
Kurdish-led militiamen ride atop military vehicles 17 October 2017 as they celebrate victory over the Islamic State in Raqqa, Syria. (Photo by Erik De Castro, Reuters)

# The People's Protection Units' Branding Problem

## Syrian Kurds and Potential Destabilization in Northeastern Syria

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The Syrian civil war has been one of the most destructive conflicts in recent international history. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, and even more people have been displaced from Syria. Amidst the tumult of violence, the Islamic State (IS) emerged as the most vicious strain of Islamic terrorists to date. The IS and numerous armed factions within Syria have taught the world a bloody lesson in the power of nonstate actors. Yet, ironically, a nonstate actor largely led the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in defeating the IS. Supported by the United States, the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People's Protection Units, or YPG) led Raqqa's recapture, and in demolishing the caliphate, the YPG reclaimed approximately a third of Syrian land known as the Rojava. The YPG fighters arguably have been the unsung heroes in the most recent international campaign against terror, as told by many media outlets such as CNN and *National Review*.[1] Unfortunately, these same media outlets now tell of another latent maelstrom of destruction.[2] The United States has stepped aside, enabling Turkey to invade the Kurdish Rojava region in northern Syria. While the White House vacillates between a full withdrawal and a limited one to quell a potentially resurgent IS, a secondary multination conflict is unfolding amid a wavering cease-fire and a joint Turkish-Russian agreement. Until the YPG satisfactorily distances itself from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey's view, however, mediation efforts are almost certainly doomed to fail. Shaping the YPG's messaging and dialogue with Turkey should be the Syrian Kurds' main line of effort.

## Who Are the People's Protection Units?

The YPG is the armed wing of the Syrian-based Democratic Union Party (PYD). Ethnic Kurds comprise most of its membership. Although the YPG was founded in response to the 2004 riots that took place in the Syrian city of Qamishli, the YPG gained international recognition by fighting the IS during the Syrian civil war.[3] In the process of fighting the IS between 2014 and 2016, the YPG and the Kurdish contingent writ large have come to dominate the Rojava—an area largely bordered by the Euphrates, extending through the northeastern portion of Syria (almost one-third of the country). The Rojava is a de facto autonomous region that has established a nascent liberal democracy.[4]

## Turkey's Issue with the People's Protection Units

The PYD's founding philosophy hails from Abdullah Öcalan, a Kurdish socialist-turned-federalist who founded the PKK and who was imprisoned by Turkey.[5] Turkey has designated the PKK a terrorist organization and so have the United States and the European Union. The PKK's violent separatist campaign dates to the 1980s, and since 2015, Turkey has dealt with a PKK-launched insurgency. PKK attacks have killed over forty thousand people to date.[6] The common philosophical underpinnings of the PKK and YPG as well as Turkish Kurds fighting alongside Syrian Kurds (albeit against the IS) make the YPG and the PKK interchangeable in the eyes of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In short, Erdoğan's government believes the YPG and PKK are one and the same, and for Turkey, there is little difference between "Kurdish terrorists" and the IS. As Turkey's former Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğl commented in 2015, "How can you say that [the YPG] organization is better because it's fighting [the IS]? … They are the same. Terrorists are evil. They all must be eradicated. This is what we want."[7]

The military offensive that began 9 October 2019 is not the first time Erdoğan's forces have acted against the Syrian Kurds. Despite the Kurds' large stake in the Syrian civil war, Turkey has vetoed Kurdish participation in international talks throughout the conflict in order to include Kurdish membership in the High Negotiations Committee (HNC)—the body created to represent the Syrian opposition in 2016. Considering that the Syrian Kurds comprise

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A U.S. military commander (*second from right*) walks with Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (YPG) 25 April 2017 at a YPG headquarters that was hit by Turkish airstrikes in Mount Karachok near Malikiya, Syria. (Photo by Rodi Said, Reuters)

a substantial portion of the anti-Syrian government forces, their exclusion from the committee has been particularly problematic for the negotiations process.

