resistance, hard-charging YPG commanders such

Fig. 5.1 Mobile Operations in Deir al-Zour



1 SDF mobile operations in Deir al-Zour avoided fortified villages in favor of 20–40 mile advances through open desert to a distant objective that cut off the enemy from resupply.

Fortified locations could then be reduced through negotiation or assault against less fortified axes.

2 SDF forces sometimes split their main force into multiple columns and did attack multiple objectives simultaneously if resistance seemed light, as shown in this example.

Almost no security forces were left along the line of advance; coalition airpower provided flank security for deep penetrations and broke up enemy counterattacks. Forcing the Islamic State to use river lines of communication made the group extremely vulnerable to coalition airpower.

as Ciya Kobani—described lovingly by U.S. advisors as "the SDF's Patton"—outraced the Assad regime to the Conoco, al-Omar, and Tanak oil fields in phases 2–6 of the offensive. Then, in phases 7 and 8 of Jazira Storm, the SDF laid down a carpet of forces all along the Euphrates to the Iraqi border, blocking Assad regime and Russian advances across the river.[8] Throughout the Syrian-Iraqi caliphate, the Islamic State was in full rout by the end of 2017. All its remaining strength was falling back on a last-stand defense of the Hajin and Baghuz areas of the Syrian MERV, plus some smaller pockets on the Iraq-Syria border. The scene was set for a final, grinding battle of annihilation.

Turkey's Afrin Operation Disrupts the YPG War Effort

The counter-IS campaign—and the U.S.-YPG relationship—was rocked on January 20, 2018, by the opening of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in the Afrin area of northwest Syria. The Turkish campaign was made possible by Russia, after Moscow withdrew the troops it had stationed in Afrin, following the YPG's refusal to surrender Afrin to the Syrian regime. Moscow's uncovering of the SDF to a Turkish invasion may also have been a Russian gesture to Ankara after the Russian-aided Assad operation defeated Turkish-backed rebels in eastern Idlib in late 2017.[9] The YPG was surprised by Russia's action. Indeed, just a few weeks before the Turkish operation, the Russians had awarded YPG commander Sipan Hemo with an "award of heroism."[10] Even when the Turkish operation began, the YPG did not believe it would be more than a shallow incursion, an assessment that proved incorrect.[11] The fifty-eight-day operation ended with the capture of Afrin city on March 18 and was a "resounding defeat" for the YPG in Afrin, according to one U.S. government report.[12]

The YPG in Afrin, which had not received any U.S. support since 2014, was thoroughly outmatched by Turkey's planning, multidirectional

attacks, and combination of commando forces with advanced intelligence, strike, and tank survivability systems.[13] The YPG's well-fortified mountain positions facing Turkey were breached and outflanked: antitank guided missiles, sourced from non-U.S. markets by the YPG, were used in small numbers and did not destroy a single Turkish tank.[14] By March 14, Turkish-backed forces surrounded Afrin, seized its dam and water plant, and cut off water to the city.[15] The most Ocalanist part of the YPG leadership, led by three commanders including Mahmoud Berxwedan, Dijwar Halab, and female commander Nujin Derik,[16] stood little chance in the face of overwhelming Turkish air, technological, and logistical superiority. Although a Kobane-type street battle was threatened by the YPG, the movement chose to avoid an urban battle,[17] opting instead for long-term insurgency.[18]

For the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort with the SDF, the Afrin operation was a major wake-up call, specifically in regard to the difficulty of relying on the YPG command and fighting core of the SDF at a time when Turkey was attacking the movement. When interview material and open-source analysis is pooled, it seems that the withdrawal of just fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred YPG[19] fighters brought the counter-IS campaign in Deir al-Zour to a standstill and ended Operation Jazira Storm. Most of the withdrawn YPG forces manned the northern border of the Kobane, Manbij, and Jazira regions, facing Turkey.[20] Only a small number of SDF fighters were able to participate directly in the defense of Afrin. Some YPG cadres (and some Arab SAC forces who had previously been given shelter in Afrin) tried to get smuggled through Assad regime territory to Afrin, though the SDF Military Discipline Units made real efforts to stem this flow.

Nevertheless, it was clear to U.S. commanders, frustrated at the halt in operations, that the withdrawal of as few as fifteen hundred YPG fighters (and one or two key commanders) resulted in a total loss of offensive capability in the SDF[21]—a reality that was explicitly discussed by the U.S. government in its remarks to Congress. Combined Joint

Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reported that the Syrian Arab Coalition, a force belonging to the SDF, is "probably unable to conduct offensive operations against [the Islamic State] without the YPG." In December 2018, CJTF-OIR reported to the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General that the YPG's "experience in fighting [the Islamic State], along with U.S. equipment and training to the SDF over a number of years, is paramount to stability and efforts to defeat [IS] in the MERV."[22]

Most importantly but invisible to the outside world, the diversion of just a single YPJ logistician—Newroz—had an outsized impact on the Deir al-Zour campaign. Her withdrawal (to coordinate the transfer of YPG-held ammunition to Afrin) "brought the Deir al-Zour supply chain to a halt," in the words of one U.S. advisor.[23]

Airstrikes dwindled in March and April[24] as the YPG-based system of coordination rooms and fronts was frozen. The United States itself was partially distracted by the need to resolve the Afrin issue, and to prevent it from spreading to other frontlines, such as Manbij.[25] In Afrin, Mazloum later claimed that approximately 2,000 YPG fighters were killed—more than the 1,253 claimed killed at Kobane—a number that showed the lethality of Turkish airstrikes and artillery fire.[26]

U.S.-YPG Power Games After Afrin

Senior U.S. commanders did not put too much pressure on Mazloum during the Afrin crisis. One recalled, "We recognized how significant this was for the Kurds. We provided some space for [Mazloum] to think his way through it, and we let him make his choice. We tried to encourage him to think long term."[27]

Mazloum played the six-week crisis coolly. His actions had prevented too many YPG fighters from entering the Afrin area; he even used his military discipline units to detain YPG fighters trying to reach Afrin. The Kobane and Jazira YPG encouraged the Afrin YPG to

cede Afrin city in an effort to avoid a destructive urban battle.[28] Most importantly, Mazloum never fully or permanently withdrew the YPG from the counter-IS fight. He knew that the YPG's value to the United States—and its first-among-equals status in northeast Syria—largely derived from its contribution to the war against the Islamic State. U.S. officials were candid in telling Mazloum, "The United States is here to fight [the Islamic State]. If you're not fighting [IS], then we are going to get questions about why we are still here."[29]

The Afrin crisis, and the need to restart the Deir al-Zour campaign with or without the YPG, led to a number of interesting changes in how the United States did business with the SDF. One such change was a more visible frontline role for U.S. advisors. The latter stages of the Deir al-Zour campaign—that is, those from May 2018 onward—saw U.S. (and French) special forces deployed on more axes, with each of the six front commanders. The coalition moved coordination of fire support from the SDF joint operations commands to frontline management of fires (air and artillery strikes).[30] Just as important, the United States responded to the withdrawal of YPG logistical management during Afrin by decentralizing the supply arrangements for the SDF, with one senior U.S. advisor noting the following:

> Until Afrin, the United States did not have to move any logistics for [the SDF]. We got it to the landing zone, and YPG would truck it to the [forward line of own troops] via their depots. After Afrin, we did facilitate contract trucking on our own in Deir al-Zour, and not just to al-Shadadi but all the way to Green Village, in the al-Omar oil field. This undermined their centralized control of logistics.[31]

The trend across the board was one of more direct interaction between the U.S. and the SAC components of the SDF, in terms of logistics, advisement, and fire support.

Completing the Clearance of the MERV

The final territorial clearance operations against the Islamic State posed some daunting challenges for U.S. and SDF planners. Using the pause forced by the Turkish incursion, IS had drawn much of his its strength, including significant numbers of foreign fighters, into the remaining pockets of Hajin and the twin towns of Baghuz I and Baghuz II, close to the Iraqi border. [32] The momentum of the Deir al-Zour campaign had been lost, which allowed IS to recover its balance.[33] IS fell back onto its best remaining defensive terrain, where it could use its proven tactics to extract a heavy cost from attackers—thick belts of improvised explosive devices, covered by snipers; short-range ambushes with armored suicide car bombs; and light infantry infiltration tactics in urban terrain.[34] Compared to the open desert that the SDF had flowed through in late 2017, the next battles would unfold on the escarpment of the Euphrates River Valley, in vegetated "green zones" and, finally, through a chain of fortified towns.

Human Terrain and Tribes in the MERV

The human terrain was equally oppressive, with the SDF encountering Arab tribes that had been working with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State for well over a decade and that had been under IS control for more than three years.[35] According to one Manbij Military Council commander who participated in the Deir al-Zour campaign, though most local Arabs opposed the Islamic State, there were areas of particularly strong IS support and recruitment, such as al-Busayrah and al-Shuhail.[36] Arab commanders have made this observation about the intensity of IS support in some parts of Deir al-Zour.[37] Historically, after 2003, Deir al-Zour was an important crossing point for jihadists to fight the U.S. forces in neighboring Iraq.[38] Fighters who later returned to Syria joined groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State during the

Syrian civil war. Another Kurdish commander noted that Deir al-Zour was always a region with de facto independence, where tribes ruled and favored Saddam Hussein in Iraq over Assad's Alawite-dominated government. He said the following:

> Majority-Sunni [regions] like Deir al-Zour did not see themselves represented in the Syrian system; instead, they had more appreciation for Iraq, specifically for Saddam Hussein, that he was fighting for the right of Arab people, and he had killed thousands of Kurds during Anfal and Halabja. All that led to an increased sectarianism in Deir al-Zour. Therefore, when [the Islamic State] entered Deir al-Zour, they could easily position themselves there.[39]

The SDF, reliant on a 90 percent Arab-manned force in the Deir al-Zour campaign, was involved in painstaking political-military negotiations as it advanced in 2018 and early 2019. The group worked with local power brokers to lever and bribe IS-aligned tribes into standing aside, in an effort to spare their villages from destruction—many miniature versions of the late-stage IS evacuations of Manbij and Raqqa.[40] Meanwhile, IS remained highly aggressive, capable of exploiting any period of bad weather or poor visibility (and thus reduced fire support) to mount vicious counterattacks that frequently pushed SDF forces back with heavy casualties.

Weakness of Deir al-Zour SDF Units

Though IS still had a lot of punch in its final battles, the SDF in Deir al-Zour was less effective than the Raqqa attack force had been. "When Afrin started, pretty much all the Kurdish people left to go there," one former volunteer recalled.[41] New local tribal forces joining the Deir al-Zour Military Council needed to be gathered and trained, and were among the least-effective SAC forces that the United States had worked with. IS sleeper cells attacked lines of supply, with one foreign volunteer recalling, "The sleeper cells made logistics and [casualty evacuation]

very difficult from the desert region. We needed the mine roller to clear the main desert road every single day."[42] SDF forces were never fully safe, with troops generally withdrawing from some checkpoints to reach better-protected bases by sunset.[43] Deir al-Zour Military Council forces were isolated:

> They were scared, and fired wildly at anything that moved outside their bases—even plastic bags in the wind, or dogs, even with 23 mm cannons. They would take a siesta every day with no security, just a circular fighting position with everyone asleep in their tents.[44]

Indeed, as an embedded journalist remarked, "The local fighters were very passive, fatalistic, and depressed, with a number of self-inflicted wounds."[45]

These SAC forces lacked resilience, and needed to be bolstered with YPG and YPJ reinforcements when the SDF cleared "hot" areas such as Susa and Shafa. One commander shared the following:

> In areas like Susa and Shafa in Deir al-Zour, we planned to deploy SDF-only local forces (from Deir al-Zour) to fight [the Islamic State]; yet we were not successful in that plan—there were shortcomings. [IS] could carry out counterattacks and reclaim the control over some of the areas they had lost. So we had to deploy the YPG/YPJ forces within the SDF in order to intervene in those areas. Special battalions were deployed and continued to be part of the Deir al-Zour operation until the ultimate liberation.[46]

The U.S. Department of Defense described the Deir al-Zour SAC units in less graphic but nonetheless clearly negative terms:

> The SAC component of the SDF remained unable to effect "meaningful territorial gains in the MERV without the YPG or to hold ground in the face of a determined enemy..." Although the SAC includes a wide range of forces with varying experience, "in general the organization lacks discipline and operational experience..." CJTF-OIR described the SAC as a "conglomerate of tribal militias

> with differing motivations for fighting and distinct geographical affiliations," whose success has been underpinned by "the YPG's coherence and leadership."[47]

The statement reflected an objective reality: there could be no final clearance of the MERV, and no subsequent holding of the MERV, without significant non-Arab contributions of YPG leadership and U.S. firepower. The SAC remained a largely hollow fighting force in Deir al-Zour without its YPG spine.

The Final Clearance Battles at Hajin and Baghuz

During the untidy end of major combat operations against the Islamic State, U.S., French, and British special forces played a far more visible and active role on the frontline. Attempts were made to provide SDF forces with protected mobility—the all-important mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles—as well as with bridge-layers to aid maneuver outside expected routes of advance, and armored bulldozers for route clearance and the rapid consolidation of defensive positions.

Even with these preparations, numerous successful IS counterattacks and suicide bombings disrupted the methodical reduction of the defensive pockets. From September 2018 until the December 14 capture of Hajin town center, an estimated 539 SDF troops were killed—on par with the toughest battles at Kobane and Raqqa city—with more than 90 fatalities in the last week of November.[48] According to the United Nations, around fifteen thousand residents—including five thousand IS fighters and their families—were in Hajin alone.[49] According to the coalition, however, around fifteen hundred to two thousand fighters remained in Hajin.[50] The Defense Department said that "[the Islamic State] improved its defensive posture in territory still under its control and conducted successful counterattacks to defend against SDF advances there."[51]

The attack force for the final battles was a patchwork of long-established and newly formed Arab units (including deserters from

the Assad military and Turkish militias), returning internally displaced persons from Hajin and Baghuz, YPG cadres, U.S. and French special operators, and Western volunteers getting in on the last chance to participate in major combat operations.[52] The main Arab force during the operation, the Deir al-Zour Military Council, comprised tribal recruits from the al-Bakir, Baggara, and al-Shaitat tribes, with the al-Bakir having the upper hand in numbers and thus providing the overall commander of the Arab forces, Abu Khawla al-Dayri. Alongside the al-Bakir, many members of the al-Shaitat tribe joined the council to seek vengeance for the massacres that IS had carried out against them since 2014.[53]

Under such pressing circumstances, firepower again came to the fore. In addition to intensive airstrikes—634 in Hajin in November 2018 alone—the role of artillery was significant.[54] Supplementing U.S. and French howitzers firing from inside Iraq,[55] and Iraqi forces providing cross-border support with airstrikes and artillery,[56] SDF mortar units provided unprecedented levels of support.[57] Almost all troops down to the squad level, including SDF foreign volunteers from the United States and Europe, had access to a tablet.[58] According to the UN, "To overcome [Islamic State] setbacks, SDF relied heavily on international coalition air power, causing a notable increase in civilian casualties."[59] Col. Francois-Regis Legrier, who was in charge of French artillery units during the Hajin battle, criticized the reliance on airstrikes that increased civilian casualties, suggesting that an extra one thousand coalition ground troops could have more effectively finished the job.[60]

The desperate IS defense lasted until the last patch of terrain was recaptured. Even at the very end of the battle, the SDF called down "danger-close" airstrikes on its own (YPG) troops to avoid being overrun in one of the many IS counterattacks.[61] For the first time, U.S. special operators brought their own snipers to the frontline to directly engage IS targets during battles. At the cliffs of Baghuz, overlooking the Euphrates, major combat operations came to an end on March 23,

2019. Around forty thousand people of different nationalities, including foreign IS families, left the jihadist territory after a three-month battle.[62] The SDF General Command announced that it had lost a total of eleven thousand fighters,[63] plus more than twenty-one thousand injured, in the fight against IS since the battle of Kobane.[64] The SDF, whose focus following the physical defeat of the Caliphate subsequently shifted to holding and stabilizing the liberated areas, announced that it would continue campaigns—with coalition backing—against IS sleeper cells.[65]

Notes

1 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2017–December 31, 2017*, 31–32.

2 Authors' interview with U.S. official 34: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

3 The United States began to logistically prepare the boats required for the crossing, before ultimately canceling the option. Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

4 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

5 Authors' interview with U.S. official 12: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

6 See "Deir ez-Zor Military Council Commander Ahmad Abu Khawla on Operation #CizireStorm" (video), September 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC3iuPeszK8; and "Al-Jazeera Storm Campaign Gaining More Advance in the Four Sides of the Battlefields," SDF Press, October 2, 2017, https://sdf-press.com/en/2017/10/al-jazira-storm-campaign-gaining-more-advance-in-the-four-sides-of-the-battlefields/.

7 Authors' interview with SDF official 26: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

8 On February 2, 2018, U.S. aircraft killed up to two hundred Assad regime and Russian mercenary forces as they probed their ability to cross the Euphrates and enter local oil fields in the so-called Battle of Khasham. Sebastien Roblin, "Did U.S. and Russian Troops Fight Their Bloodiest Battle Since World War I in February?" *National Interest*, June 16, 2018, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/did-us-russian-troops-fight-their-bloodiest-battle-since-26280.

9 Haid, "Why Did Russia Abandon Afrin?" Middle East Eye, February 12, 2018, https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-did-russia-abandon-afrin.

10 "YPG Commander General Sipan Hemo in Moscow," Firat News Agency, December 23, 2017, https://anfenglishmobile.com/women/

ypg-commander-general-sipan-hemo-in-moscow-23815.

11 Authors' interview with former volunteer 3, July 2019. Name and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

12 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2018–March 30, 2018*, 5.

13 Gurcan, *Assessing the Turkish Military*, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-post-july-15-turkish-military-operations-euphrates-shield-and-olive.

14 Ibid., 13–15. This is compared to the loss of eleven Turkish Leopard 2A4s and one M60-A3 tank in 2016's Operation Euphrates Shield.

15 "Water Cut in Syria's Afrin as Turkey Completes Encirclement," Al Jazeera, March 14, 2018. See also Patrick Cockburn, "After My Recent Trip to Syria, I Knew Afrin's Fall Was Inevitable," *Independent*, March 18, 2018.

16 Authors' interview with SDF official 19: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

17 This scene repeated itself when Mazloum, in coordination with the United States, also decided to pull out from Ras al-Ain after one week of battle, after fighters there were basically besieged during Turkey's October 2019 intervention. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish-Led Forces Withdraw from Syrian City Besieged by Turkey," Kurdistan 24, October 20, 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0f8f5a18-7451-47eb-8c7e-6e18098b041b.

