



# The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria

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## *Executive Summary*

Six years into Syria's civil war, the military and political map in the north has been dramatically redrawn. The most dynamic local actors, the political affiliates of the Iraq-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey – the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Democratic Union Party (PYD) – control major portions of the Syria-Turkey border, have announced a federal region and established local rule. But YPG military success is hitting significant geopolitical and demographic barriers, placing the PKK before a stark choice: continue to subordinate its Syria project to its fight against Turkey or prioritise more Kurdish self-rule in Syria. Given recent regional realignments, the latter option is best: for the YPG-PYD to become what it professes to be: a Syrian Kurdish party ideologically linked to the PKK and its founder, Abdullah Öcalan (imprisoned in Turkey), but operationally detached. Turkey's 25 April attacks on PKK bases in northern Syria and northern Iraq augur dangerous escalation of its conflict. To avoid this, other actors, notably the U.S., should tailor their assistance to the YPG-PYD to promote that objective.

After the PKK deployed cadres in Syria in July 2012, it cooperated with the West in fighting the Islamic State (ISIS), advancing westward from the majority-Kurdish districts of Jazeera and Kobani in north-eastern Syria to the majority-Kurdish district of Afrin north of Aleppo. By seeking to create this land bridge, the PKK and its affiliates had a dual objective: to control a contiguous militarised belt along the Syria-Turkey border and establish what they call democratic self-administration comprising both Kurdish and non-Kurdish communities. When the YPG, under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), took the majority-Arab city of Manbij in August 2016, it appeared close to realising its strategic goals.

Today, however, regional realignments are stymying the YPG-PYD ambitions and rendering the PKK's twin objectives incompatible. Since mid-2015, after a Turkey-PKK ceasefire broke down, Ankara has worked to strangle the YPG-PYD-run region. Its rapprochement with Moscow enabled Turkish troops to enter Syria in August 2016 without fear of Russian or regime airstrikes (Operation "Euphrates Shield"). Fighting beside Syrian rebel allies, their aim was to defeat ISIS, but especially, to halt the YPG's expansion west of the Euphrates. In February 2017, they succeeded, leaving the YPG surrounded and dependent on Damascus for movement between majority-Kurdish districts. Meanwhile, because the PKK views northern Syria essentially as a recruiting ground and potentially a launching pad for attacks in Turkey, with local governance not worth heavily investing in, those, especially in the YPG-PYD, willing to consider a Syrian solution have been unable to strike local roots or set up governing institutions with broad legitimacy.

For the YPG's self-rule project to survive, overcome the embargo on it and cease relying on the regime, it will need support from more powerful outside actors. Yet, finding a reliable protector will be challenging. The most capable candidates are Russia and the U.S.; the YPG has forged relations with both, but they may prove fickle friends. Moscow's top priority remains the Assad regime's survival and recovery of sovereignty. It also appears to prize rapprochement with Turkey. At this rate, the YPG-PYD may soon become a victim of a Russian change of heart.

That leaves the U.S. The question is whether the YPG-PYD and PKK leadership are agile enough to correct course to help their Syrian self-rule project survive. If the former want the U.S. to give longer-term guarantees and commit against abandonment to Turkey, the Syrian regime or both, the PKK almost certainly must adjust to allow Washington to do so without imperilling its Turkish ties. The most effective means would be a return to a Turkey-PKK ceasefire and peace talks. But this does not appear realistic in the short term.

Instead, while the U.S. still needs the YPG to fulfil its anti-ISIS objectives, the PKK should ask Washington to mediate a compromise with its Kurdish rivals in northern Syria and northern Iraq. As part of such a deal:

- ❑ the PKK and its affiliates would agree to withdraw from Sinjar just inside Iraq in exchange for the Iraqi Kurdish authorities fully opening the Syria-Iraq border to trade. While Sinjar does not directly relate to developments in northern Syria, the U.S. could help de-escalate a local conflict there between two groups with which it has close ties, the YPG and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party. This may not be sufficient to also de-escalate tensions in northern Syria, but it could be a critical first step that is relatively more doable;
- ❑ in northern Syria, the PKK would forego ambition to connect the two eastern majority-Kurdish districts with Afrin and allow the YPG-PYD to seek a Syrian solution for Syrian Kurds. This would entail diluting its political dominance by giving other Kurdish and non-Kurdish parties a viable local governance role, especially in budget management and appointing senior officials, and removing the YPG from governing responsibility. This could render the one-party YPG-PYD "democratic self-administration" less undemocratic; and
- ❑ the YPG should refrain from actively supporting PKK violence in Turkey, whether through arms supplies or providing personnel and tactical skills, and establish an SDF military operations room through which both YPG and non-YPG commanders can interact with the U.S.