## Why the United States Is Involved

In the summer of 2014, the U.S. government began aiding the YPG via air support during the IS siege of Kobani.[8] U.S.-led airdrops continued through 2015. Vis-à-vis this partnership in the "global war on terror," the YPG became a nonstate proxy-extension of the U.S. fight against the IS. President Barack Obama's "Assad must go" messaging helped elevate the YPG and its partnering contingent, the SDF, to become a center of mass away from the Alawite regime during the civil war.[9] As noted, the YPG and Kurdish footprint in the Rojava autonomous region also offered a small-scale proof-of-concept that a stable democratic government could persist in the Middle East. As of 2019, the YPG's anti-IS campaign arguably has been the largest dividend derived from Capitol Hill's investment of YPG-armament and general funding.

## What does Everybody Want?

Turkey, the YPG, and the United States have differing, often conflicting, aspirations for the fate of the YPG, other Kurds in Rojava, and the region itself.

**Turkey.** As noted by Dr. Tim Cook and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), there are multiple items at play concerning Turkey's agenda.[10] Currently, there are approximately three million refugees from the Syrian civil war in Turkey.[11] Erdoğan is under a lot of domestic pressure to act. Politically, the party is much weaker than it has been in years past, having lost its majority in parliament for the first time in 2015.[12] The ruling party also suffered an unanticipated loss in the summer of 2019 in Istanbul's mayoral election.[13] As mentioned, Turkey has

dealt with various and periodic domestic terror attacks for decades to include a resurgent conflict with the PKK that has raged for the last four years. These two issues have resulted in two separate objectives. First, Turkey has an interest in "freeing up" adjacent land to return Syrian refugees in large numbers. Second, Turkey wants to remove the threat of armed Kurdish forces on its southern border. Both objectives led to the commencement of Operation Peace Spring and subsequent military operations on 9 October 2019.[14]

At the same time, Turkey feels betrayed by the United States and its public backing of the YPG. Per the CFR, there is no decisive evidence that Turkey has let go of the possibility of deposing Bashar al-Assad.[15] To this end, it is possible that Turkish forces will try moving down the Euphrates to enlist the previous members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) who have been trained by Turkey—well beyond the twenty-mile "safe zone" that Turkey and the United States have previously discussed.[16]

**YPG/Kurds in Rojava.** The CFR panel's broadcast on 10 October 2019 suggested that what the YPG and Syrian Kurds want may be straightforward enough because they face an existential threat from Turkey.[17] Accordingly, the YPG and Syrian Kurds want stability within their cities and a sense of security. This includes allowing their children to attend school and not worrying about fleeing their homes.[18] As Cook notes, it is *not* clear that the YPG (or the larger Kurdish contingent) desires a nation-state per se.[19] It has been a "nation-stateless" democracy and has functioned that way for several years.[20] This is a complicated point though, considering the various Kurdish groups that have differing interests; for instance, the Iraqi Kurds under Masoud Barzani's leadership and the 2017 Independence Referendum.[21]

The United States has long made clear that it will not intervene militarily on behalf of the Kurds, but that does not lessen the sense of betrayal felt by the YPG.[22] Currently, the Kurds are looking for anyone to defend them, regardless of who. As of the week of 14 October 2019, the Kurds found a taker: Assad. Through a deal brokered by Russia, Syria will come to the Kurds' aid, though it will likely cost the Kurds their autonomy. But as the SDF's commander in chief, Gen. Mazloum Abdi, claimed, "If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people."[23]

**The United States.** The U.S. government's interests in the region are both complex and divergent. The YPG has been an efficacious partner in fighting the IS. While the United States invested heavily in arming and training the YPG against the IS, it has suffered fewer than five American combat deaths (eleven thousand people internationally have died in the fight against the IS).[24] Despite the low casualty figure, President Donald Trump seems driven by a desire to make good on his promise to bring back American troops from foreign wars. He believes the regional countries should "fight their own wars."[25] Weeks prior to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's recent demise, Trump was willing to accept Erdoğan's message at face value: "ISIS is defeated—leave the rest to us."[26] It was only after Iraq reported that the United States could not stay in the country for a prolonged period that a small number of U.S. troops guarded the Syrian oil fields against a possible IS resurgence.[27]