18 "Afrin Administration: The War Has Moved to Another Stage," Firat News Agency, March 18, 2018, https://anfenglish.com/rojava/afrin-administration-the-war-has-moved-to-another-stage-25570. See also Cockburn, "Afrin's Fall Was Inevitable."

19 According to the Department of Defense's Inspector General Report, around fifteen hundred to two thousand Kurds belonging to the YPG left to fight in Afrin. See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2018–March 31, 2018*, 5.

20 Most appear to have been held in readiness to defend the border between Kobane and al-Malikiyah. Authors' interviews with multiple

interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

21 It is also clear that these fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred YPG troops were the cream of the SDF, representing an irreplaceable offensive cadre. This structure underlines how SDF offensives were built around a very compact cadre of YPG fighters. Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

22 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2018–March 30, 2018*, 5.

23 Authors' interview with U.S. official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

24 Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Report to the United States Congress: FY 2019 Comprehensive Oversight Plan* (October 2018), 5. In January 2018, the coalition undertook 215 strikes in Iraq, largely in support of Deir al-Zour operations. In March and April, the totals were 38 and 74, respectively. When the YPG rejoined the campaign, the airstrikes rose back up to 197 in May.

25 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2018–December 31, 2018*, 28, 41.

26 Initially, the YPG said that 820 YPG fighters were killed in the battle, but General Mazloum confirmed in a later interview that more were killed. See "Afrin Administration: Another Stage"; and "Exclusive Interview with General Mazlum Kobane, Syrian Democratic Forces," *Syrian Democratic Times*, June 12, 2020, https://www.syriandemocratictimes.com/2020/06/12/interview-with-general-mazlum-kobane-sdf/.

27 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

28 Gurcan, *Assessing the Turkish Military*, 13, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-post-july-15-turkish-military-operations-euphrates-shield-and-olive.

29 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

30 This arrangement was not necessarily a smooth transition. Neither the original Delta-led leadership nor the YPG liked the new decentralized fire control mechanism at the frontline. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

31 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

32 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018–September 30, 2018,* 43.

33 Authors' interview with SDF official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

34 For a detailed description of IS defensive tactics, see Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Defeat by Annihilation: Mobility and Attrition in the Islamic State's Defense of Mosul," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 4 (April 2017): 1–7.

35 Ziad Awad, "Deir Al-Zor After Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime" (research project report, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy, 2018), 11.

36 Authors' interview with SDF official 34: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. These towns and others in the Khabur River Valley seem to have had a long connection with al-Qaeda in Iraq (and later IS), stretching back to 2003.

37 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2019–March 31, 2019*, 6.

38 Awad, "Deir Al-Zor After Islamic State," 5.

39 Authors' interview with SDF official 28: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

40 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

41 Authors' interview with SDF foreign volunteer 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

42 Ibid. Also see authors' interview with SDF official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

43 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

44 Authors' interview with journalist 3: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

45 Authors' interview with journalist 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

46 Authors' interview with SDF official 36: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. See also OIR Spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto (@OIRSpox), "SDF sends special forces to Hajin amid 'hard fighting,'" Twitter, October 29, 2018, 3:02 a.m., https://twitter.com/OIRSpox/status/1056803511231569920.

47 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2019–March 31, 2019*, 27.

48 Agence France-Presse, "East Syria Fighting Kills Over 200 in 3 days: Monitor," France 24, November 26, 2018.

49 UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (New York: United Nations, 2019), 10.

50 "Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing by U.K. Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Ghika via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq" (transcript), November 13, 2018, U.S. Department of Defense, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1689611/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-press-briefing-by-uk-army/.

51 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018–September 30, 2018*, 44.

52 The volunteers came from settings as diverse as "Florida, Texas, Sydney, Dublin, Canada, Scotland, and South Korea," one U.S. advisor recalled. Their experiences included the military, far leftist politics, the civil war in

Ukraine, and antipoaching activism in Africa. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

53 Awad, "Deir Al-Zor After Islamic State."

54 Alex Hopkins, "Airwars Monthly Assessment—November 2018," Airwars, January 2019, https://airwars.org/report/airwars-monthly-assessment-november-2018/.

55 U.S. Central Command (@CENTCOM), "French Task Force Wagram supports ground forces around the city of Hajin," Twitter, February 3, 2019, 9:40 a.m., https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1092070245546815494.

56 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018–September 30, 2018*, 44. See also U.S. Department of Defense, "Iraqi Air Force Conducts Strike Against ISIS Terrorists in Syria," news release, April 19, 2018, https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1498576/iraqi-air-force-conducts-strike-against-isis-terrorists-in-syria/.

57 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

58 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

59 UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (New York: United Nations, 2019), 10.

60 John Irish, "Top French Officer Raps West's Tactics Against IS in Syria, Faces Punishment," Reuters, February 16, 2019.

61 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

62 Ellen Francis, "Islamic State Faces Final Territorial Defeat in Eastern Syria Battle," Reuters, March 2, 2019.

63 According to Zelal Jeger, the co-chair of Tevgera Civake Demokratik (TEV-DEM, or the Movement for a Democratic Society), a political organization in Rojava, three thousand were Arabs, and the rest mostly

Kurds (and Assyrians). See interview with Zelal Jeger, co-chair of TEV-DEM, via Rojava Information Center (RIC), date unknown.

64 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "SDF Says Over 11,000 of Its Forces Killed in Fight Against the Islamic State," Kurdistan 24, March 23, 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0dafe596-6536-49d7-8e23-e52821742ae9; and "Statement to Public Opinion," SDF Press, March 23, 2019, https://sdf-press.com/en/2019/03/statement-to-public-opinion-14/.

65 Van Wilgenburg, "SDF Says Forces Killed."

6

Stabilization "By, With, and Through" the SDF

After the clearance of the Mid-Euphrates River Valley, the Syrian Democratic Forces controlled nearly 30 percent of Syrian territory, or twenty thousand square miles. This territory had an estimated population of three million and was home to most of Syria's oil production.[1]

Organizing Local "Hold Forces"

The SDF worked with the coalition to design a framework document that would organize counterterrorism and stabilization operations, defining roles and missions. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), formed in September 2018,[2] had three main military regions that do not exactly align with the seven AANES political regions.[3] These include:

- **The Jazira military region (Herema Cezire, 1):** This includes the military councils of Derik (al-Malikiyah), Qamishli, Hasaka, Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye), Tal Tamer, Amude, and al-Hawl. The region, known as Syria's breadbasket, is inhabited by a slight majority of Kurds, a large minority of Arab tribes, and sizable Assyrian and Armenian communities.[4]
- **The Euphrates military region (Herema Furate, 2):** This includes the military councils of Tal Abyad, Kobane, Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, al-Bab, and Jarabulus (northern Manbij).

- **The Eastern military region (Herema Dere, 3):** This includes the military councils of Deir al-Zour and al-Shadadi.

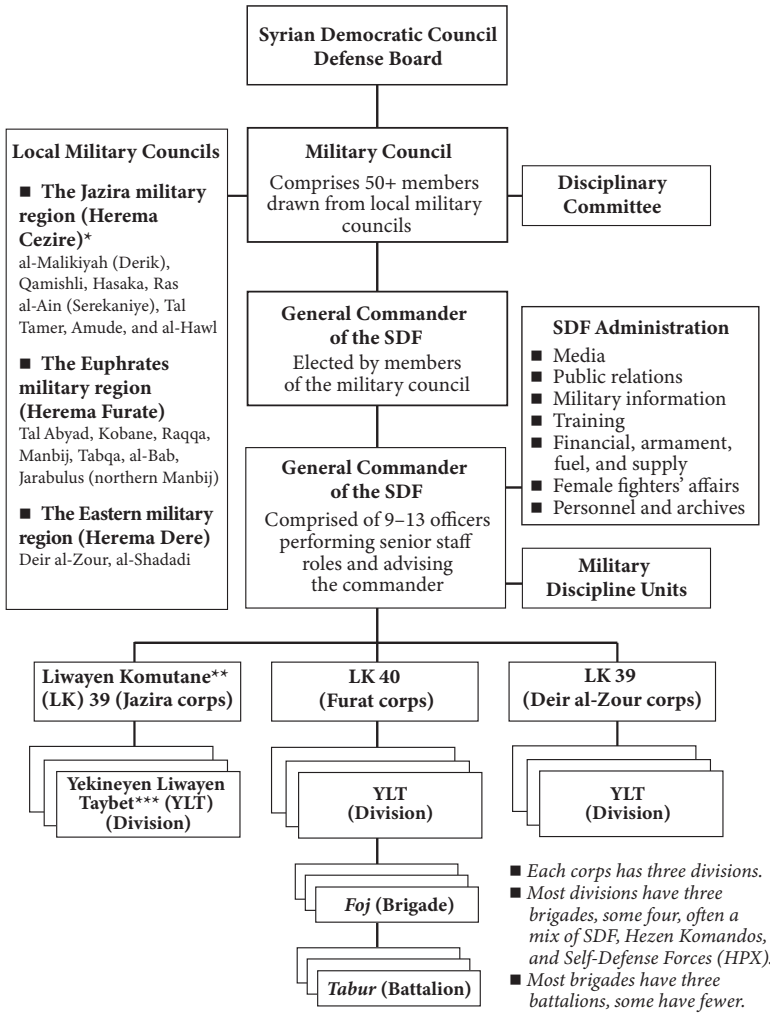
Since 2018, these military regions and subordinate military councils have slowly become the dominant mechanism for local-level security coordination. In all areas except Deir al-Zour, which remains too insecure, the MCs and civilian councils have taken the lead in local security decisionmaking by forming groups representative of the local ethnic and tribal populations.

Operating within the MC operational command structure, the forces of the AANES Internal Affairs Board and civilian councils provide urban and facilities protection, including for prisons.[5] Under the Provincial Internal Security Forces (PRISF) umbrella are the Asayesh, Internal Security Forces (InSF), Hezen Anti Teror (HAT, or Anti-Terrorism Group) counterterrorism units, and, where active, local volunteer Hezen Parastina Civaki (HPC, or Civil Defense Group) neighborhood watch units.[6] Outside the cities, in the rural and border zones, are the forces administered by the AANES Defense Board, such as the military forces of the SDF, the Yekineyen Anti Teror (YAT, or Anti-Terror Unit), Self-Defense Forces reserves, and Commando Units (a newer set of elite SDF infantry brigades that, since 2017, has used chosen recruits).[7] The HPX appears to have a special mission to watch for Assad regime forces along the internal border as well as inside SDF zones.[8]

U.S.-SDF Relations After the Fall of the Caliphate

As early as November 2018, the United States began to angle its security cooperation toward non-SDF security forces that were focused on urban stabilization. The November 2018 vision involved more than half of the seventy-five thousand–strong SDF splitting off to bolster the PRISF, leaving thirty thousand SDF troops and forty-five thousand PRISF troops for a range of border and national guard–type roles within

Fig. 6.1 Notional SDF Command and Control, 2019



**The region, known as Syria's breadbasket, is inhabited by a slight majority of Kurds, a large minority of Arab tribes, and sizable Assyrian and Armenian communities.*

***Brigade Commanders*

****Special Brigade Units*

their home provinces.[9] Some of these PRISF units were subsequently retasked to security operations for Islamic State detainees in northeast Syrian prisons and refugee camps, where around two thousand IS foreign fighters, and another eight thousand Iraqis and Syrians, are being held by the SDF in twenty detention areas.[10] (Approximately ten thousand IS-affiliated foreign family members reside in a separate annex at al-Hawl camp, two-thirds of them children under age twelve.[11])

Ultimately, however, the United States ran out of time and began to power down in Syria before Arab hold forces were fully developed, which makes the SDF an unfinished project that may now evolve with a mix of indigenous and foreign influences. Although still a significant amount, the financial commitment of the United States to northeast Syria gradually declined after the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, from $500 million in fiscal year 2018, to $252 million in FY 2019, to $200 million in FY 2020 and FY 2021 (requested).[12] Manpower and political interest were downgraded next: right after the fall of Baghuz, the U.S. footprint in northeast Syria halved from around two thousand to around one thousand.

Operation Peace Spring

Further limiting Washington's ability to guide the future of the SDF, President Trump suddenly announced on October 6, 2019, that U.S. forces would leave Syria. Three days later, Turkey invaded the SDF's territory in Operation Peace Spring. The Turkish invasion was aided by the prior dismantling of SDF fortifications on the border and by the withdrawal of some SDF forces, which had been brokered by the United States as a confidence-building measure between the Turkish military and the SDF.[13] In eight days of fighting, the Turkish military seized a seventy-mile-wide, twenty-mile-deep security zone between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. These 1,860 square miles (10 percent of SDF territory) were highly strategic, interdicting M-4 highway access

between the Kurdish Jazira and Kobane cantons, forcing the SDF to use an alternative, longer, mostly unpaved road between Hasaka and Raqqa.

Advocates of the U.S. presence in Syria did salvage an ongoing U.S. mission in Deir al-Zour and Hasaka; the operation, though centered on the oil fields east of the MERV and the Kurdish parts of the Jazira region, was reduced to a small training and observer mission fewer than five hundred in number.[14] All U.S. military forces left the Manbij, Raqqa, Ain Issa, and Kobane areas, falling back to the parts of the AANES east of the Tigris that were termed the East Syria Security Area (ESSA).[15] The American presence dropped from one thousand to under five hundred, and U.S. forces moved to a much less well-resourced "train the trainer" approach using U.S. Army training teams, as opposed to Special Forces Operation Detachment Alphas. With U.S. forces pulling back to the ESSA, in Deir al-Zour and Hasaka, the SDF accepted Syrian regime forces (variously assessed at four thousand to ten thousand troops, plus three hundred Russian military police) in Manbij, Kobane, Raqqa, Ain Issa, Tal Tamer, and all the border towns between Turkey and the Jazira canton.[16] Russia thus entered the AANES as a major security player.[17]

The episode was an extreme test of the U.S.-SDF relationship—one that the United States largely flunked. Mazloum had, with some difficulty, led the SDF leadership to support a U.S.-backed "safe zone" (security mechanism implementation zone) along the Turkish-SDF border, where the People's Defense Units withdrew many fighters and heavy weapons and demolished fortifications.[18] From the perspective of U.S. officials, "Turkey played us."[19] Ambassador James Jeffrey noted that U.S. troops in the area were never likely to "stand and fight against a NATO ally."[20] Although Washington had clearly stated that it would not support the YPG in Afrin, the Kurds—and many U.S. commanders—were nonetheless shocked that the United States would first push the SDF to negotiate away its defenses, then provide no support when Turkey invaded a core part of the AANES territory where U.S. forces were located.[21]

Few Arab elements of the SDF defended against Turkey;[22] contrary to expectations, however, Arab defections from the SDF were few. Mazloum publicly stated, "Turkey's plans were undermined; they were expecting that once they attack, the Arab-populated areas will rise against us [SDF] in Raqqa, Deir al-Zour, Manbij, and Tabqa, for instance."[23] This did not occur. The SDF also claims low levels of defection and desertion,[24] though it is notable that the SDF General Command issued a general amnesty for deserters—an action that suggests some fraying of Arab membership.[25]

Mazloum held the SDF together and kept the United States as its principal security cooperation partner, while somehow maintaining the group's de facto autonomy from Moscow, Damascus, Ankara, and Washington. One factor underpinning AANES and SDF resilience was centralized control of oil revenues, which the United States supported, even after October 2019. The United States thus continued to protect the AANES's oil fields,[26] and later assisted in refining and upstream development.[27] With this income, the structure created under the Kurdish-led AANES administration was able to pay two hundred fifty thousand employees, comprising seventy thousand soldiers, thirty thousand police, and one hundred fifty thousand civil servants, including forty thousand teachers.[28] Of note, the YPG core of the SDF still holds the upper hand over Assad regime forces inside SDF areas, hemming them in with checkpoints,[29] cracking down on regime subversion,[30] and even monopolizing logistics intended for neglected regime forces on the Turkish border who lack even the most basic supplies.[31]

Stabilization Operations Across the AANES

During major combat operations, the dominance of the SDF's YPG core was logical and accepted by Arab factions. As the previous sections note, the YPG leadership of the SDF remains the best resourced and most

organized faction in northeast Syria; it also enjoys the most valuable international connections through Mazloum's high-profile ties to the United States. At the same time, many elements are trying to splinter the AANES even while IS remains active as an insurgency, using ethnic tensions as a wedge between the mainly Kurdish YPG leadership and the Arab factions.

The YPG Role in Local Arab "Hold Forces"

As noted previously, the YPG initially wanted neither to administer nor to occupy Arab areas such as Raqqa (apart from Tal Abyad) and Deir al-Zour, as it was more focused on uniting its northern canton administrations.[32] As one senior U.S. officer commented, "We asked them to go there. They didn't want to go to Raqqa and they definitely didn't want to go to Deir al-Zour. Mazloum knew it was a bad idea, but we made them go."[33] The United States wanted the Kurds to take part in the security management of liberated areas for exactly the same reasons it wanted them to lead major combat operations: their structure, their rapid projection of a bureaucracy onto local areas, and their proven ability to work with Arabs.[34]

In its doctrine on local semiautonomy and decentralization, the YPG has theoretically been entirely on board with the need for Arab forces to secure Arab areas. There remains a strong cultural resistance to homogenizing SDF units and erasing their local character. One YPG commander in the SDF is worth quoting in full:

> Their general command is coming from the SDF, but keeping their autonomy when it comes to the system. They do not oppose a major organizational difference, but indeed they keep their special features—every military force is founded based on the geographies of their region and the nature of their communities. For instance, the Syriac forces are unique in our region. The structure of their military force and the Kurdish forces will not be the same. Another example

> would be, the nature of regions like Deir al-Zour and Qamishli are quite different from each other. For instance, as someone who has grown up in Europe, you might not be able to live like someone from the Middle East. The military organizations are like that, each have their own features. Some of these forces, depending on their religious and ethnic beliefs, might need to protect their holy sites—so the councils were established in order to better understand their needs and solve their problems on a local scale. Each council from Qamishli to Serekaniye [Ras al-Ain], etc., [has its] local commanders, ultimately under the command of the SDF council… This is a democratic approach: you cannot force different groups to follow under one language, one flag, one color, or one uniform. Each force is preserving [its] identities.[35]

In practice, the YPG found it harder to quickly hand off leadership, intelligence, and logistical functions to Arab "hold forces." The lasting defeat of IS was an important objective for the YPG, and the anti-IS campaign kept Mazloum, the YPG, and the SDF in the spotlight, supported by powerful international players. Arab forces in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour were simply not trusted[36] and appeared unlikely to hold together in the face of IS, Assad regime, and Turkish and Russian splintering campaigns.[37]

The precedent set during major combat operations—of YPG officers providing the core to mainly Arab forces under a titular Arab commander—carried over into the counterinsurgency effort. One SDF commander said the following:

> In Deir al-Zour—it is newly liberated—we need more time to have a military structure, to create leaders from the Deir community to take over work there. But until this happens, we still need the experience and loyalty of those Kurdish commanders who are sent there. Why should I send a commander from Qamishli to Deir? Because the commander was working with the SDF for five or six years, he has the experience, we trust him to follow the orders, etc. But if you take a commander who is new, who has been with us

> just for one or two years, we don't know what will happen, and the whole area is unstable.[38]

As a result, the local hold forces in Arab areas such as Deir al-Zour were filled with shadow commanders—YPG *cadros* who sat on the shoulders of Arab unit leaders and military council members. As during major combat operations, the YPG operated "by, with, and through" the Arab SDF units.

