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The Kurds play a key role in the war against the Islamic State as they are located on the periphery of the jihadist organization's two de-facto capitals, Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. As a result, both Western states and Russia are courting the Kurds since they do not want to put boots on the ground. However, Turkey has opposed both possible Russian and Western support for the People's Protection Units (Yekineyên Parastina Gel—YPG), a Syrian Kurdish defense force. Turkey also fundamentally opposes the creation of a Kurdish statelet along its Syrian border. Despite this, the mutual interest of the Kurds and the West to contain the Islamic State has brought them closer together.

YPG and Peshmerga Forces

The main Kurdish militias are the Peshmerga forces led by Kurdistan Regional Government president Masoud Barzani in Iraq and the YPG militia in Syria, which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK) and designated by the United States and 40 other countries as a terrorist organization. There are over 160,000 Peshmerga forces patrolling a border of 1,600 kilometers with the Islamic state ([Rudaw](#), September 11; [Rudaw](#), November 25, 2014). The Peshmerga forces already control over 95 percent of the territory that they say they want to hold after capturing the city Sinjar on November 12 ([KRG](#) cabinet, April 6). The YPG, on the other hand, constitutes a fighting force of approximately 50,000 fighters that controls most of the Syrian-Turkish border apart from a 90-kilometer line between Azaz and Jarabulus and territories in Idlib and Latakia Governorates ([al-Jazeera](#), June 28).

The Islamic State sees both the YPG and Peshmerga as its most important adversaries on the ground. Its English magazine Dabiq also mentions that the PKK, which it refers to as the same organization as the YPG, and the Peshmerga are the biggest allies of the United States on the ground in Iraq and Syria. [1] The enmity of the Islamic State toward Kurdish militia groups is related to the fact that the Kurds are the biggest recipients of U.S.-led coalition support in both Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State launched its biggest attack on Iraqi Kurds in August 2014, while its main attack on the YPG was on the Syrian city of Kobane in September 2014 ([al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), August 6, 2014; [Rudaw](#), November 23). Both battles led the U.S.-led coalition to give Kurdish forces air cover to contain the Islamic State, enabling them both to inflict huge casualties on the jihadist organization in Syria and Iraq. In Kobane alone, the Islamic State reportedly lost at least 5,000 fighters ([Daily Beast](#), November 18). Moreover, the Peshmerga recently cut IS supply lines between Mosul and Raqqa by capturing Highway 47 and the city of Sinjar on November 12 in just two days ([Rudaw](#), November 12). The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces have also shown an interest in assisting future Iraqi Army operations in Mosul; however, they do not want to occupy the city because they fear an Arab backlash ([Basnews](#), November 30).

Furthermore, the Kurdish-inflicted losses on the Islamic State could push the organization to shift its focus from the "near enemy" to the "far enemy" by attacking Western countries in the "heart of crusader" territory. [2] An example is the November 13 Paris attack that overshadowed the Islamic State's loss of Sinjar the previous day. The weakening of the Islamic State's narrative of *baqiya wa tatamadad* (remaining and expanding) prompts them to expand in new territories in North Africa and Asia, and carry out attacks against the "far enemy."

The YPG, Turkey and Future Operations

Although the Iraqi Kurds have secured most of their goals, the Syrian Kurds have not, as they cannot connect the territories of Kobane and Efrin due to Turkish opposition. Any attempt by the YPG to take the city of Jarabulus and link these two regions would invite cross-border fire from Turkey ([Now Lebanon](#), October 26). For Turkey, it is more important to prevent the Kurds from capturing the Syrian territory stretching from Azaz in the west to Jarabulus in the east. Turkey fears a viable united Kurdish statelet along its border, which could be used by the PKK in the future for recruits ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 17). This fear is heightened after clashes restarted between the PKK and the Turkish state in July 2015, ending the peace process. Therefore, Turkey has proposed a safe zone in this border area in order to prevent YPG advances ([Yeni Safak](#), September 2).