In return, the U.S. would:

- ❑ coordinate with, and give military aid and advice through, the SDF operations room to be established by the YPG; recruit and train local fighters exclusively through the SDF; give stabilisation support and reconstruction funds to local administrations in Jazeera and Kobani, provided the PYD makes its rule more inclusive, as stated above; and support the PYD's bid to be included at the Geneva negotiations along with other Syrian Kurdish parties; and
- ❑ continue patrols in the YPG-PYD self-rule area east of the Euphrates instituted following the 25 April 2017 Turkish air strikes there, and commit to using influence with Ankara to prevent further Turkish attacks in that area. The latter entails exchanging assurances with Ankara that YPG-PYD rule in Syria is indeed being diluted as described.

Jointly, these efforts could improve YPG-PYD chances to set up a workable governance structure and build alternative trade routes not dependent on Damascus; transform its military role from servicing the PKK's anti-Turkey agenda to a legitimate effort to protect the northern Syrian populations in the absence of central-state control; gain some outside protection; and potentially help give the PYD a role in Syria peace talks and drafting of a new constitution.

The U.S. should have a powerful interest in pursuing this: under the current trajectory, its efforts to defeat ISIS in Raqqa risk being complicated; the Turkey-PKK conflict could be pushed into new theatres, with risks to wider regional stability; and the U.S.-Turkey partnership could be compromised.

As long as the PKK requires its offshoots to prioritise fighting Turkey, it stands to lose much if not all that the YPG has gained in northern Syria. If it allows its local affiliates to strike roots in Syria in a way both acceptable and meaningful to the diverse population, it has some hope, however narrow, of turning a new page.

**Ankara/Qamishli/Brussels, 4 May 2017**

# The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria

## I. Introduction

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In an apparent deal negotiated between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) and Iran in 2011, Syria, preoccupied with fighting off a well-armed insurgent challenge, partially retreated from Kurdish-populated areas in July 2012. This allowed the PKK to send its fighters from its Qandil stronghold in northern Iraq into northern Syria, thus improving its strategic position while suffering heavy losses fighting the Turkish army inside Turkey. By opening a second front, it was able to apply new military and political pressure on Ankara through its Syrian affiliates, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), while pursuing an old ambition to connect the region's three non-contiguous majority-Kurdish districts of Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin. In 2013, as the PKK and Turkey agreed a ceasefire and began political talks, the YPG-PYD set up a "democratic self-administration" there, calling it Rojava ("Western Kurdistan").<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in towns along the Euphrates Valley, immediately adjacent to and in one case bisecting Kurdish areas, and the effort by a new U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS gave the YPG-PYD a chance to extend its territorial reach east and west of the river and create a contiguous entity. By the first half of 2015, the YPG had connected Jazeera and Kobani districts across Arab-inhabited areas, including the border town of Tel Abyad. Benefitting from U.S. air support, it then pushed west toward, and eventually across, the Euphrates into areas where ISIS was ensconced. By August 2016, YPG flags flew along most of Syria's northern border with Turkey except for a nearly 100km stretch that remained under either Syrian anti-regime rebel or ISIS control.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of the PKK's Syria adventure exceeded its expectations. Military success put further pressure on Turkey and enabled the YPG-PYD to build out its autonomy scheme. In March 2016, it announced a "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" that incorporated local communities – Kurds, Arabs and smaller minorities – in a large contiguous swathe of parts of Hasaka, Raqqqa and Aleppo governorates, as well

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the PKK, PYD and YPG, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°s 136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013; and 151, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 8 May 2014.