Benefits of YPG "Advise and Assist"

The YPG brought many benefits as a partner in counterinsurgency. Its commanders—Mazloum and Ciya Kobani, among others—were now quite experienced at engaging key leaders of the Arab tribes. Indeed, the SDF commanders had earned a degree of trust among the Arabs, and had a feeling for their mindset and concerns. In the Deir al-Zour campaign, for instance, the SDF tried to lower the profile of female fighters to respect local conservatism.[39] The YPG leaders brought local services with them, rebuilding bridges, operating medical clinics, and delivering water to villages. One journalist observed the following:

> When they arrived as conquerors, the first thing they did was reassure the Arabs that they would have their own police autonomy and their own local forces. They had the discipline not just to win battles but to protect populations and incorporate them into governance structures.[40]

Even the status of the YPG as outsiders had some benefits, because the Kurds could help resolve tribal problems and prevent infighting.[41] They were skilled at managing chaos and operating with tribes.

Most importantly, the YPG—as ever—had a system in place that they could export to the Arabs. Within the Kurdish areas, there was stability and unified control, with a complex, multilayered system of police, Asayesh, checkpoints, and criminal intelligence. The YPG had

shown a knack for developing human intelligence networks inside IS areas, often using former Assad regime Mukhabarat officers.[42] These networks continued to operate after liberation.[43] In October 2019, for instance, the SDF provided critical intelligence and planning to the special operation that killed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[44]

SDF military intelligence personnel proved adept at a basic form of sensitive site exploitation, collecting identification cards, documents, and electronics that they found on the battlefield, especially on the bodies of dead IS fighters.[45] In each MC, YPG-trained intelligence officers ran intelligence fusion cells that were focused on counterterrorism.[46] The Kurds extended their ability to monitor both IS areas and "friendly" Arab SDF units using their growing fleet of quadcopter drones.

When suspected IS targets were identified, the YPG also had ready-made forces of special operators to launch raids. Though a process that began in 2019, whereby the U.S. Special Forces in Deir al-Zour developed small "strike forces" for raiding within each Arab SDF unit, the U.S. drawdown handed the lead role back to the YPG. In October 2019, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve concluded that SDF forces in northeast Syria were "lacking in personnel, equipment, and intelligence to support counterinsurgency operations to counter [Islamic State] fighters as they fled from the MERV to establish clandestine cells in SDF-controlled territory in northeastern Syria."[47] The United States could provide intelligence, logistics, forensics, and insertion by U.S. aviation, but some other force needed to closely mentor the fledgling counterterrorism forces and accompany them on operations.

As much as or more than U.S. training, the mentorship by the YPG's special operators of these Arab raiding units developed them into existence.[48] One Deir al-Zour–based senior SDF commander in al-Shadadi explained the following:

> The majority of the special units are Kurds, but there are also Arab fighters. But a group like Deir al-Zour HAT [Hezen Anti Teror, or

> Anti-Terrorism Group] are all Arabs. There is a training and integration period for the local HAT units; more experienced HAT from Qamishli and Raqqa have been deployed to Deir al-Zour to provide training. Some days we have three to four antiterrorism operations, so we need as many forces as possible. But once the local HAT is able to stand on their feet, forces from other regions will withdraw.[49]

Alongside local and on-loan HAT was a slowly growing number of multiethnic InSF SWAT units. The number of SDF Commando Units (Hezen Komandos) formed within Arab areas also gradually increased, with six small intakes graduated by the time of publication.[50] In addition, SDF YAT special forces from the Kurdish areas deployed to Arab areas, but only for the duration of specific operations (usually no more than seven to ten days). By the end of 2019, this patchwork of counterterrorism forces "was capable of unassisted raids against lower risk targets and advisor-assisted raids for higher risk targets."[51]

Downsides of the Kurdish Role in Arab Areas

Less often discussed is the fact that the YPG and AANES proved to be less respectful partners to Arabs in governance and counterterrorism than they had been during major combat operations. In hindsight, this is not surprising: partnerships that work well in the desperate days of military crisis often do not thrive in the fragile peace that follows, when all sorts of thorny issues of governance and demographics come to the fore.

Significant Kurdish-Arab tensions existed before the SDF and forerunner experiments in combined operations such as Euphrates Volcano: these tensions had not disappeared by the time Raqqa or the MERV was cleared. U.S. Army civil affairs officer Peter Brau noted, "The farther southeast the SDF pushed, the more easily these civil councils were challenged, as the Arab minorities became Arab majorities, even though in practice Arabs held as many, if not more, positions of leadership

in the inclusive Kurdish governance model."[52] Though preexisting ethnic intermixing made cooperation easier in the Furat and Jazira regions, YPG commanders were particularly distrustful of some Arab populations in Deir al-Zour, and arguably with good reason,[53] as the area was far more hostile to SDF presence than any other liberated area.[54] As one senior U.S. official said regarding Mazloum and other Kurdish commanders, "They were aware of the need for inclusivity, and they were sincere about trying to get it. But not at any cost. [The Islamic State] was still out there. [IS] collaborators were everywhere. They could not let things get too loose."[55]

In a practical example of this distrust, the YPG quartermasters of the Deir al-Zour Military Council carefully assessed each Arab unit request for materiel, disbursing only enough ammunition and weapons for individual operations and signing weapons out and back in with meticulous effort.[56]

The Kurdish Role in Governing Arab Areas

Beyond a prudent caution, there is no denying that the YPG leaders of the SDF were also Kurdish "control freaks" operating in a chaotic Arab setting.[57] Whether motivated by a desire to control all parts of the AANES or just fearful of anarchy if it let go, the YPG did not trust Arabs in Raqqa or Deir al-Zour to govern themselves or to interact independently with foreign states. In an environment like Manbij, the YPG found it relatively easy to grant the local military council considerable autonomy. The aforementioned deep bonds between Manbij militias and the YPG resulted in the Manbij Military Council's attaining special status, with the freedom to directly interact with the U.S. and French militaries, in part to assuage Turkish concerns about YPG influence. The payment of Arab forces has also worked smoothly under SDF administration. One-third of MMC salaries is paid by the

coalition, with two-thirds coming from the AANES (meaning the SDF).[58] Non-MMC forces in Manbij[59] are paid and logistically supported by the SDF but must coordinate all movements and activities with the local MMC.[60]

In contrast, the Kurds in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour initially sought a dominant role on the councils, according to the U.S. Department of State[61] and multiple other observers.[62] In 2020, the State Department also noted that in regard to "participation in local governing structures, decision-making authority is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of a small number of individuals perceived as having close ties to the Democratic Union Party (PYD)."[63] In Deir al-Zour, the civil council was entirely made up of Arabs;[64] yet, according to the State Department, local residents report that "PYD advisors" constrain the decisionmaking ability of local council leaders.[65] According to a U.S. Central Command statement, "A number of Arab leaders in [Deir al-Zour], including the co-president of the Civil Council and a tribal leader, reported that Kurds maintain too much control over existing institutions."[66] The PYD and YPG view this mentorship of local governance in similar terms to embedded support in local military units. One YPG official argued, "There is a local cadre in Deir. They take over the administrative work; they have more experience. The Arabs need to learn this work."[67]

Early YPG Missteps in Arab Areas

The previous statement is indicative of what one European official with extensive on-the-ground experience called "a moral superiority complex that was very negative in security operations."[68] The YPG cadres did not merely try to provide operational advice: they initially sought to bring cultural change to the Arabs in terms of political ideology, gender equality, and secularism.[69]

> The cadres checked in on mid-level military commanders and the military councils regularly. They thought that the Arabs needed

> ideological and educational change, and they pushed secularism. [The YPG] felt that an antireligious agenda was necessary, that tough treatment was the only way to deprogram [the Islamic State].[70]

And one senior YPG commander confirmed the following:

> We are trying to change the mentalities in the region, to respect democracy, to be moderate [in religion], to accept women's freedom, and to free themselves from the effects of Islamic radicalism. We are discussing these issues, training, and working on it; it is not easy, but we are continuing.[71]

Multiple interviewees from U.S. and European governments and NGOs relayed a similar sense that, although the YPG may have had largely good intentions, it was sometimes too inflexible to relinquish control, or to allow any degree of untidy local politicking and corruption. Put simply, the YPG had significant weaknesses as the central pillar of a counterterrorism and stabilization effort in Arab areas. That is not to say that the Arabs, left to their own devices, or coalition advisors would have been any more effective, as underlined by counterinsurgency failures in Iraq—both under U.S. occupation and since U.S. withdrawal. One European diplomat who spent significant time in northeast Syria reflected the more complex reality:

> The YPG was not as bad as the [Assad] regime or Islamic groups in northwest Syria. There were no major forced disappearances, or torture or corruption. But the YPG were high-handed and treated the Arab areas like occupied territory. The entire SDF chain of command consistently downplayed this problem.[72]

Like any outsider stabilization force, Kurdish forces made mistakes. In places like Tal Abyad, the hard fighting ended with unnecessary levels of YPG destruction of villages, which made peace-building more difficult.[73] Later, female fighters plastered a huge poster of Abdullah Ocalan in liberated Raqqa city[74] and organized protests

to advocate for a Kurdish female member of parliament in Turkey.[75] The YPG cadres sometimes demonstrated high-handed treatment of local civil society organizations, as well as Arab militias perceived to be close to the Assad regime or Turkey.[76] The cases of Abu Issa's Jaish al-Thuwar al-Raqqa[77] and Fayad al-Ghanem's Liwa Suqur al-Raqqa[78] are instructive. Abu Issa's faction was excluded from the Raqqa battle by the YPG for failure to comply sufficiently with rules laid out by YPG leaders.[79] Both factions were then disbanded by SDF-linked security forces because of Ghanem's alleged links to the regime[80] and Abu Issa's alleged meetings with Turkey.[81] According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, these instances were part of the YPG's efforts to "constrain aligned Arab militias" exclusively within the SDF.[82] In Deir al-Zour, the Kurds have been accused of holding in place an Arab ally, military council leader Abu Khawla al-Dayri, against the wishes of local tribes.[83]

Evolution of Governance in Liberated Areas

Despite the exceptions discussed previously, the PYD- and YPG-designed political system laid a foundation for a relatively inclusive multiethnic and multireligious structure.[84] A senior U.S. official on the ground, Ambassador William Roebuck, noted that the initial postconflict councils were a point of departure for governance, did not represent the final governing structure, and were both sufficient and, ultimately, capable of evolution:

> They were not representative enough in many cases—particularly in Arab areas—and relied too heavily on Kurdish advisors usually affiliated at lower levels with the ruling PYD political party. But there was always the hope—and some limited evidence—these structures could evolve and become more representative, by including Kurds outside the PYD and more empowered, independent Arabs, and ultimately through holding free and fair local elections, when

> conditions permitted. Given the political models in the region the SDF had to work with, and given the ongoing civil war and fight against [the Islamic State], it wasn't a bad start.[85]

Evolution toward more Arab-led policies is visible in local governance, with positive effects for counterinsurgency. For instance, out of respect for tribal sensitivities, the AANES did not ban polygamy or child-marriage in Arab-majority areas, although such activities are inimical to YPG ideology.[86] Conscription was waived in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour.[87] The secular education curriculum used in Arab-majority areas in Tabqa, Manbij, and Raqqa was likewise abandoned by the Deir al-Zour Civil Council in the summer of 2020 in response to the religious sensitivities and objections of the local community.[88] According to Syria-based researcher Thomas McClure, the curriculum change is an example of how the local council in Deir al-Zour "[made] its own decision," as "local civil society actors were able to influence the council's decision through meetings and discussions."[89] McClure concluded: "The decision occurred even though it is counter to the PYD's broader political program of promoting women's liberation and secularism."[90] A similar decision was made by the Raqqa Civil Council in August 2020 to "outlaw the public consumption of alcohol—issued alongside measures to stop exploitative prostitution practices in the city center."[91]

The local governance structures of the AANES, made possible by the SDF's victories, appear to be viewed more favorably than the alternatives: tribal self-governance, new federal regions, or even a return to the Assad regime. Indeed, the YPG's centralist tendencies established order and a system, thereby preventing endemic warfare among different armed groups over control of territory. Arabs can see in areas under Turkish control that armed factions undertake daily infighting, human rights abuses, and disorder, without much intervention from the local Turkish-backed civil administration. Arabs in the AANES

also recall the period before the IS takeover, when rival factions fought in the Arab areas of northeast Syria and ultimately paved the way for the Islamic State.[92]

For these reasons, the AANES and the SDF survived the October 2019 Turkish incursion and continue to be seen as the "least bad" option for governing northeast Syria. According to a Deir al-Zour–based stabilization coordinator funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, "Almost all tribe[s] and clans (in Deir al-Zour), despite their divisions, agree there is no safer, reliable, organized alternative than SDF… They believe building on the SDF project to establish more coherent, inclusive, and local-led governance bodies is indispensable."[93] As noted by one journalist who watched the SDF undertake governance and counterterrorism in northeast Syria:

> The comparison is not with a liberal democracy: it is a comparison with Syrian [government] or rebel rule. The YPG did not allow dozens or hundreds of different armed groups to cause complete anarchy. They kept a monopoly of force to provide security and discipline.[94]

Notes

1 "Deal with Syria Regime 'Inevitable,' Senior SDF Official Redur Xelil Says," Defense Post, January 5, 2019, https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/05/syria-regime-deal-inevitable-sdf-official-redur-xelil/; Guney Yildiz, "U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Leaves Kurds Backed into a Corner," BBC News, December 20, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46639073; and Anchal Vohra, "'Taste of Victory' for SDF, but ISIL Threat Remains," Al Jazeera, March 23, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/23/taste-of-victory-for-sdf-but-isil-threat-remains.

2 The AANES was formed in 2018, with its capital in Ain Issa. See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "New Administration Formed for Northeastern Syria," Kurdistan 24, September 6, 2018, http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c9e03dab-6265-4a9a-91ee-ea8d2a93c657.

3 These seven include three regions forming the core of SDF areas with large Kurdish populations: Jazira, Euphrates, and Afrin (now under Turkish control). Four Arab-majority areas were added after their liberation from the Islamic State: Tabqa, Raqqa, Manbij, and Deir al-Zour. See van Wilgenburg, "Administration for Northeastern Syria," http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c9e03dab-6265-4a9a-91ee-ea8d2a93c657.

4 Nicholas Heras, "The Battle for Syria's Al-Hasakah Province," *Combating Terrorism Centre* 6, no. 10 (October 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-syrias-al-hasakah-province/.

5 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

6 Ibid.

7 Authors' interview with U.S. official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

8 Authors' interview with SDF official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

9 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2018–September 30, 2018*, 29.

10 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020*, 6. See also Ryan Browne and Jennifer Hansler, "U.S. Officials Say More Than 2,000 Suspected Foreign ISIS Fighters Being Held in Syria," CNN, April 17, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/17/politics/foreign-isis-fighters-syria/index.html; and Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, "U.S.-Backed Forces Are Holding 2,000 Suspected ISIS Fighters in Syria," *Wall Street Journal,* March 5, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-backed-forces-are-holding-2-000-suspected-isis-fighters-11551815580.

11 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020*, 8.

12 These figures are drawn from a close survey of all Department of Defense annual Overseas Contingency Operations request books, FY 2018 to FY 2021.

13 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

14 Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve reported that, since November 2019, it no longer had a dedicated prison support mission in Syria. Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019*, 35.

15 "Department of Defense Off-Camera Press Briefing by Major General Alexus Grynkewich" (transcript), U.S. Department of Defense, January 23, 2020, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2063705/department-of-defense-off-camera-press-briefing-by-major-general-alexus-grynkew/.

16 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019*, 50; and Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 51. See also Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurds Confirm Damascus Border Deal for Return of Syrian Army," Kurdistan 24, October 14, 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/88a9d11e-a969-4a2a-9838-967d36175fb7.

17 When the Russians introduced their ceasefire plan, it looked a lot like the pre-incursion U.S.-Turkish effort to produce a thirty-mile-deep Turkish-controlled zone between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye). The deal also outlined joint Turkish-Russian patrols in a ten-kilometer-wide strip of land along the border that began on November 1, 2019. See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish-Led Forces Withdraw from Syrian City Besieged by Turkey," Kurdistan 24, October 20, 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0f8f5a18-7451-47eb-8c7e-6e18098b041b.

18 A Syrian Democratic Council official testified before Congress on October 23, 2019, that the U.S. request for the SDF removal of defenses and fighters from the border had left the SDF defenseless against the Turkish attack. See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–October 25, 2019*, 23. U.S. officers often repeated the same point to the authors. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

19 Authors' interview with U.S. official 36: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

20 "Cardin Questions State Dept. Official About War Crimes Committed by Turkey at SFRC Hearing" (video and press release on website of U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin [D-MD]), October 22, 2019, https://www.cardin.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/video-cardin-questions-state-dept-official-about-war-crimes-committed-by-turkey-at-sfrc-hearing.

21 One diplomat on the ground said that although the United States did not promise the Kurds that it would defend them, such a guarantee seemed implicit because of the presence of U.S. forces. Whereas the United States had no troops in Afrin, a leaked cable noted the following: "We are here in the northeast. We are your close partner and Afrin can't happen here." See "Read the Memo by a U.S. Diplomat Criticizing Trump Policy on Syria and Turkey," *New York Times*, November 7, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/us/politics/memo-syria-trump-turkey.html.

22 Individual Arab fighters within the SDF did oppose Operation Peace Spring, but not whole units such as the Sanadid Forces or Jaish

al-Thuwar. Such Arab units appear to have backfilled YPG parts of the SDF, allowing them to deploy to the north. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

23 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "The Future of Northeastern Syria: In Conversation with SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi," *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 10, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-northeastern-syria-conversation-sdf-commander-chief-mazloum-abdi.