However, the Russian-backed Bashar al-Assad regime has advanced in Aleppo, and IS has threatened to capture Azaz, which could leave the YPG as the only viable alternative to IS along the Syrian-Turkish border ([Now](#), December 2). If IS does capture Azaz, Turkey's plan for a "safe zone" would be finished. This might prompt Turkey to provide more support to rebels along its border or carry out more attacks on Islamic State positions near the border

Russia, Turkey and the Kurds

The intervention of Russia on the behalf of the al-Assad regime in late September and Turkey downing a Russian jet on November 24 has complicated the situation ([Daily Sabah](#), Nov 24). Clashes have occurred between Turkish-backed rebels and YPG-allied FSA-rebels in northern Aleppo. The FSA and Islamist rebels accuse the YPG and its allies of receiving Russian air support, while the YPG accuses them of working with Turkey to orchestrate attacks on Kurds ([Now](#), December 2; [Hawar News](#), December 1). This has led to worsened relations between Syrian opposition groups and the Kurds in Aleppo.

The tensions between Russia and Turkey could lead Russia to back the Syrian Kurds in their attempt to take the border strip of Jarabulus to Azaz in order to take revenge on Turkey ([Pravda](#), December 2). However, the YPG and Russia differ over their approach to Bashar al-Assad. The YPG is neutral toward al-Assad, but refuses to back his indefinite stay in power, suggesting that al-Assad has to go in the long term in order for the YPG to work with Russia ([Sputniknews](#), November 30; [Al-Monitor](#), October 1). Russians still prefer for al-Assad to stay.

The YPG most likely wants to maintain its neutrality towards both al-Assad and the opposition because it fears that it could lose its support from the U.S.-led coalition. However, the YPG would prefer for both Russia and the United States to work together against the Islamic State. The Kurdish militia could be tempted to use Russia's air cover against FSA rebels and the Islamic State in order to connect its territories if the Kurdish enclave of Efrin in Aleppo faces more danger from Turkish-backed rebel groups.

Raqqa and Hasakah

Currently, the YPG is focusing on Raqqa and Hasakah in order to attain more Western support and to work with Arab and Christian groups so as to control ethnically diverse Arab-Kurdish areas. For this purpose, they formed a joint FSA-YPG operations room in September 2014 that attained coalition support following the IS attack on Kobane. After liberating the city from the Islamic State in January, the YPG managed to capture the Arab majority town of Tal Abyad in June ([YPG Rojava](#), June 16).

Currently, the FSA militias in the joint operations room has several checkpoints 50 kilometers from Raqqa. They are part of a newly formed Syrian Arab coalition allied to the YPG that has received ammunition from the United State to fight against the Islamic State in Raqqa ([Hurriyet](#), November 11). This coalition consists of members of the Shammar tribe in al-Hasakah Governorate and smaller FSA groups and tribes from Raqqa and Deir al-Zor governorates near Raqqa and Kobane. To support this alliance, the United States has deployed 50 special forces soldiers to Kobane to train the Arab and Kurdish forces who are intended to attack Raqqa ([AFP](#), November 27).

To take it a step further, the YPG and its allies set up the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a newly created alliance to receive more support from the West, on October 15 with a smaller Arab and Christian groups that already has made several advances ([YPGRojava](#), October 16). This is in anticipation of further peace talks for a Syrian transition between major stakeholders. The SDF says that it is both an alternative to the Syrian regime and jihadist groups, and that it can provide a template for a federal democratic Syria ([Hawar News](#), November 30). In its first operation, launched on October 31, the SDF managed to advance more than 900 square kilometers, capturing al-Hawl and marching on toward al-Shadadi ([Twitter](#), December 2; [Qasioun](#), November 15).

The goal of the YPG is to secure its territory in al-Hasakah Governorate from future Islamic State attacks by securing the Syrian-Iraqi border near Sinjar, Iraq to the Jabal Abdal Aziz Mountains in southwestern portion of the Syrian governorate. However, tensions with Turkish-backed Syrian rebel groups in northern Aleppo could damage relations between Arab rebel groups and the YPG in the future.

Conclusion

The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces have so far secured over 95 percent of the territory that they wanted to capture in Iraq, and will assist Iraqi forces when they capture Mosul. In Syria, Turkey opposes any further advances from the YPG along the Jarabulus-Azaz border strip. As a result, the YPG has focused its operations more on Raqqa and al-Hasakah to the south so as to receive more Western support. The Russian operations in Aleppo in support of Bashar al-Assad, and the refusal of Turkey to prevent Kurdish forces from advancing across the Syrian border, could push the YPG to pick a side. The different goals of the different actors could further complicate the policies of the U.S. administration, but this also depends on developments on the ground.

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Notes

1. "Just Terror," Dabiq, Issue 12, November 18, 2015, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-12e280b3.pdf>.
2. *Ibid.*