Yet Congress opposes the president's decision and does not agree with abandoning the Kurds (this includes GOP lawmakers).[28] Congress does not want to repeat what it believes has been a cardinal sin of presidents past: pulling out of a conflict before the right moment only to see the advancements gained crumble. Capitol Hill also understands the importance of allies and the requisite trust that follows. The image of Trump washing his hands of the situation sends a dangerous signal to allied nations, and it is not a good look for the United States regarding countries like Israel.[29]

## Unintended Consequences

U.S. inaction coupled with Turkey's continued forward press into the Rojava region may result in various unintended consequences for all parties involved.

**A large-scale regional conflict.** If left unchanged, these groups' trajectories could cause many consequences. On 16 October 2019, the Syrian army entered Kobani to block Turkish forces from advancing.[30] In the wake of Trump's declaration of Syrian withdrawal, Turkey and Russia have come to a security agreement. The agreement gave the YPG less than one week to withdraw from the mandated safety zone, which Turkish forces now patrol. Turkey, Russia, and Syria will collectively oversee the border region.[31] However, Assad has already declared that he will regain all lost territory and has referred to Turkey's actions as an invasion. He has claimed that he is ready "to support any 'popular resistance' against Turkey's invasion 'to expel the invader sooner or later.'"[32] While Damascus is determined to regain its territory, it


A convoy of U.S. military vehicles arrives near the Iraqi Kurdish town of Bardarash in the Dohuk Governorate 21 October 2019 after withdrawing from northern Syria. (Photo by Safin Hamed, Agence France-Presse)

is not clear how Assad will handle his agreement with the Kurds in the face of Turkey's military actions. It does not seem too far-fetched to think that there could be a skirmish between Syrian and Turkish forces in the future. Russia would likely play mediator but arguably would back Assad before Erdoğan if it came down to choice. While Turkey's military may be one of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) larger forces, it is not in top condition. Thus, the military actions against the Kurds could be precarious for Turkey.[33]

**A protracted, guerrilla-based conflict.** As mentioned, it is not necessarily the goal of the YPG and Kurdish within the Rojava to become a nation-state. Turkey publicly equates the YPG with the PKK as terrorists that want to harm Turkey. But if harm is the YPG's objective, then Turkey's moves are strategically questionable. The YPG would be better positioned to attack Turkey via guerrilla warfare—the YPG is in fact more vulnerable to Turkey's reprisals within its own territory.[34] Given this potential vulnerability, a Turkish offensive may initially push the Kurds further from Turkey's borders, but Turkey could initiate the guerrilla war it seeks to avoid. Regardless, the offensive would compel the Kurds to defend themselves in some capacity. Considering the domestic pressures Erdoğan faces, there is a high likelihood that the conflict could become protracted for Turkey; this is also not a desirable outcome for its military.[35]

**A resurgence of radicals.** Radicals gaining traction within Syria is a serious concern. This is not only true of the IS but also within the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Concerning the latter, according to Cook, there are Turkish trained fighters within the FSA that the Pentagon rejected as "allies" against the IS because the FSA fighters themselves were extremist (and poorly trained).[36] If Turkey reenergizes these extremist fighter groups as they continue down the Euphrates, that energy could create more chaos and could potentially fuel renewed multiparty conflict within Syria. Concerning the IS, although it has lost its caliphate and its original

caliph, the IS still exists (reportedly as many as fourteen thousand fighters remain).[37] The U.S. withdrawal further heightens the risk of resurgence as IS forces move to exploit a power vacuum.[38] The YPG has been a major buffering force up to this point, holding approximately eleven thousand IS fighters in detention.[39] However, to U.S. allies that America no longer honors its word as it once did. Such a signaling of unreliability is bad for business. Concomitantly, the more the United States withdraws from international agreements/partnerships and weakens relationships with other states, the stronger strategic rivals like Russia and Iran (and China) become.