24 On the issue of Arab defections from the SDF during and after Operation Peace Spring, Mazloum stated, "Nothing like that ever occurred, actually, there has been more unity. And as we speak, Arab fighters are joining the SDF more than pre-Turkish invasion… None of the Arab militias appear to be defecting from the SDF, despite the regime's urgent calls for Arab tribes to join the Syrian army." Van Wilgenburg, "The Future of Northeastern Syria," https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-northeastern-syria-conversation-sdf-commander-chief-mazloum-abdi.

25 AANES Defense Board, "General Amnesty," Facebook, November 22, 2019, http://vvanwilgenburg.blogspot.com/2020/02/general-pardon-for-those-who-deserted.html?q=amnesty.

26 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 52.

27 "If we can find a way, for example, to generate income for the SDF from the oil fields, that income then can be equitably distributed in the long term," said Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, during an online event hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace on August 12, 2020. Quoted in Matthew Petti, "U.S. General: We're Talking to Russia About Syria's Oil," *National Interest,* August 12, 2020.

28 Patrick Haenni and Arthur Quesnay, "Surviving the Aftermath of the Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy" (research project report, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy, February 17, 2020), 7.

29 Van Wilgenburg, "Future of Northeastern Syria."

30 Haenni and Quesnay, "Aftermath of the Islamic State," 10. See also

"New Confessions About Syrian Intelligence Involvement in Igniting Sedition in NE Syria," Hawar News Agency, August 12, 2020, https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/new-confessions-about-syrian-intelligence-involvement-in-igniting-sedition-in-ne-syria-h18464.html; and "Syrian Intelligence Stands Behind Assassination of Arab Clan Notables," Hawar News Agency, August 7, 2020, https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/syrian-intelligence-stands-behind-assassination-of-arab-clan-notables-h18357.html.

31 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees in Kobane: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

32 Although the YPG initially did not think of administrating Raqqa, it had ambitions to govern non-Kurdish-majority territories across the north, with the aim of creating a contiguous territory and local administration. Even the Hasaka province itself was made up of a mixture of Kurds and Arabs. Kurds had also previously lived in Raqqa, Manbij, and Tal Abyad as minorities and had had prior relations with Arabs. However, in Deir al-Zour, such a Kurdish-Arab link did not exist. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

33 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

34 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

35 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

36 As noted earlier, the YPG had a history of bad relations with Abu Issa (Raqqa) and Ahmed Jarba (Deir al-Zour), who were seen as pro-Turkey and as Turkish-backed opposition, respectively. The YPG also refused to work with Fayad al-Ghanem (Tal Abyad) and Yaser Dahla (Deir al-Zour, later assassinated), who were seen as pro-regime. Their groups were disbanded or joined SDF-linked forces. Most of Jarba's Elite Forces defected to the Deir al-Zour Military Council. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names,

dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

37 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 54.

38 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

39 Because of the resistance of conservative Arab communities, the YPJ/SDF has recruited only around one thousand Arab women. See "Women in Local Security Forces" (Syria's Women: Policies and Perspectives series, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, Washington DC, November 7, 2017), https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/SyriasWomen-SecurityForces.pdf.

40 Authors' interview with journalist 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

41 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

42 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

43 Ibid.

44 "Memo Criticizing Policy on Syria and Turkey."

45 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

46 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

47 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019*, 22.

48 Authors' interview with U.S. official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

49 Authors' interview with SDF official 28: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

50 Authors' interview with SDF official 36: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

51 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019*, 32.

52 Peter Brau, "Civil Authority in Manbij, Syria: Using Civil Affairs to Implement Stabilization Activities in Nonpermissive Environments," *Military Review* (February 2019).

53 The coalition confirmed in 2020 that "[the Islamic State] conducted most of its attacks this quarter in Syria in [Deir al-Zour] province, where it continues to receive some support from Sunni communities along the Middle Euphrates River Valley." See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 27. Even an Arab SDF commander who participated in the Deir al-Zour campaign noted that he "believes that the people of Deir al-Zour have not cooperated with the SDF to the extent that the people in Raqqa have. Today, there is chaos in Deir al-Zour county." See authors' interview with Army of Revolutionaries (Jaish al-Thuwar) commander Ahmad Sultan (Abu Arraj), August 18, 2019. According to a monthly report by Rojava Information Center (RIC) "79 [percent] of the attacks occurred in the region of [Deir al-Zour]." RIC, "Report: ISIS Attacks Falling Despite Anger over Top Sheikh's Assassination," August 10, 2020, https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/08/report-isis-attacks-falling-despite-anger-over-top-sheikhs-assassination/.

54 In Daman, one of the strongest remaining areas of support for the Islamic State, one U.S. admirer of commander Ciya Kobani noted that "even General Ciya was afraid to go there." Authors' interview with U.S. official 12: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

55 Authors' interview with U.S. official 1: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

56 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

57 The YPG has never tolerated rivals well. In addition to excluding the Rojava Peshmerga from the AANES, the YPG has a track record of suppressing Arab militias that do not play by its rules. For instance, tensions existed between the SDF and Ahmed Jarba's Elite Forces, who worked independently from the SDF in the Raqqa battle in 2017. Jarba's Elite Forces no longer existed on the ground after its fighters

defected to the SDF. See Jared Szuba, "ISIS's 'caliphate' was crushed. Now Syria's Kurd-led alliance faces bigger battles," Defense Post, March 29, 2019; and Abdulrahman al-Masri, "The Decline of the Syrian Elite Forces," Atlantic Council MENASource, September 6, 2017.

58 This equates to $100 per man per month from the coalition and $200 per man per month from the SDF. Authors' interview with SDF official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

59 For instance, Jaish al-Thuwar, Jabhat al-Akrad, al-Bab Military Council, and Liwa Shamal Demokrati. Authors' interview with SDF official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

60 Authors' interview with SDF official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

61 In November 2017, the U.S. State Department signaled "continuing concerns about the degree of Kurdish control of the councils and of large areas of Syrian territory in which the Kurds are an ethnic minority." See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2017–December 31, 2017*, 41.

62 "In areas such as Raqqa, which had a majority conservative, Sunni Arab population, the potential for domination by the Syrian Kurds caused the [Department of State] to stress democratic values to ensure stability and acceptance by the population." See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2017–December 31, 2017*, 41. See also Mona Yacoubian, "Governance Challenges in Raqqa After the Islamic State" (Special Report 414, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, October 2017); and John Davison, "Some Syrian Schools Erase Assad but Tensions Rise over Kurdish," Reuters, September 7, 2017.

63 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 54.

64 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Unknown Assassins Kill Leader of Kurdish-Backed Council in Syria," Kurdistan 24, December 29, 2018, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ee5b67ff-7f02-45e4-86ca-4713c9e078f9.

65 Ibid.

66 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 54.

67 Authors' interview with SDF official 11: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

68 Authors' interview with European official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

69 One exception seems to be polygamy. The SDF-linked councils have been careful not to provoke local sentiments by not outright banning polygamy in Arab-majority areas. For instance, in the town of Tal Abyad, the decision to ban polygamy was revoked. See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Local Tribal Customs Prevent Polygamy Ban in Northeast Syria," Kurdistan 24, March 8, 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/25e605d4-4a4a-40b7-a6a2-34611effe4a8.

70 Authors' interview with European official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

71 Authors' interview with SDF official 30: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

72 Authors' interview with European official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

73 Amnesty International, "Syria: U.S. Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes," press release, October 13, 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/. See also Roy Gutman, "Kurds Setting Up to Rule in Syrian Town Islamic State Held," McClatchy, November 1, 2015.

74 "YPG Fighters Credit Ocalan with Syria Victory," Reuters, October 23, 2017.

75 "Women Administration in al-Raqqa: Leyla Guven, Her Comrades' Victory is Victory of Peace," Hawar New Agency, May 27, 2019, https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/women-administration-in-al-raqqa-leyla-guven-her-comrades-victory-is-victory-of-peace-h9248.html.

76 Amberin Zaman and Dan Wilkofsky, "U.S.-Led Coalition Ally Targets State Department-Funded Syrian Arab Activists," Al-Monitor, April 7, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/syria-sdf-coalition-state-department-arrest-activists.html#ixzz6UolLpK70.

77 Bedir Mullah Rashid, "Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria" (special report, Omran for Strategic Studies, Istanbul, January 24, 2018), 61. See also "After releasing him from SDF prisons by mediation of the International Coalition, the commander of Thowwar al-Raqqah Brigade, Abu Issa, denies his arrest in conjunction with preparations for handing him over the command of a military regiment," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 7, 2018, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=97222.

78 "Kurdish-Arab Tensions Grow Within U.S.-Backed SDF. YPG Arrests Liwaa Suqour al-Raqqa Members—Reports," SouthFront, August 28, 2017, https://southfront.org/kurdish-arab-tensions-grow-within-us-backed-sdf-ypg-arrests-liwaa-suqour-al-raqqa-members/.

79 Rashid, "Military and Security in Syria," 61.

80 "Kurdish-Arab Tensions Grow Within U.S.-Backed SDF."

81 A senior Arab commander claimed that Abu Issa had meetings with Turkey and did not participate in the Raqqa battle—only Tal Abyad. He later returned to Raqqa by invitation of the SDF but was accused of causing problems for civilians; his fighters were detained, and he was sent to Ramalan. Authors' interview with SDF official 37: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. One Kurdish commander claimed that (1) Abu Issa is still being paid by the SDF and is protected by his own guards, and (2) there are ongoing discussions about giving him a position in the SDF. Authors' interview with SDF official 28: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

82 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, 56.

83 Authors' interview with Omar Abu Layla, executive director of Deir al-Zour 24, August 11, 2020.

84 RIC, *Beyond the Frontlines: The Building of the Democratic System of North and East Syria* (Qamishli: Rojava Information Center, 2019), 55, https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/12/Beyond-the-frontlines-The-building-of-the-democratic-system-in-North-and-East-Syria-Report-Rojava-Information-Center-December-2019-V4.pdf.

85 "Memo Criticizing Policy on Syria and Turkey."

86 Van Wilgenburg, "Customs Prevent Polygamy Ban." See also authors'

interview with Thomas McClure, head of the Syria-based Rojava Information Center, August 12, 2020.

87 Authors' interview with SDF official 32: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

88 "Following meetings with and complaints from local actors aggrieved at the introduction of a liberalizing curriculum into their highly conservative society, the Deir al-Zour Civil Council canceled its plans to roll this curriculum out in Deir al-Zour. The significance of this high-profile decision is threefold; firstly, the local, Arab-led council was free to make its own decision; secondly, local civil society actors were able to influence the council's decision through meetings and discussions; and thirdly, this decision occurred even though it is counter to the PYD's broader political program of promoting women's liberation and secularism," said Thomas McClure, head of the Syria-based Rojava Information Center. Authors' interview with Thomas McClure, head of the Syria-based Rojava Information Center, August 12, 2020. See also "Interview: 'We Must Develop a Common View of the Curriculum for Our Schools'—Kemal Musa, Head of the Education Committee of Deir-ez-Zor," Rojava Information Center, August 3, 2020, https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/08/interview-we-must-develop-a-common-view-of-the-curriculum-for-our-schools-kemal-musa-head-of-the-education-committee-of-deir-ez-zor/; and "SDF Cancels Its Education Program That Angered the People" (video in Arabic), Jesrpress, July 22, 2020, http://bit.ly/3btdAIv.

89 Authors' interview with Thomas McClure, head of the Syria-based Rojava Information Center, August 12, 2020.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Amy Austin Holmes and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurds and Arabs in Northeast Syria: Power Struggle or Power Sharing?" *National Interest,* August 11, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/kurds-and-arabs-northeast-syria-power-struggle-or-power-sharing-72281.

93 "Report: ISIS Attacks Falling Despite Anger over Top Sheikh's Assassination," Rojava Information Center, August 10, 2020, https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/08/

report-isis-attacks-falling-despite-anger-over-top-sheikhs-assassination/. See also Shelly Kittleson, "Tribal Assassinations Spark Iraqi-Syrian Border Concern," Al-Monitor, August 10, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/iraq-tribal-syria-isis-security-terrorism.html; and Mohammed Abdul Sattar Ibrahim, "East of the Euphrates: There is No Alternative to the 'QSD,' Which Is Accused of Assassinating Tribal Leaders," Syria Direct, August 9, 2020, http://bit.ly/3oHSqdK.

94 Authors' interview with European official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

7

Assessing America's "By, With, and Through" Campaign in Northeast Syria

Gen. Joseph Votel of U.S. Central Command (Ret.) has termed "by, with, and through"[1] an "operational approach" that is uniquely tailored to each particular conflict.[2] As Col. J. Patrick Work, U.S. Army, another practitioner of "by, with, and through," noted, the basic thrust of the approach is to help create "a viable host nation partner who owns the fight and the victories."[3] The latter point is important, underlining the key trick of "by, with, and through," which, in theory, involves attaining a degree of control over a partner force and its operations but with reduced risks and costs to the United States, and with lessened U.S. responsibilities in the conflict's aftermath. This conundrum is what Colonel Work called the "fascinating quest for influence without authority."[4]

Why the U.S. Fought "By, With, and Through" the SDF

Although the United States initially decided to provide armed support to the People's Defense Units at a moment of crisis in fall 2014, the escalation of such support to the YPG and later the Syrian Democratic Forces was a more deliberate process that unfolded in a measured, incremental way between 2014 and 2017. Moreover, U.S. support for the YPG/SDF grew amid the elimination of other alternatives. Neither the Obama nor the Trump administration nor the U.S. military wanted to deploy a sizable U.S. ground force to liberate Manbij, Raqqa, or the

Mid-Euphrates River Valley.[5] Ultimately, "the ghost of Iraq hung over every policy and partnering decision in northeastern Syria," according to journalist Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, who studied and saw at close hand the U.S. partnership with the Women's Protection Units and the YPG.[6] The U.S. presence had to be lean and nearly invisible, with one U.S. general recalling, "We didn't want to create an overbearing footprint that would be hard for us to sustain; we didn't want to own it completely or be out in front."[7] The war in northeast Syria was not designed primarily to resemble Iraq in 2003 to 2011—or the post-2002 war in Afghanistan.

This left three alternatives: the vetted Syrian opposition in northwest Syria, the Turkish military and allied militias, and, finally, a YPG-led partner force in northeast Syria. The United States clung to the VSO option until as late as spring 2016, at which time the VSO on the Marea Line—the western effort to seize Manbij—was still the main line of effort for the United States, receiving far more air support and materiel than the SDF.[8] Prior to the Turkish operation in Afrin in 2018, U.S. officials had little faith in Turkey's capacity to mount a major ground incursion. In hindsight, Turkey might have been quite effective, but at the time its first attempt (Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016) seemed to show a Turkish military that could not operate confidently in Syria. To both the Obama and Trump administrations, the YPG-led SDF was much more appealing. As one U.S. official recalled acidly, "The combination of YPG fighters and Tier 1 U.S. Special Forces was a no-brainer. It was a good operational choice mainly because it was cheaper and easier politically. If you are not going to do it right, do it cheap."[9]

How Efficient Was U.S. Support to the YPG?

Though it is debatable that the "by, with, and through" effort did "do it right," the U.S. campaign in northeast Syria certainly looks cheaper than the mammoth stabilization campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. RAND

and other providers of operational analysis will, in time, conclude in great detail on the cost-effectiveness of the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort in Syria, but some trends are apparent even at this stage.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations sought to limit the deployment of U.S. forces in Syria, even though the latter allowed their number to grow briefly in 2017. Deployment of U.S. troops brings a greater risk of U.S. casualties, attracts U.S. political attention, and can foster local dependencies on U.S. presence. The number of U.S. Title 10 boots on the ground was zero for the first year of operations, fifty for much of 2016, and not much more than one hundred in late 2016. In fact, that number only increased to one thousand for the Raqqa battle as artillery and logistics support increased. The Deir al-Zour campaign and the ramp-up of the training of Arab hold forces—plus tasks such as watching Russian–Bashar al-Assad forces and keeping Turks and Kurds apart—brought the highest commitment of U.S. forces to just under fifteen hundred in the spring of 2019, though that number quickly dropped to five hundred in October 2019.

The U.S. footprint in Syria in the most intense years of the war, 2016–19, was typically 10 to 30 percent of that in Iraq, which peaked at 5,275 troops in Iraq in 2019.[10] If one criticism can be made, it is that Washington exerted insufficient effort in a move to draw open contributions of other Western special forces into Syria—as was effectively achieved in Iraq—which would have lent burden-sharing, synergistic capabilities, and diplomatic resilience to the mission.[11] The United States started energetically pressing U.S. allies to deploy troops in Syria only in 2019.[12]

In terms of requested train-and-equip funding, Iraq was allocated $7.21 billion in fiscal years 2017 through 2021, while $2.63 billion was requested from Congress for northeast Syria. Admittedly, the size of the military task in Syria was smaller (liberating around fifteen thousand square miles versus around sixty thousand square miles in Iraq; developing sixty-one thousand troops versus two hundred thousand

in Iraq),[13] but the footprint and commitment were nevertheless very light for achieving key strategic objectives in Syria. Nor did the United States invest such materiel support in Syria. Providing a gross example of the thriftiness of the northeast Syria model, the cost of paying and equipping the SDF averages to $472 million per year in Syria, versus a whopping $81.2 billion per year in Iraq in 2003–11. Such disparities underline the completely different scale of the commitments. If avoiding the expense of the post-2003 occupation of Iraq was an objective, it was clearly met.

As one U.S. Army quartet of authors noted, the "by, with, and through" approach "is hardly an economy of force mission from the standpoint of whole-of-coalition operations" (such as air, intelligence, and Special Forces).[14] The key difference with "by, with, and through" is that U.S. maneuver forces do not engage in direct ground combat—which makes the approach cheap from a political angle, as well. This was certainly the case in northeast Syria. Fighting "by, with, and through" a YPG-led local force closed the Turkish border to foreign fighters and liberated all Islamic State territorial holdings in northeast Syria, including the recapture of the Caliphate's original capital at Raqqa, at the cost of seven U.S. combatants killed in action over a fifty-four-month period.[15]

Did the United States Partner with the PKK?

Critics of the U.S. "by, with, and through" relationship with the SDF suggest that one error was selecting a partner force that was too close to a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party.[16] Though the United States has not similarly designated the YPG, U.S. officials and military officers involved with the YPG from 2014 onward knew that Mazloum and some of the command cadre of the YPG (and thus the SDF) had fought in the PKK against Turkey.