<sup>2</sup> In February-July 2015, YPG forces advanced into the Arab-populated areas of Tel Abyad (Raqqqa governorate), Tel Hamis and Tel Brak (both in Hasaka governorate), controlling an area of over 18,000km<sup>2</sup> and connecting Jazeera and Kobani districts. In November 2015, they moved further into Hasaka's Arab hinterland, seizing Al-Hol and, in February 2016, Shaddadi. That same month, the YPG crossed the Euphrates in an attempt to connect Kobani and Afrin. This extended its overall territorial control to 32,000km<sup>2</sup>. Crisis Group interview, NGO official travelling in Syria, Istanbul, April 2016. By August, it had also taken the predominantly Arab town of Manbij in Aleppo governorate and was eyeing Al-Bab as the last obstacle to its ultimate objective. At that point, it ran into a Turkish counteroperation, "Euphrates Shield", to block its progress. This fight is ongoing.

as Afrin, which the group controlled but could not attach to its other territory.<sup>3</sup> The group's numbers also increased. As it advanced into Arab areas, it began recruiting local men whom it placed under the umbrella of a group it called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it established in October 2015 and commanded.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, questions about PKK priorities, objectives and structure, which had simmered since its foundation, resurfaced. Should it continue to focus on Turkey? Or should it permit its Syrian affiliates to set their own priorities autonomously and forge a primarily Syrian solution to the Kurdish question there?

This report, Crisis Group's fourth on the Kurds in northern Syria, argues that Turkey-focused PKK-trained commanders have inclined the YPG less toward a Syrian solution to the Kurdish question in Syria and more to the PKK's struggle against the Turkish state. This makes YPG-PYD self-rule in northern Syria, under whatever name, more precarious and PKK-dependent. PKK-ordered military moves alienate the YPG-PYD from Kurdish society it wants to govern by militarising youth and antagonising the educated middle class and non-Kurdish groups it controls. This reduces its prospects for broader legitimacy. Moreover, the more the YPG-PYD acts as an outgrowth of the PKK and its strategy, the more it will provoke regional players and prompt attempts to throttle its self-administration.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Washington Post*, 24 March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In October 2015, the YPG, with U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition support, announced creation of the SDF (Quwwat Suriya al-Dimuqratiya), an alliance of non-Kurdish fighters (Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmen) in addition to the YPG, which retained overall command and control.

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## **II. Inside the PKK's Syria Adventure**

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### *A. Competing Priorities*

The conflict in Syria revived an old PKK dilemma. Established as an underground leftist party in 1978, the PKK saw Turkey – the country with the largest Kurdish population and its birthplace – as the primary arena for carrying out its agenda through military struggle.<sup>5</sup> Its objective was not Kurdish autonomy but Marxist-inspired social reform in which it called on Kurds and non-Kurds to participate. In 2003, possibly in response to the U.S. Iraq invasion and Iraqi Kurds' ascendancy, it announced it was changing its objectives from a military struggle against Turkey to Kurdish self-determination in the four main countries with Kurdish populations. To this end, it created branches in each of these neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

This shift produced two complementary goals. PKK-affiliated branches outside Turkey began laying the foundations for local Kurdish self-rule, inspired by theories of "democratic self-administration" introduced by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's founder. This allowed the group to operate across the region, using its presence in each Kurdish community as a resource for its paramount insurgency in Turkey. Regional branches were not autonomous. Decision-making and appointments to branch leadership remained in PKK hands via a new organ, the Union of Kurdish Communities (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), whose executive council (its highest decision-making organ) comprised only PKK-trained military cadres and served as the spearhead of the party's activities in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

This inherent strategic tension persisted in internal PKK debate from 2003 onward and sprang to the surface following the 2011 Syrian uprising and outbreak of civil war. The movement took advantage of regional polarisation between the Syrian regime's backers and foes and renewed Ankara-Damascus tensions to harness its Syrian affiliates to a new strategy attuned to the evolving situation.

Though no hard evidence has surfaced of a deal, at least three events suggest the PKK realigned itself with the Syrian regime and its external backers, most importantly Iran, against Turkey. In September 2011, the PKK's Iranian offshoot, the Kurdish Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), implemented a unilateral ceasefire after years of battle that largely remains in place except for occasional

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<sup>5</sup> While there are no accurate figures regarding the number and percentage of Kurds in the Middle East, Turkey is estimated to host the largest group, fifteen million. Iran has ten million, Iraq eight million and Syria three million. See "The Kurdish Population", Institut Kurde de Paris, [www.institutkurde.org/en/info/the-kurdish-population-1232551004](http://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/the-kurdish-population-1232551004).