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between Turkey conducting an offensive and the YPG focused on asking Assad for sanctuary (and fleeing), it calls into question who will be left to target the IS head on. It is possible that Syria could take on the role of the United States as financier for the YPG's anti-IS campaign but that is far from certain.

**Declining partnerships and emboldened competitors of the United States.** In the short run, the moves thus far by the United States have strained relations with both its nonstate and major allies. The United States arguably abandoned the YPG for sake of a NATO partner. In the process of Turkey's escalating actions toward the Kurds, the United States then threatened Turkey with economic sanctions, putting serious strain on the relationship between the two countries. Seemingly, the United States has damaged both relationships and gained little in return (the fractured cease-fire does not instill a sense of hope or goodwill).

The long run could have more troubling strategic implications. For instance, officials such as Ambassador Dan Shapiro have already questioned whether the decision to withdraw from Syria and stand aside while Turkey crushes the Kurdish forces will weaken Israel's confidence in its longtime Western partner.[40] The question stands for other U.S. allies as well.[41] Abruptly announcing U.S. withdrawal from Syria has been one of many moves on behalf of Trump's "America First" strategy. It is possible that the Trump administration is expending unrenewable social capital vis-à-vis NATO and other U.S. allies. Announcing a withdrawal from Syria accompanies other relatively recent U.S. "back outs" such as the exiting the climate accords and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. One cannot help but wonder if this signals

## Multiple Compatible Interests; One Major Nonstarter

Examining the interests of Turkey, the United States, and the YPG more closely reveals that they are not mutually exclusive.

- Turkey (Erdoğan) wants to quell terrorism, transfer Syrian refugees back to Syria, and be seen domestically as actively promoting Turkish interests.
- The YPG and Kurds want security and stability under their own autonomy (though they are willing to compromise autonomy for security in the face of genocide).
- The U.S. government wants to please the American public by making good on bringing troops home and "getting out of foreign wars."
- Congress wants to honor the treaty between NATO partners but does not want to abandon the in-country ally that has been most effective at defeating the IS (nor allow for the IS's resurgence). Capitol Hill is also very sensitive to strained tensions between the United States and its allies abroad. Finally, the United States does not want to continue allowing Syria and Russia to come away as the sole "winners" in the region.

None of these interests are necessarily mutually exclusive. Some require a good deal of compromise (largely from the Kurds), but the Kurds are at a point where compromise is favorable to destruction. As Abdi stated, allying with Assad is a strong signal from the YPG that it is willing to do whatever is necessary to prevent destruction of the Kurds.[42] However, as mentioned earlier, Turkey does not differentiate between the YPG and PKK. Until Erdoğan's party has a politically acceptable off ramp to

make such a distinction, many of these compatible interests are moot points because they are *not* compatible with Turkey, thus equating the YPG to a terrorist organization. Understanding why this is the case requires a deeper understanding of how Kurdish issues have become an existential threat for Erdoğan.

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## The Kurdish Issue: A Closer Look at Erdoğan's Existential Threat

Between 2013 and 2015, the Turkish-PKK conflict had reached a pseudo-abeyance. Erdoğan's administration hosted the PYD in Turkey's capital to discuss border stability and court as an ally against Assad.[43] However, this signaling toward a truce did not last. As Max Hoffman from the Center for American Progress (an independent policy institute) highlights, several manifested factors led Erdoğan into an intractable position on the Kurdish issue.[44] First, the more powerful the U.S.-supported YPG became, the more the PYD became a threat in Erdoğan's view. At the same time, the Kurdish People's Democratic Party within Turkey (HDP) was able to better mobilize toward the end of this two-year respite.[45] The HDP platform includes stark opposition to the power-monopolized presidency Erdoğan has been engineering for himself. This gave Erdoğan not only a growing concern across the border but also two concerns domestically—the HDP and the PKK. These concerns compounded with a lack of Turkish support toward the YPG, and violence soon erupted once more within Turkey due to Kurdish protests.[46]