This combat experience and organizational capacity was, in part, what Washington liked about the YPG: strong organization, motivation, and fighting skills, all of which were honed by fighting against Turkey for decades within a highly motivated terrorist movement.[17] One U.S. diplomat noted the following:

> What made the YPG our dream partner is what makes them a political nightmare: they are a longstanding, centrally organized, politically coherent insurgent group, prepared to fight—but a very big problem for Turkey and many other factions around them.[18]

No U.S. official or soldier interviewed for this study sought to deny the historic links of YPG leaders and cadres to the PKK.[19] In discussions with the YPG, the United States adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude about past events. As a senior U.S. Special Operations officer shared, even in his many conversations with Mazloum, he never got into the details of Mazloum's activities in the PKK, saying, "We had the full weight of the U.S. intelligence community under Obama and later reviewed under Trump behind the decision to partner with the YPG. We knew what we were getting into."[20] Yet clearly, the United States did whatever it needed to do to paper over the cracks, to allow both direct and indirect support to the YPG—even its leaders with significant PKK heritage. This study incorporated very in-depth interviews to unravel exactly when and how working with YPG leaders was discussed in the U.S. interagency process, as well as how the vetting arrangements for YPG commanders worked. Also, no interviewee had any sense of how many PKK cadres had "left" the organization to join the YPG.

For U.S. officials, what mattered most was that the PKK-origin YPG leaders appeared to have stopped undertaking anti-Turkish operations, which fits with the U.S. historical pattern of cooperating with former terrorists if they detach from militancy and if Washington's objectives seem to require such cooperation. The United States has even worked with militants with American blood on their hands—often just weeks

or months before, as in the case of the Iraqi *sahwa* (awakening).[21] Washington has cooperated with terrorists who have attacked close partners, such as Israel[22] or Britain,[23] albeit largely when those partners themselves sought accommodation and as part of peace overtures. It is hard to find a case study of a U.S. partner actively opposing American interaction with a militant group; and yet the United States has pressed on with bilateral cooperation anyway, without peace-building as its main objective. In this case, the United States clearly chose to risk its relationship with Turkey, perhaps without fully understanding the risk in 2014–16 but increasingly as a clear-eyed policy in 2017.

YPG Distancing from Anti-Turkish Operations

In all the authors' interviews, U.S. officials and soldiers stressed the forward-facing behavior of the YPG leaders and, particularly, their commitment to not fight Turkey while receiving U.S. aid. The primary risk-mitigation approach of the United States was to set some redlines that would differentiate the YPG from the PKK in terms of its behavior, if not its personnel. From their first meeting with Mazloum, U.S. interlocutors drew assurances from him that the YPG would not directly mount cross-border attacks on Turkey or support PKK operations elsewhere, which this study finds the YPG largely honored. One senior U.S. military commander is worth quoting in full:

> They were trying to do their own thing—the Syrian Democratic Forces—and they were more focused [on being] part of the future of Syria, whatever that was going to be, than linking to some larger PKK effort, some terrorist effort from the past. I think they knew that they would lose it all if they got caught with their hand in that cookie jar, and we never did see anything that smacked of collaboration [with PKK].[24]

Cross-border attacks from YPG areas into Turkey were rare.[25] With the caveat that there will always be some diversion and double-dealing

in a civil war environment, this study finds that the PKK appears to have benefited to a very minimal extent from U.S. security cooperation *thus far*. The YPG can rightly claim that it viewed the war against the Islamic State as its primary focus, going beyond its ethnic borders to fight in costly urban battles in Arab cities. Moreover, the YPG did not divert its focus to the intense fighting in eastern Turkish cities in late 2015.[26] Nor did the YPG defend Afrin during prior Turkish invasion scares in 2015–16.[27] The YPG closely interacted with the same U.S. intelligence community that had increased targeting support to the Turkish armed forces against PKK bases in northern Iraq in 2016–18. Turkish incursions in Afrin in 2018 and along the border in 2019 paused—but did not end—the YPG support to counter-IS operations, and the YPG sought to end the fighting in both cases as quickly as possible. If the YPG is a PKK affiliate, it is a pretty lousy one.

Although there are many allegations of diversion of U.S. security assistance to the PKK, few have checked out, and those that do are of fairly minor significance. SDF commanders tend to be uniformly derisive[28] of the materiel delivered by the coalition, noting that the Assad regime, the Turkish-backed VSO, the black market, and battlefield captures were better sources of heavy weaponry. [29] From the outset of U.S. involvement, Turkey was allowed to vet detailed lists of U.S. personnel and materiel they were sent into northeast Syria.[30] U.S. provision of armaments was remarkably stingy, with the heaviest weapons provided to the SDF being SPG-9 recoilless rifles, a Vietnam War–era weapon. Higher-end transfers included export models of third-generation PVS-7D night vision goggles. No antitank guided missiles were actually provided to the SDF (despite their being in the U.S. Department of Defense request books). The small numbers of ATGMs used against the Islamic State (and Turkish forces) were purchased on the local black market, sometimes from stolen or sold VSO stocks—in other words, sold from the Turkish-backed Arab opposition and used to fight Turkish forces. This fact underlines the inequity in

the U.S. arming of the Turkish-backed VSO, in comparison to the SDF. The Turkish-backed VSO achieved less, got far more advanced arms (including ATGMs), and diverted much more U.S. materiel to Jabhat al-Nusra and other northwest Syrian jihadist groups. [31]

"Syrianization" of the YPG Agenda

When the United States first worked with the YPG in Kobane, the movement had already undergone some transformation during the early years of the Syrian civil war. Had the United States encountered the early YPG, it might have recoiled from the YPG's mania for hegemonic control, cultish treatment of recruits, ruthlessness in discipline and military operations, and use of forced conscripts and child soldiers.[32] The group had for so long nurtured and engaged in anti-American discourse that it required Lahur Sheikh Janghi Talabani's Counter-Terrorism Group to vouch for U.S. good intentions in initial introductions.[33]

Once the United States became involved, the comparative importance of the PKK began to decline quite quickly. In 2013, the PKK was the YPG's only source of experienced fighters; by 2015, the international community was lining up to help. One journalist recalled the following:

> Back [in 2013] they were very paranoid, very committed Communist-Leninists and Ocalanists who wanted to build a new Cuba in Syria. But this began to change in 2015. They wanted to become a region, like the Iraqi Kurds, and the U.S. was their best shot.[34]

That change only gradually showed itself between 2015 and 2019, and one driver of it was the more open environment in Syria, versus the cloistered mountain redoubts. Ethnically diverse, the area also comprised a spectrum of moderate Ocalanist Kurds, pro-Barzani Kurds, leftists, anarchists, and nonpolitical types. The YPG increasingly came to be made up of "the school of 2011"—that is, the younger Syrians who had fought since the civil war began but who had not typically spent long periods in seclusion in the Qandil (and who had not been

subject to intense indoctrination and discipline).[35] U.S. pressure and the international spotlight also made it more difficult for the PKK to maintain the cultlike conditions found in the Qandil.[36] The YPG seemed to fully recognize the need to be a more national force, with broader international backing, after Turkey's seizure of Afrin in 2018.[37]

Thus, Mazloum and the YPG have arguably begun to lead northeast Syria in a direction that is very different from the PKK's traditional preferences. Younger Syrian commanders such as Mazloum, Newroz Ahmed, and Rojda Felat are less controversial than some older non-Syrian PKK leaders who have a long history of anti-Turkish operations.[38] Both the United States and Lahur Talabani worked hard to keep these younger Syrian PKK commanders in place, overcoming the Qandil's Trotskyist standard operating procedure of regularly moving leaders around to prevent their developing personal power bases.[39] Though the PKK seems to have recognized the value in having Mazloum "handle" the Americans—much as Sipan Hemo from Afrin seemed to lead interactions with the Russians and the Assad regime[40]—the group likely would have recalled Mazloum to the Qandil if it could have. "Mazloum was increasingly an independent actor, especially after the Afrin canton collapsed. [He was] negotiating for his own position and for Syria, and this made the PKK very uncomfortable," one U.S. official argued.[41] A number of case studies show that of Mazloum differed from the Qandil on key issues: tightening SDF-Barzani relations,[42] the close relationship between Mazloum and the Americans (especially over oil sales),[43] and Mazloum's withdrawal from Ras al-Ain even though the PKK had called for an urban defense.[44]

Critics of engagement with the YPG view the United States as having been duped into believing that the YPG and the PKK were separate entities, which was in fact the official position that allowed U.S. interaction with YPG leaders. This study concludes that there has been real distancing between the Syria-based YPG leadership and the PKK leaders in the Qandil. This trend could reverse: PKK

commanders—including non-Syrian Qandilians—who are undoubtedly still in the mix at the head of the YPG, could reemerge. The YPG retains military and administrative dominance in northeast Syria, and the PKK may still view YPG neutrality toward Turkey as a bargaining chip. But social trends suggest that the PKK will not dominate the new generation. One European diplomat with ground experience describes the members of this new generation as follows:

> [They are] ideological yet down-to-earth and pragmatic. They lived day to day. The realities of the fight shaped them much more than the PKK legacy. They keep their symbols—Kurdistan, Ocalan—but they live nothing like the PKK in Turkey or [the] Qandil. In part, this is because they have to rule large populations, and the PKK has never done this.[45]

Whether the United States consciously recognized the change in the YPG, and whether Washington should have gambled its relations with Ankara, are related matters that will be discussed further shortly.

Did the United States Condone Ethnic Cleansing and Fail on Inclusivity?

A second line of criticism of the U.S.-YPG relationship refers to allegations that the United States partnered with a Kurdish-led force that undertook ethnic cleansing of Arab villages and that resisted inclusive power-sharing with other factions (including Kurdish factions). In the previous chapters, this study has collated signs—on child soldiery, resettlement, collateral damage mitigation, and other issues—that U.S. military officers and foreign service officers both explicitly and implicitly pressured their partner force to adjust its ethical standards upward. On the issue of ethnic cleansing, this study already referenced the findings of nongovernmental watchdogs and the United Nations

that the YPG does not appear to have undertaken ethnic cleansing in Syria—a finding that appears to be accurate. (The record is more mixed in the field of "political or revolutionary cleansing,"[46] which the next section will discuss.) The northeast Syrian "by, with, and through" case study is instructive for its reminder that even in such partner force operations, the United States is morally responsible for the actions of its partners. Although Colonel Work describes "by, with, and through" as the fascinating quest for influence without authority,[47] this approach is clearly not a formula for influence without moral or political responsibility.

Inclusivity in Postconflict Governance

On inclusivity, this study has noted the moments when the YPG leaders of the SDF were accused of failing to fully share power within local councils or in military affairs. Clearly, the U.S. State Department and French diplomats did not give the YPG top marks for power-sharing with all Arab groups, scoring the YPG/PYD very low on admitting other Kurdish groups into the power structures of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Ongoing efforts are still underway on the latter issue of readmitting the Kurdish National Council and Rojava Peshmerga into the AANES as participants. General Votel and Col. Eero Keravuori assert that the "by, with, and through" approach should lend greater legitimacy, in the civic sphere, to the military success of the partner force.[48] There is no doubt that some of the criticism of the YPG is warranted, and also that the YPG shifted and compromised on a number of occasions because it recognized its failure to share power. Indeed, the YPG has been held to a very high standard of postconflict and intraconflict devolution of power that the United States itself has frequently failed to achieve in its stabilization operations. The issue of inclusivity is complex and should not be characterized in a "pass/fail" manner. It is also an ongoing process, not a single event, and wartime

conditions were the starting point for inclusive governance in the AANES, not the end.

The oversimplified narrative of a Kurdish-*only* or Kurdish-*dominated* (not just Kurdish-*led*) SDF proved irresistible to many observers of the conflict. U.S. diplomats coming out of the Iraq background tended to view Kurdish-Arab relations through that lens; but the extremely bitter, generations-spanning schism between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs did not resemble the Syrian reality. Although tensions were real, there was no mass genocide or systematic displacement of Kurds in Syria. The two communities still lived together and shared Arabic as a common language—unlike in Iraq, where most young Kurds speak only Kurdish. As one Manbij Military Council commander noted, "The Western mindset believes that the Kurds and Arabs are completely different and that they cannot work together due to their historical disputes."[49] Western advisors who were talking to a group of SDF counterparts about whether Arabs would join their efforts would, on occasion, not even realize that Arab commanders were among the very groups being addressed.[50] As noted in prior sections on civil governance and cultural "carve-outs" for Deir al-Zour and Raqqa, the YPG-led SDF did evolve on issues of inclusivity and was welcomed by many local Arab factions for its organizational capacity and outsider status, which placed the group in an umpiring role between other local groups.

Was "By, With, and Through" Divorced from a Broader Strategy?

A related criticism of the "by, with, and through" effort in northeast Syria is that it was a purely tactical or operational approach that was not linked to a broader strategy. Such a critique perhaps sets an unrealistically high bar for intervention, which is not a classroom exercise but rather a deeply chaotic enterprise. Nevertheless, to some observers, the

Syrian campaign is an abomination from a Clausewitzian viewpoint, with warfare failing to be "the extension of politics by other means."[51] One U.S. official interviewed for this study argued that "by, with, and through" was "morally and intellectually dishonest," adding that "the whole point of applying military force is to achieve political ends. If you're not doing that, what are you doing?"[52] Roy Gutman noted, in a similar vein, "In northeast Syria, the broader political issues are at the center of things. Military operations began with no clear goals, no plan for prisoners, reconstruction, or governance. What is the stable political outcome we were seeking?"[53] Another U.S. official characterized the effort as "a virtuoso tactical success but a strategic failure," saying, "[It was] tactically smart and cheap, but you don't divest yourself of political responsibility for the end state."[54]

The heart of this critique is that less American blood and treasure may be expended in "by, with, and through" campaigns; geostrategically and politically, however, U.S. liability for outcomes is not reduced. Ideally, any "by, with, and through" effort will be nested within a cohesive country, regional, and global strategy. The U.S. partnership with the YPG clearly was hastily conceived to meet the exigencies of a military crisis, without such a broader framework. U.S. officials tried to make the "by, with, and through" effort "freestanding" of the strategic backdrop by ameliorating Turkey's concerns, laying down clear redlines about YPG actions, and focusing the effort on counter-IS activities and for only as long as the conflict lasted. If there is justifiable anger about the pursuit of tactical military gains without full consideration of strategic costs, the problem is not principally the "by, with, and through" approach: the problem is the lack of a cohesive U.S. country strategy for Syria, or the lack of a regional and global strategy toward Iranian, Russian, and Turkish actions. The U.S. military will single-mindedly execute the mission it is given: its job is not to make up missions of its own.

Did the United States Prioritize Counter-IS over a NATO Partner?

A clearer criticism of the strategic cost-benefit of the "by, with, and through" effort is that the United States was shortsighted, disingenuous, or naive in its favoring the YPG over a long-established NATO partner: Turkey. Facets of this controversy are threaded throughout this study. The United States initially engaged with the YPG under emergency conditions; the U.S. government, however, eventually seemed to understand that it was risking a serious breach with Turkey by pursuing a temporary tactical alliance with the YPG in an effort to achieve a common objective—the defeat of the Islamic State.[55] As previously noted, the United States had at times joined forces with insurgent groups with U.S. blood on their hands (in Afghanistan and during Iraq's Sunni "awakening"), but the U.S.-YPG relationship witnessed a longstanding NATO ally being forced to accept U.S. cooperation with an affiliate of its most hated terrorist foe, the PKK.[56] As U.S. Army Col. Peter Brau fairly states, this was a tall order:

> After all, the United States had been in Afghanistan for seventeen years and in Iraq almost as long, fighting for the same reasons as Turkey is looking to create their buffer—security of its citizens against terrorist networks...The United States refused to acknowledge the name changes from the [al-Nusra front] when the terrorists in Syria rebranded and disavowed relations with their previous organization—it should not have been hard to understand why Turkey would refuse to do the same thing with the PYD [Democratic Union Party]/YPG and SDF when they disavowed their ties to the PKK and announced they were only conducting operations in Syria and had no hostile intent to Turkey.[57]

In late 2014 and early 2015, the U.S. government was right to value certain indicators, including thirty months of Turkey-PKK talks,[58]

recent direct Turkey-PYD meetings,[59] and even Turkish-YPG military coordination inside Syria.[60] U.S. officials were also right that Turkey was partly to blame for deteriorating relations with the United States, and that Turkey as a partner was far from ideal.[61] Nevertheless, the U.S. government failed to track—and thus to ameliorate—the subsequent rapid deterioration of Turkish-Kurdish relations.[62] In the summer of 2015, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan chose to reignite the war with the PKK to aid his political fortunes. Turkey's internal politics were in ferment, with a long string of elections and referenda interspersed by a major coup attempt in July 2016 that strengthened the loyalist military's hand over Kurdish policy. Erdogan was already very exposed in Syria, having gone along with the Obama administration's flaccid regime-change strategy only to be left hanging. The expansion of Kurdish military power in central Syria threatened a nightmarish outcome for Turkey: not only the joining of the three Kurdish cantons in Syria, but also the opening of land communications between those areas and the PKK strongholds in the Qandil and eastern Turkey. Ankara's tolerance of the YPG's territorial expansion (and U.S.-YPG ties) began to fray considerably when the SDF attempted to move into Jarabulus and al-Bab in summer 2016.[63]

The United States chose to seek forgiveness—not permission—from Turkey, but Washington also focused on mitigating Turkish concerns, and energetically and successfully limited the tactical risks posed by U.S.-YPG cooperation. As noted earlier, the YPG did not secure significant new military capabilities[64] and thus remained a light infantry force that Turkey could easily defeat on Syria's plains. From the outset of U.S. involvement, Turkey was allowed to vet detailed lists of U.S. personnel and materiel being sent into northeast Syria.[65] In the so-called Manbij Roadmap, Turkey was allowed to veto the involvement of ten leaders in military and civil governance in Manbij,[66] and to dictate the exact terms of future U.S. security assistance in Manbij.[67] Along the Turkish border, the Turks dictated the terms of YPG demilitarization (shortly

before Turkish forces invaded).[68] In other words, Turkey was afforded significant input into the U.S.-SDF relationship.