<sup>6</sup> In 2003, the PKK created the Kurdish Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran, a military-political organisation to fight the Iranian government. In Iraq, it established the Democratic Solution Party without a military counterpart, given the military control exercised within the Kurdish region by the peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, both PKK rivals. In Syria, the PKK established the PYD and other organisations that comprised civilians as well as fighters in civilian dress.

<sup>7</sup> The PKK represents the entirety of the movement's rank-and-file, including its affiliates; the KCK is its decision-making hub in Qandil, overseeing both the PKK and its regional affiliates. This report generally refers to the PKK except when a matter concerns the KCK's role directly.



skirmishes.<sup>8</sup> In July 2012, regime security forces withdrew unilaterally from Kurdish areas, allowing YPG fighters to take over positions and border posts. And in mid-2013, the KCK's executive council experienced a major reshuffle that favoured those who posit the political-military struggle in Turkey as a precondition for solving the Kurdish issue in neighbouring countries.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the swift YPG-PYD territorial gains and proclamation of Rojava self-rule revived the internal debate. A senior PKK cadre and PYD founding member operating in Syria said:

Ideologically, we all refer to Öcalan, but the PYD's priorities differ from the PKK's: the PYD seeks to implement Öcalan's thoughts in Syria. This requires us to avoid clashing with Turkey. We may organise a demonstration in solidarity with Kurds in Diyarbakır, but we don't want to be part of the fight.<sup>10</sup>

Cemil Bayık, the KCK co-chair, champions a different view:

It is wrong not to mention Turkey when we speak about Syria, Iran and Iraq. Turkey is behind the crisis in those two countries. If you can't fix the Kurdish issue in Turkey first, you can't resolve it there either.<sup>11</sup>

Since its creation, the YPG-PYD's Rojava project had an ethnic overtone, which contrasted yet coexisted with the dominant view within the PKK. That view backed local self-rule experiments as long as they bolstered the overall objective of fighting Turkey, not if they turned into full-fledged Kurdish autonomy projects that could pave the way to statehood on the nation-state model. The PKK's ideological approach was non-ethnic, at least in name. It proposed an alternative to Western democracy, calling on Kurds and non-Kurds to rule themselves locally around shared principles of gender equality and ecologic awareness. Cemil Bayık explained:

The nation-state idea is not helpful in resolving the current crisis [in the Middle East]. You must concentrate on basic rights. One of the main reasons for conflict in the region is that when one ethnic group defeats another ethnic group, it tries to rule over it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See "Iran-Kurdish rebel ceasefire holds among skepticism", Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, 7 November 2011. A PJAK-Iran ceasefire accommodated all sides: it allowed Iran to freeze its conflict with the Kurds and prevented continued unrest in Kurdish areas; the Syrian regime to suppress and contain the Syrian Kurdish uprising by delegating control to a Kurdish military force, the PKK; and the PKK to re-militarise in Syria and so put additional pressure on Turkey.

<sup>9</sup> In July 2013, the KCK replaced Murat Karayilan, a PKK leader oriented toward self-determination in the four countries where Kurds live, with Cemil Bayık and Beşe Hozat as KCK co-chairs. They represent the wing that prioritises pursuit of PKK goals in Turkey over other countries with Kurds. "PKK Reshuffles Top leadership of its Executive Council", *Rudaw*, 14 July 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, PKK and PYD founding member, 20 February 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qandil, 24 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Riza Altun, head of PKK foreign relations, echoed these thoughts. Asked about an independent Kurdish state, he said in an interview, "instead of an independent state and calls for secession, we must focus on achieving social freedom for all the region's inhabitants. Establishing a Kurdish nation-state would exacerbate existing problems". He criticised the proclamation of "Rojava" because of its ethnic character, and proposed replacing it with a "federation of northern Syria", characterised

A PYD leader in Syria offered a contrary view:

Those who think that a society can exist without a state can keep on dreaming. We have to deal with the reality of the international system, which consists of states with borders. We should focus on getting Kurds recognised as an integral component of Syrian society whose rights are protected. It doesn't matter whether we do this via cantons or a federal region or whatever. I don't look at Iraqi Kurdistan as a positive example, but ... we should not be pursuing utopia.<sup>13</sup>

These contrasting views reflect neither rigid fault lines nor competing factions within the PKK, whose military hierarchy keeps decision-making centralised and prevents factionalism and splits.<sup>14</sup> Yet, outside developments have affected internal debates, empowering or disempowering different perspectives and reshuffling priorities without precipitating loss of unity. For instance, because they spent their formative years fighting Turkey in the 1990s, most senior PYD and YPG cadres, regardless of citizenship, have long considered Turkey the primary theatre in which to implement the ideological project, possibly as a precondition for success with Kurdish communities elsewhere. But because the Syrian war has allowed the YPG-PYD to grow, including through promotion of junior commanders, a tendency has emerged that appears to prioritise Kurdish self-determination in Syria over the fight against Turkey, a tendency Turkey-oriented PKK leaders have tried to suppress by appointing trusted senior cadres who follow the Turkey-focused line.

While the two visions could coexist and were even mutually reinforcing at first – while the YPG-PYD worked to build Rojava, the PKK used YPG-PYD progress to put pressure on Turkey – more recent developments present PKK leaders with a choice they may soon have to make: to devolve power to the party's Syrian branches and allow them to refocus on Kurdish self-rule in Syria, or continue to use Syria as a springboard for guerrilla war against Turkey.

#### **B. *The Critical Role of PKK-trained Cadres in Northern Syria***

The PKK and its Syrian affiliates are linked by the history of the latter's creation and the profile of the military cadres they share. After three decades of guerrilla war, the PKK had a large force of fighters from the four parts of the Kurdish realm: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They received basic training in PKK military camps and ideological

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as a federation of different local communities, not a federal region as such: "We prefer the use of North Syria Federation and call for the removal of Rojava from the name, because Rojava denotes a federation of Kurdish identity. North Syria is home to all its constituents, and the freedom of Kurds there is contingent upon the degree of liberty enjoyed by other inhabitants of the region". Quoted in Mohamed Nouredine, "PKK's head of foreign relations speaks out", *As-Safir*, 26 July 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, PYD founding member, 20 February 2017.

<sup>14</sup> A Kurdish-origin politician of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) said, "the PKK tries to give the impression that it has different factions in order to have more policy options when it needs them. Overall, their leaders are aligned. They switch positions when they need to, compromise when they are weak and listen to Öcalan when it suits them. None of this derives from one faction overcoming the other". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 1 February 2017.

academies in Qandil, the movement's base since the 1990s, and spent their formative years fighting Turkey.<sup>15</sup> A Syrian founding member of the first PKK cell recounted:

During the first years ..., in the 1980s, the PKK counted just 54 Syrian nationals among its 256 members. At that time, we were little more than a circle of intellectuals with Marxist sympathies. In the 1990s, when the war with Turkey began, the PKK shifted from being an elite movement to a guerrilla organisation. At that point, many Syrians joined, especially after Öcalan was captured [in 1998]. Many were very young and had not finished their studies. They received military and ideological training and were sent to fight the Turkish army.<sup>16</sup>

In 2003, the PKK established organisations with civilian goals in Syria, such as the PYD, Union Star (Yekiti Star) for women's rights, and Revolutionary Youth (Ciwanen Soresger), groups ideologically inspired by the imprisoned Öcalan.<sup>17</sup> While these had members or even nominal leaders with little or no link to Qandil, only PKK-trained fighters held decision-making powers. This allowed the PKK to create a base of Syrian sympathisers and recruit fighters for its struggle in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> A PKK founder recounted the creation of its Syrian branches:

When the PYD was established, we didn't have the choice between staying with the PKK in Qandil or joining the PYD in Syria. Some of us were Syrians, others not. As PKK fighters, we were united in a [Kurdish] nation [*watan*]; our designations as Syrian, Turkish, Iranian or Iraqi citizens were externally imposed.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these regional entities' claim to be linked to the PKK only ideologically, not organisationally, those with key military and institutional responsibilities used to be PKK fighters in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Regional branches may have had their own identity and leaders, a distinct name and members who did not receive training in Qandil, and may have enjoyed some decision-making autonomy in recruitment, establishment of local offices, dealing with local authorities and coordinating military operations and militant activities. Yet, strategic decision-making remained the exclusive domain of fighters schooled in the Qandil-based institutions. For example, in 2010, Aldar Khalil, a PYD official who had been a PKK commander in Qandil, had greater decision powers