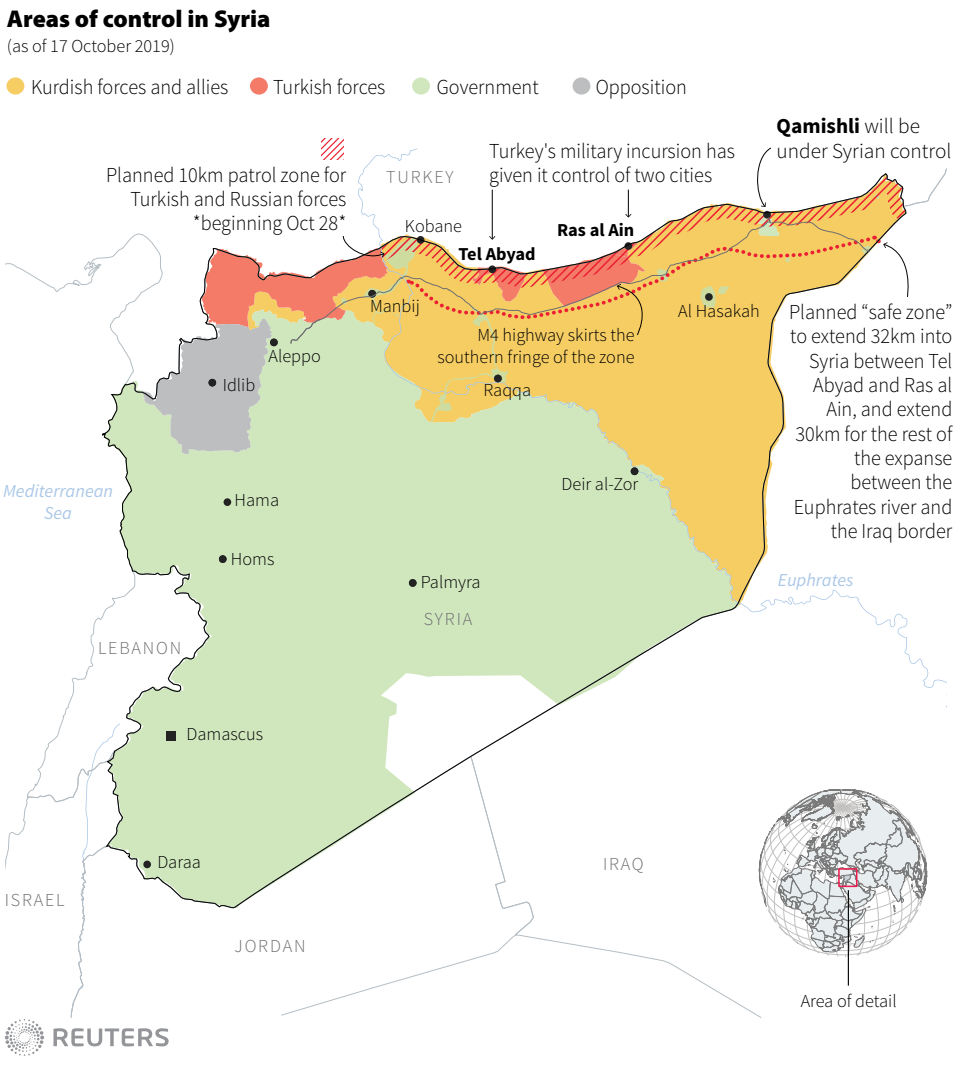
Erdoğan is up for reelection in 2023 and needs to consolidate his coalition to ensure reelection. With these recent moves, Erdoğan may be reaching out to right-wing nationalists who hold strong anti-Kurdish views.[47] Equating the People's Democratic Party to the Kurdistan Worker's Party gives Erdoğan's government two political dividends. First, linking terrorism to political expression permanently sidelines the Kurdish effort, which in part strengthens Erdoğan's supporters' platform. Second, if Erdoğan's supporters are strengthened, then so too are Erdoğan's prospects of reelection. This point is worth considering further because it suggests that there are other political motivations that explain Erdoğan's government's "inability" to make a distinction between the PYD and PKK. Political stability and regional stability are of equal import for Erdoğan. Moreover, internal state stability likely requires Erdoğan "to manage factions within the state security apparatus that favor a hardline response" against any of the Kurdish contingents that are within Turkey's realm.[48]