In some instances, there were also failures to salve Turkish sensitivities. Ankara was embarrassed by unnecessary incidents such as media coverage of the U.S. military's airdrop to the YPG at Kobane, or of U.S. government meetings with YPG leaders.[69] Washington's unsuccessful efforts to blur the YPG's identity within the SDF suggested to the Kurds that Washington was deceiving itself or deceiving Ankara with regard to the "temporary, tactical, and transactional" nature of the U.S.-YPG relationship. Although the United States repeatedly warned the YPG against making major efforts to link the Kobane and Afrin cantons, the group made creeping progress toward that end, and the YPG was ultimately not contained east of the Euphrates. The United States could and should have done more to stop the creation of the al-Bab and Jarabulus military councils that sparked Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield.[70]

More U.S. diplomatic effort might also have been preemptively invested in designing a package of demands that could draw the YPG more clearly out of the PKK's orbit. For example, U.S. support to the Syrian Democratic Council and SDF might have hinged on more explicit U.S. requirements vis-à-vis the end size and role of the SDF, oil revenue management, and the administration of northeast Syria—all factors that might reassure Turkey or, at the very least, give it greater certainty. More non-U.S. forces involved in Syria could have broadened the diplomatic discussion (and crisis management) with Turkey, and would have made a precipitate U.S. withdrawal harder to order. The United States might have considered the broader potential of northeast Syria by more actively pressing the YPG and PYD to distance from the PKK, and also by pressing Turkey harder to recognize and reward real efforts to detach from PKK influence.

One factor in the SDF case study that lies outside the focus of this report but that would benefit from dedicated research is the manner in which U.S. policymaking on northeast Syria was bifurcated because

the area of operations sits along the crease of Europe (and thus the European section of the National Security Council, the State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, and U.S. European Command) and the Near East (the Middle East section of the National Security Council, the State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and U.S. Central Command). Detailed investigation should also focus on the coordination role of the Office of the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Trust and Military Culture as Cornerstones of "By, With, and Through"

U.S. operations in northeast Syria were rich in lessons about how close relations are built and maintained with a partner force. There is no doubt that the U.S. Special Operations community reacted quite positively to the YPG from the very beginning. Part of this reaction is attributable to the warm introduction provided by another highly trusted partner, Lahur Talabani's CTG, which the U.S. had worked closely with since 2001. U.S. military familiarity with the Kurds as a partner force was another factor that made relationship-building easy and quick. Many U.S. officers had, on balance, negative views of Iraqi Arab and Afghan partner forces, informed by "green-on-blue" killings of U.S. troops by partners. In contrast, the Syrian Kurds (like the Iraqi Kurds) provided a safe environment for American advisors and trainers. One SDF commander noted the following:

> Not only the American forces [but] all coalition members are considered our guests, and their protection is important for us. And our society is not a radical one. For example, a U.S. soldier can even go unarmed to the city of Kobane...This is not only related to the YPG or SDF; it is dependent of the people in [our] region, our people

> would not betray. Can the same serviceman walk freely in Anbar, Ramadi, and Mosul?[71]

Taken together, all these factors left a very positive impression on the U.S. military. One very senior U.S. advisor, who lived in close proximity to a variety of partner forces, shared this:

> This was a partner unlike the Iraqis, Afghans, or any other force we had worked with, with the exception of Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service and CTG...They had high-quality commanders like we had not seen anywhere else. Their operational logistics—from beans to bullets to medical supplies to civil affairs and selling oil—just worked. Their culture was fierce, and they refused to run away from [the Islamic State]. This culture began to spread into the rest of the SDF. We could go with this partner as far as they were willing to go. The partner was not the limiting factor.[72]

Culture as a Bonding Factor

What was the linchpin of that trust? The word that recurred throughout interviews with U.S. officers was *culture*. This term, obviously, does not refer to general political culture: indeed, from an ideological standpoint, the YPG and the United States make unlikely partners—the former being proto-Marxist guerrillas at war with a U.S. NATO ally for decades. Yet many aspects of YPG *warrior* culture, or the U.S. perception of it, were quite attractive to Americans, and thus allowed the groups to overcome their ideological differences. Members of the YPG were viewed as brave and tough but not cruel. On the law of armed conflict, they were seen as compassionate, focused on reducing civilian casualties and providing services and governance to Arabs, Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds alike. On the role of women, the YPG was found by United States to be extraordinarily progressive, unlike Arabs, Afghans, and Pakistanis. As one U.S. special forces trainer recalled, "Compared to the Afghans, they were a much more educated and capable force, a lot

more liberal than their Afghan counterparts. The YPJ wear makeup, drive vehicles, and fight alongside the men."[73]

Two other recurring themes—discipline and structure—came along with the YPG's ideological base and made the group seem relatively uncorrupt, at least compared to partner forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa. "It was reassuring for us that the Kurds were not going to sell the weapons we gave them, or divert them, like they did in Iraq, to the Iranians," one senior U.S. advisor recalled. "They were going to use them effectively."[74] Most important, they were good fighters[75] and had "a culture of resistance."[76] This cultural fit "was the glue that [kept] the partnership together," one U.S. advisor recalled.[77] Another noted,

> When you find people that mirror you, it is much easier to partner. The Kurds worked hard; they were committed and competent. They would match you on the battlefield with bravery. It was much easier to do successful "by, with, and through" in the Kurdish setting because of their culture.[78]

One U.S. officer made the simple but essential observation that "you have to understand the culture of the people you are going to fight 'by, with, and through.'"[79] The case of Syria suggests that the U.S.-YPG relationship was even deeper: one not just of understanding, but of admiration and respect.[80]

Senior Leadership "Fit" with the United States

This respect for the YPG was built from the top down, starting with Mazloum.[81] Engagement of key leaders was undoubtedly successful in the U.S. "by, with, and through" effort in northeast Syria. Since late 2014, Mazloum was in daily contact with his U.S. liaison officers, first by telephone and later collocated with them inside Syria. (Mazloum's headquarters shifted east to Hasaka when U.S. forces left the Kobane and Ain Issa areas in October 2019, in a move to maintain the tight

U.S.-Mazloum connection.[82]) U.S. flag officers visited Mazloum regularly—at least monthly from late 2015 onward.[83] The United States rotated the same Tier 1 special operators through northeast Syria year after year to build strong personal relations, institutional memory, and contact networks.[84] "When you are a 'repeat offender' and you come back," one U.S. officer stated, "it is a pretty special moment."[85]

The primary U.S. interlocutors with Mazloum believed that they have had, from the outset until today, a very candid relationship with Mazloum, in which U.S. redlines were well understood and largely respected. It helped that the relationship was a "fresh start," with no water under the bridge or past grudges (as is often the case with long-standing partners and proxies).[86] Many superlatives are expended when U.S. officers describe Mazloum.[87] One U.S. military officer with a close relationship with Mazloum made the bold claim that "he was the most effective commander in the [global war on terror] from when it started to today."[88] Quiet-mannered, canny, diplomatic, and well educated, Mazloum was described by another senior U.S. advisor who worked alongside the SDF leader as "extraordinarily competent, almost unflappable."[89] He maintained command authority and calmness and had the ultimate respect of the fighters, Kurds and Arabs, within the SDF."[90] It is fair to say that the United States relied so heavily on Mazloum that (1) certain institutions may have been overlooked, and (2) Mazloum may have been imbued with an essential political role—in essence, that of a military governor—that was not originally intended.

Despite the old saying in special operations that you cannot fall in love with your proxy force, it is probably fairer to say that almost everyone does—and that doing so is partly necessary for "by, with, and through" to work. That being said, the U.S. military fell more deeply in love with the YPG than the Kurds did in return. Indeed, the U.S. military is used to working with partner forces that fail to meet even the most basic benchmarks of cooperation—such as not betraying and killing U.S. advisors, or not diverting U.S. materiel to America's

enemies—so it was quite easy to overlook Turkey's concerns about PKK connections, or the secretive and centralist tendencies of the YPG.

For the Syrian Kurds, who showed loyalty and affection for individual Americans, a transactional calculation remained at the heart of the relationship. There was also a wariness of U.S. abandonment that proved to be partially justified, because U.S. cabinet-level leaders—who considered the broader strategic picture on a daily basis—were not as attached to the YPG. Thus, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter could detachedly describe the relationship with the SDF as "transactional,"[91] while it clearly meant much more to the U.S. soldiers who worked with the Syrian forces. "I almost viewed it as a marriage," one recalled.[92] U.S. soldiers felt (and continue to feel) ashamed about the withdrawal,[93] and Mazloum even issued a letter to U.S. soldiers absolving them of feelings of guilt about the withdrawal decision in which they had no part.[94]

What the untidy drawdown of U.S. forces showed is that the ragged end of each "by, with, and through" mission deserves more attention and thought. If "by, with and through" is time-sensitive, transactional, and dependent on a high degree of mutual trust, how should such a mission transition toward its end point? Practitioners of "by, with, and through" typically mention how the impending end of a cooperative relationship can undermine shared goals and make it more difficult to secure shared gains.[95] "If a relationship is clearly going nowhere, it will progressively worsen if all that beckons is disengagement," one U.S. advisor said. A U.S. official observed that "relationships are complex—never more so than at a fork in the road, at the end, as they change."[96] Therefore, any U.S. "by, with, and through" effort should more carefully consider how the relationship will evolve once the primary mission is undertaken, and how the engagement will off-ramp without doing harm to either the new partner force or, importantly, U.S. credibility with future partner forces. It is worth asking how the case of U.S.-SDF relations in northeast Syria will be viewed by the next prospective partner force that Washington wants to work with.

Avoiding the Urge to Transform Partner Forces

As security analyst Alex Almeida noted, the SDF was a "fit-for-purpose" fighting force that did precisely what it was meant to do. "[It] filled a very specific niche for a limited period of time: very reliable, hard-fighting battlefield light infantry that will go and clear places [on] a U.S. timetable. For a couple of years, [it was] the only force that could really do that."[97] For Mick Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich, the U.S. relationship with the SDF is an example of what they call the "tactical advantage" model, in which the United States quickly tops up an already capable partner with just enough additional capability to defeat the shared adversary.[98] (Mulroy and Oehlerich contrast this with the more expensive and slower "mirror image" model, whereby the United States seeks to have more lasting impact on military organization and culture by amassing new conventional armed forces according to a U.S. military template.[99])

The "tactical advantage model" put forth by Mulroy and Oehlerich describes security assistance that does not necessarily transform the partner force in any lasting way. Taking such an approach was partly a conscious decision by the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, which was the ideal agency to execute a thrifty "by, with, and through" campaign led by a recurring cast of Tier 1 U.S. special operators.[100] As the longest-serving trainer of SDF forces recalled, "They had an organization and a structure for military leadership and governance. We made a conscious decision not to mess with their structure."[101] A senior U.S. general expanded on this theme:

> We did not try to get overinvolved in institution building: we took them as they were and did not invest a lot of time or money in changing them...We kept them in the forefront and leveraged the strengths of the Kurds in hierarchical leadership, military competence, and turning out well-led and motivated units, including Arab militias.[102]

The YPG's Distinctive Tactical Style

This U.S. approach was pragmatic, because the YPG had a strong and resistant military culture and (rightly or wrongly) felt it had little to learn from Americans about warrior culture and light infantry fighting. Interviews with YPG leaders provide many examples of the group's distinctive military culture, forged over decades of guerrilla warfare against Turkey.[103] Macer Gifford, a British volunteer, shared the following:

> The YPG and SDF are scrappy fighters...It's amateurish, incredibly brave, incredibly aggressive, but it works incredibly well. But it was to the despair of international volunteers who were former service people, who wanted to fight in a particular way, but couldn't...[that] the SDF and local culture, and how they fight and how they want to fight, is very difficult to change. But it's a system that works, and "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" is the mentality.[104]

The YPG did not want to become a conventional army. YPG leaders looked at the Peshmerga of Iraqi Kurdistan as a cautionary tale of becoming semi-institutionalized, noting that "the Peshmerga forces are difficult to maneuver or move in a fast fashion. The Peshmerga fight does not have the complete qualities of either guerrilla or of an army."[105] Though the SDF had some tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, it tended not to use them intensively; rather, the SDF had the quintessential guerrilla view of armor, finding such vehicles vulnerable and unwieldy.[106]

The United States did not try to change the tactical organization favored by the YPG. The YPG fighters were proud of their flexible organizational and tactical model, disparaging the need for standardized, larger tactical formations. Small task-organized *foj* (regiments) and loosely subordinate *tabur* (battalions) were seen as preferable to battalions and companies. "Rather than an institutionalized army, it is a popular force and could maneuver easily," commented one YPG leader.[107] Another echoed this theme: unit size "would be specified

according to the nature of the fight…the battle tells you how many people you need to have in all ranks.[108]

The U.S. special operators who ran the intervention in northeast Syria quickly learned to tailor their support to the YPG and SDF's distinctive style. One U.S. advisor summed up U.S. forces' typical experience with the YPG and SDF: "Whenever they executed our plan, it didn't work out well. It had to be their plan."[109] Another said, "They were never organized in a triangular fashion," with tactical units abreast and reserve formations behind.[110] Indeed, the YPG and later the SDF "kept doing what they had always done: light infantry skirmishing, penetrating and bypassing enemy resistance, which was finished off later" by mop-up forces who would give Islamic State fighters ample opportunity to slip away and who would demolish resisting strongpoints with heavy weapons.[111]

Even when the United States intentionally tried to change how the YPG fought, the results were usually not worth the effort. U.S. advisors and trainers were quite philosophical about the situation, and even found it amusing, in part because the SDF still delivered battlefield results. In a variation on a commonly expressed theme, one U.S. advisor recalled, "Fire and maneuver didn't work for them. They never mastered how to win a firefight with suppressing fire and flanking maneuver."[112] The SDF did not fire and maneuver. At best, the SDF fired (with Dushkas and antiaircraft cannons) *then* maneuvered, but it often just maneuvered without supporting fires.[113] However, in a war where getting U.S. partners (e.g., the Iraqi military, Syrian VSO) to maneuver at all was often impossible, the willingness of the SDF to close with the enemy was a refreshing change.

Partner Force Reliance on U.S. Firepower

If the United States tactically altered the YPG and SDF in any way, that was unintentional, in terms of fostering reliance on U.S. intelligence

and, especially, firepower. The evolution of joint fires in support of the YPG and SDF was an undoubted success story with regard to upping the firepower available to even the lowest echelons of the SDF. The Sulaymaniyah-based strike cell, later supplemented by multiple frontline strike cells that came and went, was manned by the same Tier 1 U.S. special operators—all day, every day—for more than seventy consecutive months.[114] The exercise demonstrated that U.S. joint fires could support a partner force remotely, with no U.S. forces in Syria, for more than a year. Review of detailed surveillance footage revealed that the strike cell accounted for more than thirty thousand Islamic State fighters killed; this figure is probably much closer to the true number than battle damage assessments issued in previous wars, because of the proliferation of full-motion video and the deep "soak" of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance on many targeted sites and vehicles before, during, and after strikes.[115]

On the battlefield, U.S. assistance meant firepower; some was organic to the frontline units (through increased provision of mortars, recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, and ammunition), but most was delivered by U.S. air and artillery platforms. Other fire support was invisible at the frontline: over the horizon, unseen, the United States made the SDF's job much easier by preempting and "blunting" (i.e., stopping) IS counterattacks. Thus, the SDF experienced fewer IS surprise attacks because of U.S. intelligence available at the command level. To some extent, the YPG and SDF functioned not only as ground-holders, but as probes that forced IS tactical forces to move, reveal themselves, and demonstrate military signatures, and thus to trigger U.S. action in accordance with its rules of engagement.

Under such circumstances, it is easy to overstate how capable the partner force is, particularly in scenarios where it no longer enjoys perishable U.S. intelligence and fire support. The availability of overwhelming firepower subtly changed the YPG's fighting style, tempting the force to become more dependent on firepower, more willing to

cause material damage to spare friendly losses, and more likely to mount daytime advances when fire support was at its most effective.[116] Lacking such supporting fires, the YPG was not particularly effective against Turkish attacks in Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad. For those concerned that U.S. assistance would boost PKK and YPG capabilities to fight Turkey, these battles should be highly reassuring. The formula of drip-feeding perishable U.S. intelligence and firepower was, in fact, extremely effective at limiting the risk of overdeveloping the YPG and SDF partner force.

Multilayered "By, With, and Through"

A fascinating aspect of the campaign in northwest Syria was the multiple layers of "subcontracting" that made up the "by, with, and the through" effort. The United States initially managed the Syrian Kurds "by, with, and through" Lahur Talabani's CTG. When direct U.S. relations with the YPG were developed, the Syrian Kurds became the new "subcontractor," not only directly fighting the Islamic State but also delivering training and disbursing equipment to Syrian Arab Coalition forces. The YPG may have appealed as a partner to the CJSOTF because it essentially comprised special forces: the PKK's special operators, sent into Syria to build an unconventional warfare capability, plus younger Syrian YPG operators who had operated as special forces since their inception and who had no prior experience of conventional military operations.[117]

As detailed in prior chapters, the YPG leaders, logisticians, and technicians within the SDF were essentially providing advise, assist, accompany, and enable functions to the broader SDF. The Kurds corseted Arab units, with one U.S. operator recalling, "If Arab elements broke, YPG would fill the gap, until Arabs could be slotted back in, and there was no blame from the YPG."[118] The result, according to another senior advisor, was that "Arabs in the SDF were far better soldiers than Arabs outside the SDF."[119] Interestingly, as described earlier, members

of the YPG initially thought they might change the military and social culture of the Arabs they trained, aiming to achieve a much more transformational agenda than the CJSOTF itself. In time, the YPG also downgraded its transformative plans for Arab sociopolitical culture, but it still harbors hopes that the SDF can be a regional army for northeast Syria or function as two corps within a future Syrian national army.[120]

The SDF as a Case Study of "By, With, and Through"

With "by, with, and through" now enshrined in the U.S. National Defense Strategy,[121] there is a clear move to make the operational approach a preferred option for the United States in low-intensity and mid-intensity conflicts. As discussed earlier, the YPG/SDF case study would appear to provide powerful vindication to Mulroy and Oehlerich's "tactical advantage" model of making local forces "good enough" to defeat shared adversaries. The case also seems to point to the pluses of working with substate partner forces that rely heavily on the United States. As one U.S. diplomat said, "A functional nonstate actor like the YPG has a lot to gain and can be a highly motivated partner, unlike weak state partners like Iraq or Afghanistan, who can be very unresponsive and complacent."[122] But how transferable, or how unique, was the "by, with, and through" model used in Syria?

The YPG/SDF was an unusually organized and motivated light infantry force, with or without U.S. support. Its forces represented good "raw material" for the United States to begin working with, in part because of the system's PKK "DNA." An effective partner force, though not unique, is certainly rare. Every once in a while, the United States identifies such partners—for instance, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001–2, or some Iraqi Kurdish forces since the 1990s. America's enemies, such as Iran, occasionally encounter similarly effective forces: Lebanese Hezbollah is one, and Yemen's Houthis are another.