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<sup>15</sup> The PKK's founders distinguish between their generation (the "ideological generation", *jil al-ideoloji*), and those who joined from the 1990s onward (the "fighter generation", *jil al-muqatileen*). Crisis Group interview, PKK founding member, Qamishli, 10 December 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 18 November 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli resident and former Revolutionary Youth member, Qamishli, 12 March 2016.

<sup>18</sup> In 1999, Damascus and Ankara agreed to crack down on the PKK (the Adana agreement), which prompted the group to move operations to northern Syria and inject fighters into the leadership of underground civilian organisations, such as the Union Star and the Revolutionary Youth.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rumeilan, 12 December 2015.

<sup>20</sup> KCK leaders repeatedly state that each regional branch has independent decision-making power. Likewise, regional branch leaders invariably reaffirm their autonomy from the PKK. A YPG commander said, "we are not related to the PKK. We are only followers of Abdullah Öcalan's thoughts". Crisis Group interview, Hasaka, 13 November 2015.

than Salih Muslim, the PYD co-chair, who was a local Öcalan sympathiser from a pro-PKK family but had not received military training in Qandil.<sup>21</sup>

YPG fighters who arrived in Syria in July 2012 were Syrian nationals who had joined and been trained by the PKK in Qandil in the 1990s and fought in Turkey during the war's height. During the 2000s, many operated underground or under civilian cover in northern Syria. PKK Syrian commanders took leadership posts in the YPG, PYD, People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) and Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV DEM), PYD umbrella groups established in 2012. Boundaries between these Öcalan-inspired bodies are blurred; commanders continuously switch posts in and among them.<sup>22</sup>

Territorial expansion into non-Kurdish areas induced the YPG-PYD in March 2016, to convert the Rojava self-administration into a northern Syria federal region to accommodate the ethnically and religiously diverse population. While this new administration co-opted local figures, PKK military cadres dressed in civilian clothes took key positions, including in the presidential committee.<sup>23</sup>

### C. *The PKK's Domestication in Syria*

The Syria experience forced the PKK to nurture a new generation of Öcalan sympathisers who had no other prior PKK connection. At the same time, it strengthened the PKK's grip on its Syrian branches. Because Syrian Kurdish PKK-trained cadres arriving in 2012 were relative outsiders to a local community with its own political parties, they had to work hard to gain acceptance and contain dissent.<sup>24</sup>

When Öcalan formed the PKK in the late 1970s, well-established parties dominated the Syrian Kurdish political scene. Set up in the 1950s, they were led by an alliance of Kurdish landowners (*aghas*) and urban professionals who monopolised the movement by mediating between the Kurdish urban middle class and regime, while the

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<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, November 2015.

<sup>22</sup> After 2011, Aldar Khalil served first as a PYD official, then as a TEV DEM executive committee member; Hediye Yousef was a Union Star member and since 2013 is co-president of Jazeera district; Ilham Ahmed, a former Union Star member, served in the PCWK, then became a TEV DEM executive committee member. All were previously members of the PKK's "fighter generation". They joined in the 1990s, received military training in Qandil and moved to northern Syria after 2003 to take charge of PKK-affiliated organisations. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 15 November 2015. Because the PKK continuously creates new organisations, renames existing ones and shuffles its cadres among them, this report refers to figures with this shared profile as "PKK-trained cadres" regardless of their official posts at a given time.