Separatism continues to be a concern for Ankara. It is a phenomenon the Turkish government feels transcends borders. On 22 October 2019, Erdoğan gave the Syrian Kurds a final warning to vacate prior to the end of the cease fire, referring to them as "separatists."[49]

The United States fails to properly understand these issues between Turkey and the Kurds. The United States has not acknowledged that the Kurds, both domestically and across the border, are an existential threat to Erdoğan's government. Accordingly, the likelihood is small that Turkey ceases hostilities even if the "safe zone" is vacated.

## Changing the Tide

It may not be too late to stop the unfolding conflict in its tracks. However, it almost certainly requires the PYD and YPG to do some unsavory politicking. Ankara has been willing to settle peacefully before, but now the government is backed into a corner in a fight for political support toward 2023. Erdoğan needs an off-ramp that allows his party to court the Nationalist Movement Party and maintain a hard line against the PKK. The PYD and YPG contingents need to completely and unequivocally sever ties with the PKK. Disavowing any association or support of the PKK and publicly labeling it as a terrorist organization may give Erdoğan the room he needs to maneuver in order to de-escalate the situation. Consider that in 2017, the United States entreated the YPG to change its name and branding because of its assumed close association with the PKK.[50] While this branding change did




(Figure by P. K. Dutta and B. Simon, 23 October 2019; sources: Carter Center, Natural Earth, and Reuters)

## Turkey's Incursion in Northeastern Syria

Turkey aims to establish a "safe zone" along most of its southern border that runs roughly 30 km into Syria so that it can settle up to two million Syrian refugees there. Under its "Operation Peace Spring," Turkey struck a deal with Moscow to clear the area of Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which were long U.S. allies but which Ankara deems a terrorist group.

not go far, it does show that the YPG's "branding issue" has been identified as a problem before. Of course, this time there is now a lot more at stake.

The entire situation discussed thus far puts the Syrian Kurds in a hard place, though. To ask one group of Kurds to forsake another is a tall order. However, given the dire nature of the Syrian Kurds' situation and their current willingness to treat with Assad's government (of all entities), they may be willing to compromise. They too are facing their own existential threat. Prior to Trump's withdrawal announcement, the U.S. administration may likely have been in an opportune place to pressure the Syrian Kurdish leadership toward eschewing all association with the PKK in a rebranding effort. While this is no longer the case, U.S. forces still have close ties with YPG leaders, and a credible offer of U.S. assistance to help mediate an off-ramp from the current conflict might be accepted, if not welcomed. The United States also has the advantage of playing interlocutor with Ankara. Russia is another possible mediating entity, but it is in the United States' best interest to make the first attempt at starting a dialogue and to stymie further Russian influence in the region.

Even if all the Syrian Kurds vacate the safety zone, the most fundamental and underlying issue is not addressed. So long as the PYD and PKK are one and the same in Ankara's public view, Turkey's political objective to eradicate them is not so easily extinguished. By publicly renouncing the PKK (and perhaps leveraging backdoor talks through the United States), the PYD puts Turkey in an interesting political position. Erdoğan has been spared a large amount of domestic ridicule within Turkey concerning the Syrian Kurds because he has been able to color the Kurds in terms of terrorism and insurgency (and thus downplay Turkey's actions against them). But if the Syrian Kurds

Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish soldiers watch 12 October 2019 as smoke billows from the border town of Ras al-Ain as Turkey and its allies continued their assault on Kurdish-held border towns in northeastern Syria. (Photo by Nazeer Al-khatib, Agence France-Presse)

take the initiative and force an internationally acknowledged schism with the PKK, Erdoğan may not be able to deal with them so draconically. The current international narrative has focused more on the United States abandoning the Kurds as former allies—not that the Syrian Kurds are wrongfully pursued as a terrorist organization. Those two narratives are importantly distinct. For the Syrian Kurds' dilemma, the latter is much more important than the former. However, if a protracted regional conflict results, then the increase of international coverage ensues. That is a bad headache for Erdoğan, and the Turkish people may not have an appetite for that media-induced stress, given the internal stress already caused by the Syrian civil war.

It is prudent to mention that there is a line of thinking within some policy circles that are somewhat in tune with Erdoğan's accusations of YPG terrorism. Some commentators at both the Carnegie Endowment for Peace and the International Crisis Group claim that the PKK and YPD/YPG are more closely aligned than other scholars and commentators describe.[51] This includes claims that the PYD was established by PKK members in 2003 (coming from the Qandil Mountains), northern Syria is a "recruiting ground" for the PKK, and the decision-making contingent of the PYD (and thus, the YPG) are in fact influenced and consulted by PKK members.[52]

If these are well-founded facts, then simply exchanging one name tag for another may not be enough to do the trick for the Syrian Kurds. However, there are two major counterpoints to these assertions. First, some aspects of these assessments are based off a relatively small sample of interviews.[53] While information from an interview is a valid data point, there are other data points from other scholars' research that differ in messaging (for instance, at the Council on Foreign Relations as referenced earlier).[54] Greater current ties to PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan's ideology may not be all that problematic, considering that Öcalan no longer supports a central nation-state (as Elizabeth Tsurkov and Esam al-Hassan of the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace discuss).[55] What these interviews illustrate is that opinions vary on how the Kurds should approach governing within the Rojava region. While there may be some elements of discord between the PYD and the Arabs who live in the Rojava region, such disagreements are not necessarily leading to large-scale repression (e.g., antibigamy laws are not enforced in regions that include an Arab majority).[56] Scholars like Tsurkov and al-Hassan do make a valid point though: the PYD should empower not only the Kurdish contingents within the Rojava but also the Arabs to follow self-administration. Explicit cooperation across ethnicities can only strengthen the PYD's and YPG's marketing efforts.

Second, even if at one time there were closer ties between the PKK and PYD than originally thought, it does not change the fact that the Syrian Kurds should drastically change their platform and messaging *now*. Even authors at the International Crisis Group and Carnegie Middle East Center who group the PYD close to the PKK recommend that the Syrian Kurds should avoid supporting PKK violence and note that the Iraqi Kurdish contingent has no appetite for PKK-affiliated groups spilling over into their territory.[57] There is no disagreement here. In fact, these suggestions are completely in line with the recommendations of this article.

## Concluding Thoughts

It is ultimately in Erdoğan's interest to find a more moderate approach to the Kurdish issues. Erdoğan wants a powerful regional foothold for Turkey in addition to a powerful presidency. Yet, there is precedent for both regional and international pressure toward Turkey vis-à-vis the PKK.[58] The PYD is fast becoming a contender for inclusion as a regional chess piece in protracted conflict. If the PYD grants Erdoğan a politically acceptable off-ramp concerning hostilities that Ankara can take, then Syria (and Russia) lose out on a lever to potentially manipulate Turkey. That also gives Erdoğan a win.

The bottom line is that a drawn-out conflict with the YPG prolongs the duration of border instability. Stabilizing the border will allow the three million refugees (arguably a greater strain on Turkey than the Kurds) to return to Syria more quickly—a larger political win for Erdoğan. But that conflict cannot be quelled until Turkey no longer has the excuse to equate the PYD with the PKK. Admittedly, it delays solving the conflict with the PKK, which needs a peaceful solution as well. However, the PKK issue does not have the regional spillover that the PYD conflict does. Therefore, Ankara should aim to solve the Syrian-based one first. ■

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