Indeed, America's friends also sometimes find good raw material (for example, the United Arab Emirates has developed Yemeni Salafi forces since 2015). Most often, the partner force will be less effective than the YPG/SDF, as in the case of VSO forces in northwest Syria, SAC units in northeast Syria when Kurdish veterans were removed, various Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army units, Russian- and Iranian-backed militia units in Syria and Iraq, and Saudi-backed Yemeni forces in Yemen (since 2015).

The applicability of "by, with, and through" depends on an available partner force that has the potential to outperform the shared adversary that both the United States and its partner are attacking. If the adversary is weak, then the partner force does not need to be as good as the YPG/SDF, which was faced by a highly effective opponent (the Islamic State) and complex operational tasks (clearing cities, breaching defensive zones, defending against counterattacks). Thus, the operative factor in assessing a partner's military suitability may be the quality *differential* between partner and adversary forces, not necessarily some absolute level of partner military potential.

Some partner characteristics are arguably absolute. As noted, trust between the United States and its partner forces is a sine qua non. If U.S. advisors are on the ground, their physical safety must be a priority for the partner force. The partner force must be trusted to distribute and use the materiel and money in the manner that Washington dictates, and to observe U.S. end-user requirements. The partner force must also be trusted to try, to the greatest practicable extent, to observe the laws of armed conflict, to minimize civilian harm, and to be inclusive in postconflict governance. Again, a minimum level of trust must exist from the start, and it should deepen over time. Partner forces in "by, with, and through" campaigns must check as many of these boxes as possible, but should not be expected to check them all immediately. Rather, partner forces should be expected to err frequently, as U.S. forces sometimes do. As with military potential,

the moral differential between the partner and the adversary is an important consideration.

What does the YPG/SDF case suggest about the aforementioned quest for influence without authority, as well as about the prospect of a "by, with, and through" campaign that leaves partner forces with primary ownership of or responsibility for political outcomes? This study concludes that the United States had both more control than many observers suspect, and more ownership and responsibility. Speaking to the concept of a link between a light footprint and reduced control, one U.S. general argued the following:

> I'm not sure we did lack control. I think we orchestrated a campaign plan pretty well, and exerted appropriate authority and control over our partners on the ground to prevent atrocities and conduct operations in a manner we could be proud of, all while maintaining a light footprint so we didn't own everything.[123]

In a similar vein, another U.S. official, a diplomat involved in vetting and interacting with the YPG/SDF, noted, "We wanted to mitigate the actual physical security threats originating in northeast Syria. The YPG did everything we told them to do, and did not do the things we told them not to do."[124]

This study further concludes that the United States maintained quite a high level of control of the YPG/SDF partner forces, through explicit instruction, implicit example, and inferred expectations. As discussed, U.S. engagement arguably changed the outlook and trajectory of the YPG (loosening the PKK's hold) and shaped the SDF—temporarily or perhaps more enduringly. The United States should not underestimate how much control it can exert over the operations and conduct of its partner forces, and should strive to actively shape their ethical practices. Indeed, Washington cannot avoid a significant measure of responsibility for political, moral, and strategic outcomes. Simply proclaiming a reduction in U.S. responsibility does not make it so. Furthermore, the

end of each "by, with, and through" relationship is, in fact, the first act of the next partnership, showing future partner forces what kind of relationship is on offer.

The "by, with, and through" approach is also not a substitute for a strategic framework. As a means to ensure the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the U.S.-YPG/SDF partnership was a clear success. And it was successful even in the absence of a clear U.S. country strategy for Syria, which was simply the reality within which the military campaign was conducted. The U.S. government chose, with increasingly full knowledge of the consequences, to further risk U.S.-Turkey relations in an effort to reap the military benefits of partnering with the YPG/SDF in Syria. This choice was a "grown-up" one, and critics of the policy often overlook Washington's already soured and unsuccessful security partnership with Turkey on IS issues.

The "by, with, and through" operational approach does not end wars, but rather ends U.S. involvement in them—perhaps temporarily. Ensuring the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Syria is a more complex and long-lasting endeavor; it requires that the remaining elements of "by, with, and through" security assistance be woven into a cohesive country, regional, and global strategic framework that incorporates Syria, Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China.

Notes

1 As noted previously, U.S. Central Command defined "by, with, and through" as "operations [that] are led *by* our partners, state or non-state, *with* enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and *through* U.S. authorities and partner agreements." See Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89.pdf?ver=2018-04-19-153711-177. Italics in the original.

2 "An Interview with Joseph L. Votel," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 34, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_34-39_Votel.pdf?ver=2018-04-.

3 J. Patrick Work, "Fighting the Islamic State By, With and Through: How Mattered as Much as What," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 56, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-89.aspx.

4 Ibid., 57.

5 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

6 Authors' interview with journalist 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

7 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

8 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

9 Authors' interview with U.S. official 3: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

10 The United States bore an especially disproportionate amount of the burden in Syria; this is attributable to the far lower participation rate of coalition partners in Syria than on the Iraqi side.

11 In Iraq, there were U.S., British, French, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Italian, and Spanish special operators. In Syria, there were U.S. and French operators, with

periodic involvement by the British. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

12 Josh Rogin, "The U.S. Is Asking European Countries to Deploy Troops to Syria," *Washington Post,* February 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/15/us-is-asking-european-countries-deploy-troops-syria/.

13 Authors' interview with U.S. official 37: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

14 Michael X. Garrett et al., "The By-With-Through Approach: An Army Component Perspective," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 50, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_48-55_Garrett-et-al.pdf.

15 Authors' interview with U.S. official 38: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. Four were killed in a single rear-area terrorist attack, and three were killed in movements near the forward line of own troops (FLOT).

16 The PKK has been a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997. "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/.

17 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

18 Authors' interview with U.S. official 45: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

19 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

20 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

21 Nick Hopkins, "Inside Iraq: 'We Had to Deal with People Who Had Blood on Their Hands,'" *Guardian* (U.S. edition), July 16, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/16/inside-iraq-emma-sky.

22 That is, with Yasser Arafat. See Mark Matthews, "U.S. Suspects Arafat Knew of Weapons," *Baltimore Sun*, January 9, 2002.

23 Douglas Jehl, "Clinton to Permit Fund-Raising in the U.S. by Top IRA Figure," *New York Times*, March 10, 1995, https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/10/world/clinton-to-permit-fund-raising-in-the-us-by-top-ira-figure.html.

24 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

25 Irem Koker, "Reality Check: How Many Attacks Did Turkey Face from Afrin?" BBC Turkish, March 20, 2018. See also "Read the Memo by a U.S. Diplomat Criticizing Trump Policy on Syria and Turkey," *New York Times*, November 7, 2019. "A U.S. diplomat on the ground said that the "border stayed quiet on the Syrian side the entire time—over 20 months—I have been in Syria, until Turkey violated it with its October Peace Spring military operation."

26 One well-informed journalist noted that some YPG tunnels brought small numbers of fighters into Turkey, but "they basically played by the rules, and these cases were the exception to those rules." Authors' interview with journalist 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

27 The battle of al-Shadadi was not only the first time that YPG forces might have been expected to disengage from anti-IS offensive operations (and to turn and support PKK forces in Turkey), but also the first of many times when YPG forces stayed focused on IS instead. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places withheld at interviewees' request.

28 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Authors' interview with journalist 6: name, date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

35 Ibid.

36 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

37 Authors' interview with Fabrice Balanche, email, September 27, 2020.

38 Another senior U.S. military interviewee said of Mazloum, "We knew what he was then, and we know what he is now. And they're different." Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

39 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

40 As one Syrian commander noted, "Mazloum is our America guy, like Sipan is our Russia guy." Authors' interview with SDF official 23: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

41 Authors' interview with U.S. official 40: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

42 On August 6, 2020, Cemil Bayik criticized an oil deal between the United States and the SDF, and indirectly criticized Mazloum for not thanking Ocalan for the Kurdish unity deal. Mazloum thanked the United States and Barzani in mid-June for supporting Kurdish unity efforts in Syria after the first phase of Kurdish unity talks was announced. See "Special Program Cemil Bayik" (video), Sterk TV, August 6, 2020, http://sterktv.net/1900-bernama-taybet-cemil-bayik-2/; "SDF's Abdi Thanks President Nechirvan Barzani for Coronavirus Testing Kits, Supplies," NRT English, https://www.nrttv.com/En/News.aspx?id=20661&MapID=1; and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurdish Parties Reach Initial Unity Agreement," Kurdistan 24, June 17, 2020, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/e20c4910-d66b-480f-a89b-986bfaf145dc.

43 Metin Gurcan, "Is the PKK Worried by the YPG's Growing Popularity?" Al-Monitor, November 7, 2019.

44 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at

interviewees' request. As Fabrice Balanche has noted, Mazloum very pragmatically withdrew from battle and negotiated with Russia in an effort to retain control of Kobane, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer. Authors' interview with Fabrice Balanche, email, September 27, 2020.

45 Authors' interview with European official 2: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

46 Gutman uses this phrase in Meredith Tax and Roy Gutman, "The Syrian Kurds and Allegations of War Crimes," *Nation*, February 21, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-syrian-kurds-and-allegations-of-war-crimes/.

47 J. Patrick Work, "Fighting the Islamic State By, With and Through: How Mattered as Much as What," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 57.

48 See Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018) 42–43.

49 Authors' interview with SDF official 34: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

50 This was a recurring theme in the interviews: that is, of American visitors addressing groups of SDF commanders and discovering, during the engagement, that they were talking to a range of ethnic groups—not just YPG Kurds, as they had assumed. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

51 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 24.

52 Authors' interview with U.S. official 39: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

53 Authors' interview with Roy Gutman, July 20, 2020, by Zoom.

54 Authors' interview with U.S. official 3: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

55 Peter Brau, "Civil Authority in Manbij, Syria: Using Civil Affairs to Implement Stabilization Activities in Nonpermissive Environments," *Military Review* (February 2019): 11.

56 What mattered was not necessarily the reality of gradual YPG distancing from the PKK; what mattered was that Turkey viewed the YPG and the PKK as inextricably linked. It also did not matter that diversion of U.S. security assistance was minimal, or that weapons provided to the YPG and SDF had little impact on the military balance, which remained stacked heavily in Turkey's favor. Instead, what mattered was that Turkey viewed any aid to the YPG in zero-sum terms: the more recruits, training, equipment, and money the YPG had access to, the better able the PKK would be to focus other resources on Turkey. In fairness, this is exactly how the U.S. government views the receipt of even the most minimal support, directly or directly, to U.S.-designated terrorist groups.

57 Brau, "Civil Authority in Manbij," 11.

58 Daren Butler, "Kurdish PKK Militants End Unilateral Ceasefire in Turkey: Agency," Reuters, November 5, 2015.

59 As written by Ambassador William Roebuck and reported in the *New York Times*, "In 2015 senior PYD officials like Saleh Muslim and Elham Ahmed visited Turkey, meeting with senior GOT [Government of Turkey] officials. They were not labeled terrorists or subjected to the language of extermination or other harsh rhetoric." See "Memo Criticizing Policy on Syria and Turkey." See also authors' interview with senior SDF official Cemil Mazlum, March 22, 2019; and authors' interview with SDF official 38: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

60 "Turkey Enters Syria to Remove Precious Suleyman Shah Tomb," BBC News, February 22, 2015.

61 To secure the return of Turkish hostages held by the Islamic State and to reduce the risk of domestic terrorism, Turkey turned a blind eye to IS use of its border with Syria, counter to the fundamental needs of the coalition. Here lay the seeds of the growing U.S.-YPG partnership, which Turkey had numerous opportunities to forestall and limit.

62 One senior U.S. military commander recalled waiting for the U.S. National Security Council to give guidance or change the mission as relations with Turkey frayed in 2016. "If they had told us it was untenable, we could have off-ramped." Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

63 Jiyar Gol, "IS Conflict: Syria's Kurds Set Sights on al-Bab After Fall of Manbij," BBC News, August 16, 2016; and "The Military Council of Jarablos Declared," Hawar News Agency, August 22, 2016, https://dckurd.org/2016/08/22/the-military-council-of-jarablos-declared/.

64 What the United States provided in place of heavy weapons was airpower and artillery support, both of which could be withdrawn in a moment and left the YPG with no permanent capability upgrade. If the YPG (and, by extension, the PKK) saw benefits in the long term, they came in the form of U.S. and French training received by YPG cadres in special operations and urban tactics, plus very useful tacit knowledge of modern intelligence capabilities and methods to blunt enemy airpower. Such insights may boost PKK combat power in the future, potentially inside eastern Turkish towns, but they certainly did not give the YPG the ability to effectively resist Turkish assaults in 2018 or 2019. If anything, YPG leaders in Kobane and Jazira appeared keen to preserve their forces, even at the cost of surrendering Afrin city.

65 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

66 Three of five top commanders in the Manbij Military Council were removed (along with seven other local leaders) because of Turkey's "redline." Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

67 For instance, Turkey shaped the rules by which forces could receive U.S. assistance, directing that only urban security forces receive protected mobility systems such as Humvees. Authors' interview with SDF official 38: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

68 The terms included where YPG forces had to withdraw and where fortifications had to be removed. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

69 Authors' interview with U.S. official 16: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

70 Gol, "Kurds Set Sights on al-Bab." See also "Military Council of Jarablos."

71 Authors' interview with SDF official 15: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

72 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

73 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

74 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

75 As one younger U.S. advisor noted, with apparent awe: "You very rarely talk to anyone [in the SDF] who hasn't taken a round." Authors' interview with U.S. military officer 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

76 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

77 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

78 Authors' interview with U.S. official 41: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

79 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

80 One interesting observation from our interviews with YPG leaders is that the YPG did not necessarily return the admiration that Americans lavished on them. YPG leaders were undoubtedly impressed with U.S. intelligence and firepower, but they did not necessarily view the Americans as equals in terms of their warrior culture. YPG leaders retained some suspicion of the United States as an imperialist power—close to Turkey and Israel, intent on taking Syria's oil and quick to abandon Kurds—from Henry Kissinger's double-dealing in the 1970s to the Iraqi overrun of Kirkuk in 2017. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

81 Other YPG commanders also left very positive impressions on U.S. commanders—notably, Newroz, Rojda Felat, Ciya Kobani, Murad, and others. Over the past nineteen years, the authors have interviewed many

U.S. officers on their impressions of Afghan and Arab commanders: U.S. views of YPG leaders are far less equivocal and grudging than in other theaters of the global war on terror. Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

82 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Authors' interview with U.S. official 35: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

86 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. In contrast, the U.S. has had a fifty-year relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, which is a volatile mix of shared experience and perceived betrayals and disappointments.

87 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

88 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

89 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

90 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

91 Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2015–December 31, 2015*.

92 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

93 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Authors' interview with U.S. official 42: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

97 Authors' interview with Alex Almeida, email, January 20, 2020.

98 Mick Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich, "A Tale of Two Partners: Comparing Two Approaches for Partner Force Operations," Middle East Institute, January 29, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/tale-two-partners-comparing-two-approaches-partner-force-operations.

99 Ibid.

100 The war in northeast Syria fell wholly under the CJSOTF, and this shaped how the United States undertook "by, with, and through." It was a thrifty operation—with fewer economies of scale than Iraq but still cheap overall, and with far fewer U.S. personnel. There was no U.S. embassy to perform supporting actions (including effective Leahy vetting) and no large staff to make expansive plans to transform the Syrian fighters into a U.S.-style military.

101 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

102 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

103 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

104 Ibid.

105 Authors' interview with SDF official 15: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

106 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

107 Authors' interview with SDF official 15: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

108 Authors' interview with SDF official 13: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

109 Authors' interview with U.S. official 7: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
110 Authors' interview with U.S. official 5: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
111 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
112 Authors' interview with U.S. official 33: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
113 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
114 Authors' interview with U.S. official 31: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
115 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Authors' interview with U.S. official 6: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
119 Authors' interview with U.S. official 4: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
120 Authors' interviews with multiple interviewees, reflecting a commonly encountered view: names, dates, and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
121 "Summary of the National Defense Strategy, 2018: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," U.S. Department of Defense, January 19, 2018, 7, 12.
122 Authors' interview with U.S. official 45: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
123 Authors' interview with U.S. official 25: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
124 Authors' interview with U.S. official 45: name, date, and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

Annex A Advanced Roster of Battles and Campaigns in Northeast Syria, 2014–19

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Defense of Kobane	September 2014–January 2015	Approx. 180 days (incl. approx. 110 days urban fighting)	50-mile frontline shrinking to 3×1-mile pocket	Collapsing pocket defense, urban hold, then urban counterattack	• Kobane forces • 3,000 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	1,253 killed, approx. 3,000+ wounded
Kobane rural exploitation	January–May 2015	Approx. 140 days	Clearance of 350 villages on 50-mile front, to depth of 30 miles	Multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages	• Kobane forces • 3,000 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
Eastern Hasaka	February–March 2015	Approx. 20 days	40-mile-wide front, 20 miles deep	Multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Jazira forces • 1,500 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
Western Hasaka: Tal Tamer / Ras al-Ain	May 2015	Approx. 25 days	50-mile wide front, 20 miles deep	Multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Jazira forces • 5,500 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Euphrates Volcano: Tal Abyad / Ain Issa	May–July 2015	Approx. 40 days	Pincer of two axes, each 20-mile frontage and 10-mile depth	Multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Kobane forces • 4,000 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
Hasaka city	June–August 2015	Approx. 40 days	3×3-mile urban battlefield, defensive strongpoints rather than contiguous lines	Urban hold, then urban counterattack	• Jazira forces • 2,000 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
al-Hawl	October–November 2015	Approx. 32 days	30×20×10-mile battle area	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Jazira forces • 2,700 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah, incl. 2 weeks of prep fires	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
al-Shadadi	November 2015–February 2016	Approx. 40 days	Two axes, each 15 miles wide × 10 miles deep	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Jazira forces • 5,000 maximum • Airpower managed from Sulaymaniyah and (at end) from on-the-ground coordination rooms • United States advised/assisted with planning	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
Tishrin Dam	December 2015	Approx. 15 days	20 miles wide × 10 miles deep, with exploit phase of 5 miles beyond objective	Deliberate attack, single-axis move to contact and clear villages and strategic dam, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Kobane forces • 2,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • United States advised/assisted with planning	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Manbij encirclement	May–July 2016	Approx. 33 days	Two axes, each 20 miles wide × 25 miles deep	Deliberate attack, incl. river crossing and breakout from fortified bridgehead, multi-axis (4–5) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Kobane forces • 6,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • United States and France advised/ assisted with planning • Pre-attack rehearsal of river crossing	Approx. 150 killed, mostly on breakout from Tishrin bridgehead
Manbij city	July–August 2016	Approx. 22 days	5×2-mile city	First urban breaching assault on major IS–fortified city, including dense IED belts	• Kobane forces • 6,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • United States and France advised/ assisted with planning	Approx. 480–550 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
West al-Bab	August–September 2016	Approx. 30 days	5 miles wide × 5 miles deep	Deliberate attack, single-axis move to contact and clear villages	• Kobane forces • 1,500 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • Primarily SAC forces	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed
Euphrates Wrath / Raqqa Phase 1: North	November 2016	Approx. 15 days	10 miles wide × 10 miles deep, pincer attack to pinch off flanks of IS salient, approx. 75 tactical objectives (villages, hills)	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (4–5) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 5,000 maximum • Airpower and CJTF artillery managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) near FLOT	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Euphrates Wrath / Raqqa Phase 2: West	December 2016–January 2017	Approx. 30 days	40 miles wide × 20 miles deep, pincer attack to pinch off flanks of large IS salient, then penetrate and chop up into pockets, approx. 150 tactical objectives (villages, hills)	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (4–5) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 8,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTACs near FLOT	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed
Euphrates Wrath / Raqqa Phase 3: East	February–March 2017	Approx. 50 days	60 miles wide × 30 miles deep, pincer attack to pinch off flanks of very large IS salient, then penetrate and chop up into pockets, approx. 100 tactical objectives (villages, hills)	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (4–5) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 8,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTACs near FLOT • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Euphrates Wrath / Raqqa Phase 4: Tabqa	March–June 2017	Approx. 80 days, incl. 15 days of initial coup de main operations versus Tabqa Dam and bridges	Seizure of 15-mile-wide, 5-mile-deep beachhead, then exploitation across 15×15-mile area southwest of Raqqa	Deliberate attack, incl. heliborne and marine lake crossing, multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 5,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTACs near FLOT • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 200 killed
Euphrates Wrath / Raqqa Phase 5: Raqqa city	June–October 2017	Approx. 130 days	5×3 mile city	Large urban breaching assault on major IS-fortified city, including very dense IED belts	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 40,000 maximum • Airpower and CJTF artillery managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTACs near FLOT • MRAPs provided	Approx. 500 killed, mainly by sniping and IEDs