<sup>23</sup> In March 2016, Hediye Yousef and Ilham Ahmed joined the federal region's presidential committee, along with Rojin Ramo (a *nom de guerre*), another PKK-trained cadre who was a Union Star member before 2011. Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, November 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 16 November 2015. For a description of the autonomous administration's evolution, see Crisis Group Report, *Flight of Icarus?*, op. cit., Section III. Hediye Yousef, a former PKK military cadre, highlighted early decision-making: "The first days were very difficult. In 2012, we were the only ones defending the [Kurdish] areas in Jazeera [district]. Soon we realised that this was not enough and that we had to establish [civilian] institutions to offer the people a larger role. At that moment we decided to establish a local administration". Crisis Group interview, Rumeilan, 17 November 2015.

latter used them to contain Kurds' political aspirations.<sup>25</sup> Öcalan's Marxism resonated especially with Kurdish students from smaller towns who contested the urban and landed elites' dominance but lacked strength to challenge it effectively. The PKK was particularly successful in recruiting from this underclass, and did not set up political organs, sending the youths directly to Qandil for training.<sup>26</sup>

This remained unchanged even after the PKK established the PYD and kindred organisations in 2003. Working clandestinely in a highly restrictive security environment, the new party could not mobilise support beyond the circle of families who had long been PKK sympathisers, challenge established parties among the urban professional class or channel the younger generation's growing discontent with traditional leaders.<sup>27</sup> This meant that when the 2011 Syrian uprising spread to Kurdish areas, the PYD was just one more urban Kurdish party whose radical ideology and military objectives barely resonated. A PKK founding member observed:

At the start of the uprising, there were a lot of youth organisations [in northern Syria], many of which didn't like the PKK. We didn't know how to handle all that youthful energy. We couldn't tell them: "Come and fight Turkey with us". They had no interest in Turkey.<sup>28</sup>

Operating anew in the Syrian context, the PKK had to adapt pragmatically in the face of strict party rules. PKK-trained cadres disavowed any direct organisational link with the PKK, stating that they saw recognition of Kurdish rights in Syria as their primary objective. A former PKK member recounted:

When the [PKK-trained] military cadres arrived, the big problem they faced was to manage the street. There were a lot of people coming from the mountain [Qandil]. We were under pressure: the street was intent on gaining Kurdish rights, and the other Kurdish parties were accusing us of operating ... with a Turkey-centric agenda. So we decided to set up a self-administration and promote that as the foundation for future recognition of Kurdish rights.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê), the sister of Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, is the oldest, created in 1957 and invariably led by urban professionals, currently Saud al-Mullah. Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) also has a Syrian counterpart, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê), founded in 1965 and led by Abdul Hamid Darwish, a Damascus University-trained lawyer from a prominent landowning family. The regime resorted to these parties' leaders to co-opt and contain the Kurdish national movement: only through them and similar intermediaries could educated young Kurds gain access to state-sponsored professions. Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, PKK ideas resonated with students from smaller towns who attended university in Syria's main urban centres and wanted to challenge the urban middle-class' dominance over the Kurdish movement. YPG commander Bahoz Erdar came from a small town close to Derek and attended medical school; Nasr Abdallah, another Syrian PKK founder, was from Darbasiya and attended medical school in Aleppo; Shahin Silo, from Kobani, studied engineering in Aleppo. Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, 12 November 2015.

<sup>27</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit., Section III.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 16 November 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, PYD member, Qamishli, 15 November 2015.

PKK-trained cadres also realised that military rule, justified as protection, would not neutralise dissent, disempower traditional local elites and promote new ones to run local institutions. The PKK had sufficient military commanders to impose security but insufficient cadres with the know-how to administer the self-rule area. Political differences with pre-existing Kurdish parties hindered recruitment of middle-class professionals. The YPG-PYD thus had to recruit locals unaffiliated with the PKK and promote them as an alternative elite. Some were Öcalan sympathisers, but others were notables who had been affiliated with other Kurdish parties and saw in the self-rule experiment an unprecedented opportunity for social climbing.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, some previously disenfranchised Arab and minority leaders joined the self-administration to compete more effectively with their own communities' established leadership.<sup>31</sup>

Lack of experienced administrators has undermined the PYD's ability to establish effective governing institutions and gain legitimacy. The administration was clumsy, issuing regulations on compulsory military service and curriculum reform that antagonised people.<sup>32</sup> Newly empowered elites gained access to privileges and were able to quickly amass wealth, angering the established middle class.<sup>33</sup>

On the military side, the speed of the YPG's territorial conquests compelled it to start recruiting from the local Kurdish population to control these areas.<sup>34</sup> It estab-