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 1	Mid-September 2017	Approx. 3 days	40-mile deep penetration, less than 20 miles wide, to the Euphrates	Rapid deep-penetrating column, bypassing populated KRV by moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 1,500 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTAC near FLOT • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 2: Conoco oil field and al-Suwar	End of September 2017	Approx. 6 days	Two narrow thrusts, one 20 miles deep and one 10 miles deep	Rapid deep-penetrating column, moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 1,500 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms and JTACs near FLOT • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 3: al-Asiyah to al-Safira	Early October 2017	Approx. 12 days	30-mile deep penetration, less than 10 miles wide, rolling southeast down the Euphrates from Raqqa	Rapid deep-penetrating column, moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 1,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 4: Pocketing desert west of KRV	Mid-October 2017	Approx. 8 days	North and south pincers, each 20 miles deep and 10 miles wide	Rapid multi-axis (2–3) deep-penetrating columns, moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 1,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 5: al-Omar oil field, pocketing the KRV	Late October 2017	Approx. 5 days	North and south pincers, each 20 miles deep and 10 miles wide, isolating KRV from rest of the Caliphate and seizing Omar oil field	Rapid multi-axis (2–3) deep-penetrating columns, moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 2,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 6: Tanak and other oil fields	Early November 2017	1 day (November 6, 2017)	Twin axis advance, each 20 miles deep and 10 miles wide	Rapid multi-axis (2–3) deep-penetrating columns, moving across desert	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 2,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 7: KRV clearance	First half of November 2017	Approx. 10 days	Twin axis advance, each 20 miles deep and 10 miles wide	Deliberate attack, multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages, consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 4,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 50 killed

Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Jazira Storm / Deir al-Zour Phase 8: Lower ERV	November and December 2017	Approx. 40 days	Patchwork of villages, 50 miles long × 10 miles wide, reaching to the Syrian-Iraqi border and skirting the main IS defended locales at Hajin and Baghuz	Deliberate multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages (with significant local diplomacy involved), consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Mix of Kobane and Jazira forces • 4,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • MRAPs provided	Unknown; likely fewer than 30 killed
Round-Up / Deir al-Zour Phase 1: Iraqi border at Tal Safuq	June 2018	Approx. 45 days	10-mile-wide, 20-mile-deep clearance of highway and adjacent villages to Iraqi border	Deliberate multi-axis (2–3) move to contact and clear villages (with significant local diplomacy involved), consolidate, repel counterattacks	• Jazira forces • 1,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • Multiple ODAs working at tactical level	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed

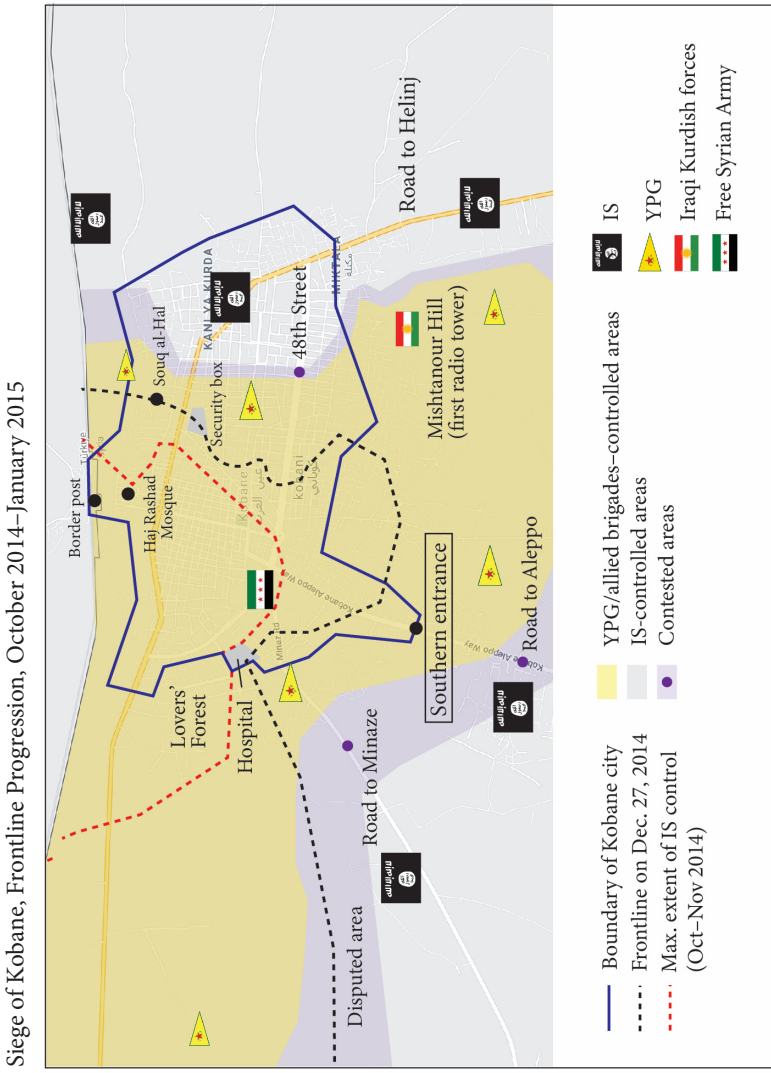
Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Round-Up / Deir al-Zour: Clear Iraqi border, Tal Safuq to the Euphrates	July–August 2018	Approx. 36 days	10-mile-wide, 100-mile-deep corridor along the Iraqi-Syrian border between Tal Safuq and the Euphrates	Deliberate multi-axis (2–3) north-to-south clearance operation, moving across desert	• Jazira forces • 2,000 maximum • Airpower managed from on-the-ground coordination rooms • Multiple ODAs working at tactical level	Unknown; likely fewer than 100 killed
Battle of Hajin	December 2018	Approx. 11 days	1-mile-wide, 10-mile-deep strip of Euphrates farmland and towns	Deliberate multi-axis (2–3) clearance operation, with heavy firepower and shoulder-to-shoulder units	• Jazira forces • 8,000 maximum • CJTF airpower and artillery managed from forward JTACs • Multiple ODAs working at tactical level	Approx. 530 fatalities

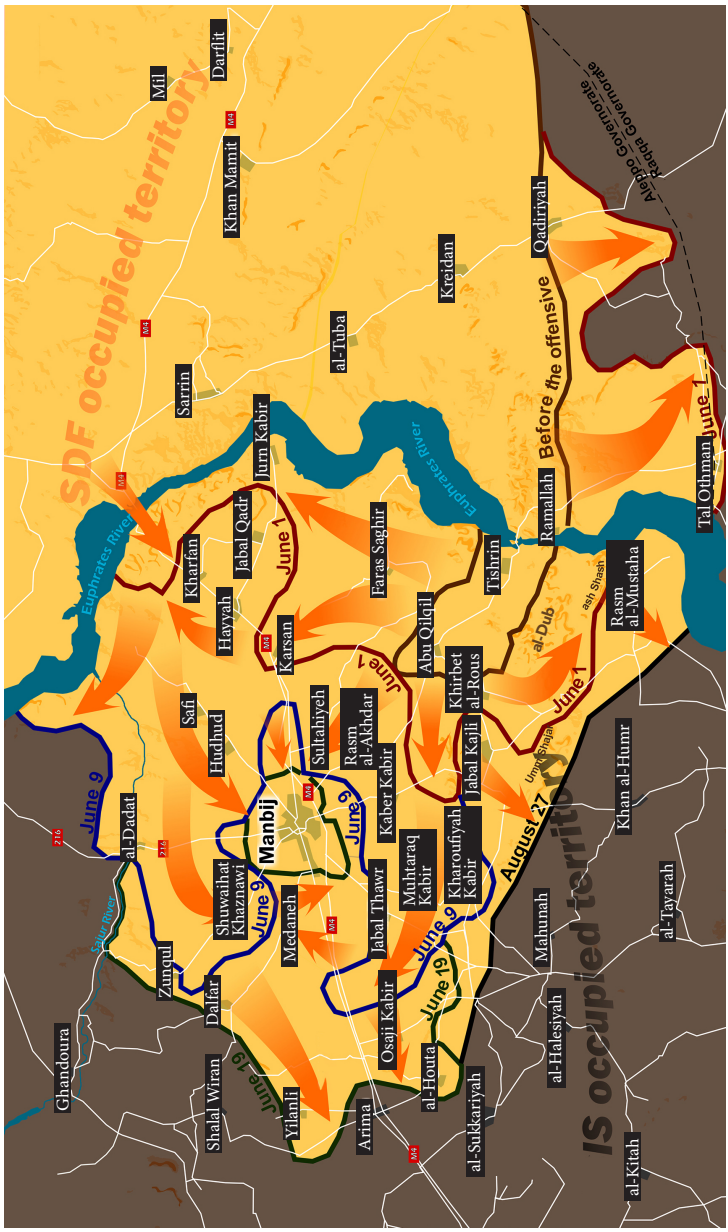
Battle name	Date	Length	Size of battle area	Type of engagement	Friendly forces	Friendly casualties
Battles of Baghuz	January–February 2019	Approx. 45 days	1-mile-wide and 5-mile-deep strip of Euphrates farmland and towns	Deliberate multi-axis (2–3) clearance operation, with heavy firepower and shoulder-to-shoulder units	• Jazira forces • 10,000 maximum • CJTF and Iraqi airpower and artillery managed from forward JTACs • Multiple ODAs working at tactical level	Approx. 280 fatalities

Annex B YPG/SDF Claimed Combat Losses in 2013–18

Category / Year	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**Total 2013–18**
YPG and SDF Martyrs (Killed)	536	1,255	1,452	1,474	2,042	2,438 (approx. 1,300 in fighting against Turkey)	6,759 (incl. approx. 1,300 in fighting against Turkey)
YPG and SDF Injured	654	1,764	1,245	1,200	2,101	3,064	10,028
Enemies ("Mercenaries") Killed	2,923	4,956	5,875	4,622	7,027	6,343	31,746
Enemies ("Mercenaries") Injured and Captured	3,012	6,753	7,809	5,673	12,000	8,123	4,3370
Liberated Land (km^2)	2,100	1,100	18,000	9,425	16,257	5,321	52,203

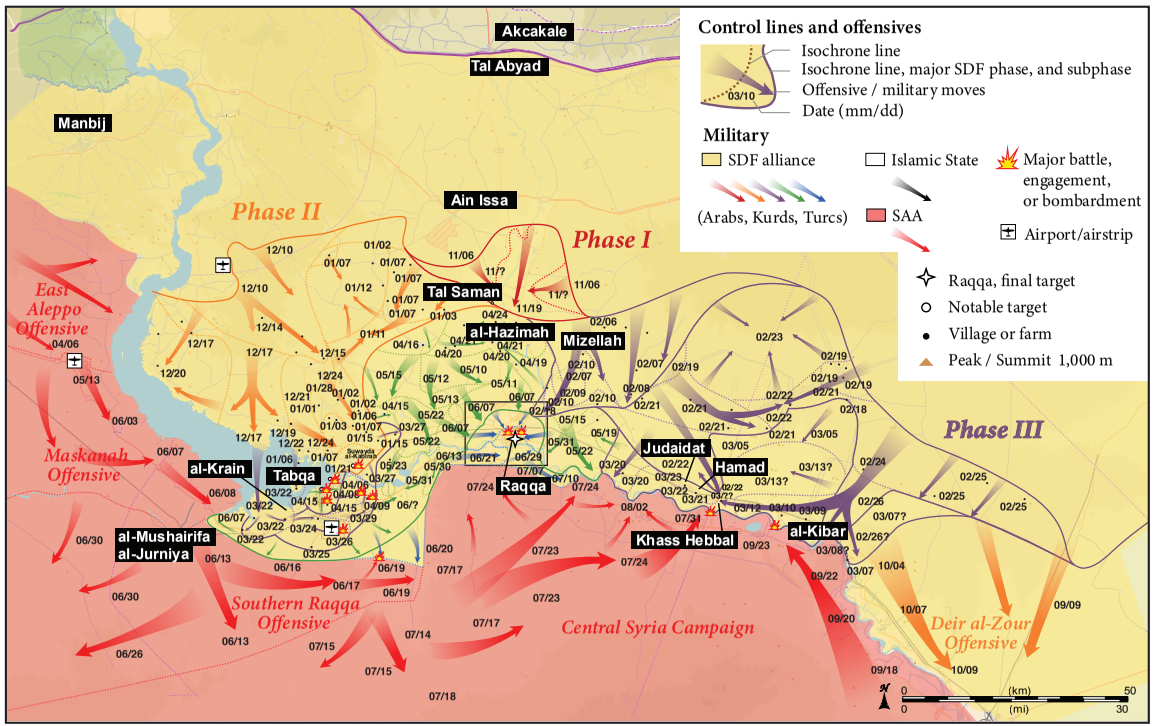
Annex C Color Maps of Military Operations: Kobane, Manbij, Raqqa, "al-Jazira Storm"



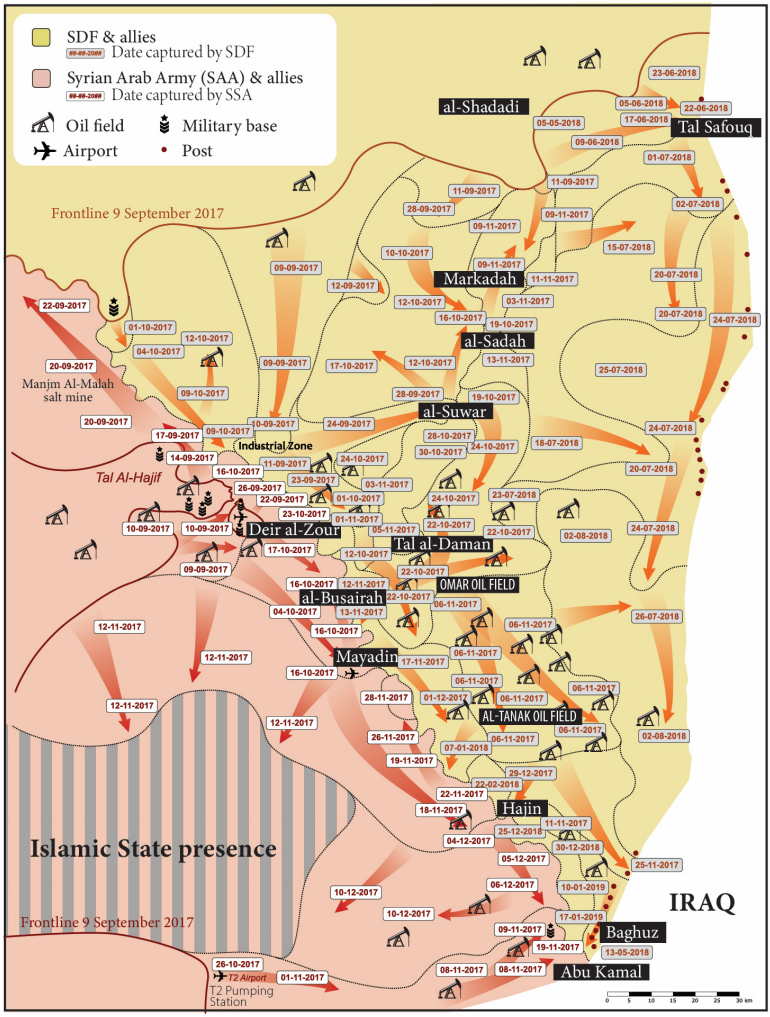


Manbij Offensive, May 31–August 27, 2016

Raqqa Campaign, November 2016



Operation "al-Jazira Storm"



"Knights and van Wilgenburg have done the best job of the many works I've seen in capturing the SDF's military sinews, campaign narrative against the Islamic State, sociology, and relations with its US counterparts. But even more, the authors understand the broader complexities of the Syria conflict within which the IS campaign was fought, and handle beautifully and accurately the geostrategic challenges with Turkey generated by the SDF-US partnership."

JAMES JEFFREY, FORMER AMBASSADOR TO IRAQ AND TURKEY, AND SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE GLOBAL COALITION TO COUNTER ISIS

The US-led effort to fight the Islamic State in northeast Syria since 2014 has been as controversial and poorly understood as it has been significant.

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. He co-authored the Institute study *Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces* (2020).

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a Dutch journalist whose writing focuses on Kurdish-related issues. He co-authored, with Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts* (2019).

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ISBN 978-0-7556-4305-9