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<sup>30</sup> Jazeera district's energy commission head, Suleyman Khalaf, is an oil engineer who joined the PYD in the uprising's aftermath. Explaining his defection from the Syrian state, he said, "before the revolution I was a Syrian Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party member, but then I became closer to the PYD, and they asked me to become energy commission chief. When I was employed by the state, it was rare for Kurdish oil engineers to be appointed in [oil-rich] Rumeilan; even after twenty years we could not be promoted to director-general". Crisis Group interview, Rumeilan, 15 November 2015. Jazeera's justice commission head, a 2000 law graduate, nurtured sympathies for the Communist party and worked as a lawyer in Damascus, returned to Qamishli in 2011 and joined the Jazeera district sub-administration the next year. Crisis Group interview, Khaled Ibrahim, Qamishli, November 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Expressing political splits within ethnic groups, a member of the Assyrian Youth Council (Tajammu al-Shabab al-Ashouri) in Qamishli said, "Jazeera's deputy head of the defence commission is a Christian from Qamishli, but he has no diplomas and does not enjoy the respect of local Assyrians". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 11 March 2016.

<sup>32</sup> According to the self-defence law (*qanoun difaa al-dhati*), issued in Jazeera district in 2014, all eighteen-year-olds must enter six months of military training. The law is mostly enforced on men. That the Syrian regime continues to enforce compulsory military service in areas the YPG controls means young Syrians are under a double strain. Also in 2014, the PYD administration in Jazeera introduced a primary-school curriculum in Kurdish with direct references to Öcalan. In response, the regime shut schools in YPG-controlled areas, compelling families which could afford it to pay for private schools, so their children could follow the Syrian curriculum, the only one the education ministry in Damascus recognises. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, March 2017.

<sup>33</sup> A lawyer in Qamishli said, "Corruption is on the rise. After the YPG came here, a new group of people has started to make money. Some benefit from cement exports, others from oil exports. Some were previously connected with the regime and have now made enough money to drive around Qamishli in a 2017 Mercedes". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 13 March 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Territorial expansion has forced the YPG to recruit in Kurdish areas. A PKK-trained cadre said, "we have a large territory to control, so we need fighters, not to deploy on dangerous fronts but to secure checkpoints .... This is why we issued the compulsory-military-service law". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 2 January 2017.

lished local training centres and military academies that churned out fresh Syrian Kurdish recruits as commanders.<sup>35</sup> It loosened strict PKK recruitment criteria and offered a diluted version of political principles deriving from Öcalan's thoughts. Facing growing manpower shortages and having extended its military reach to mixed and predominantly Arab areas, the YPG also had to start a massive recruitment drive among non-Kurds, placing them under the SDF umbrella. In February 2017, a PYD official recounted preparations for the Raqqa campaign:

For the Raqqa assault, we began recruiting [Arab] fighters, providing six months of military training to some, three to others, and only one month to again others. We also try to instil a general political perspective of Öcalan's thoughts. When the conflict ends, those who want to become cadres can take the full curriculum at our ideological academies.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, two new groups emerged in northern Syria: PKK sympathisers with no militant background, and YPG and SDF recruits who are anti-ISIS rather than pro-PKK. Yet, PKK-trained cadres remained in charge, establishing top-down rule that prevented local commanders and fighters from pursuing a Syrian instead of a Turkey-focused option, including by consolidating civil administration.<sup>37</sup>

#### D. *Ruling from Behind*

YPG-PYD decision-making is secretive, limited to a few of PKK-trained cadres appointed by the KCK and closed-door meetings. They decide the administration budget, appointment of front-line and regional commanders, distribution of military supplies and coordination with the U.S. military.<sup>38</sup> Technocrats, mostly Öcalan sympathisers without PKK militant background, nominally run the self-rule area's formal institutions. PKK-trained cadres in lower-ranking posts hold the real power.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The YPG established its female equivalent, the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ); the Martyr Khabat Academy (Akademiya Shahid Khabat), which has six grades and trains recruits in military and ideological matters; and a Special Academy (Akademiya Khaas), a 45-day program for military specialisations. Crisis Group interview, Nasrin Abdallah, YPJ commander, Qamishli, 15 November 2015. The YPG-PYD security police (Asayesh) has academies in at least five locations, offering five-month training for aspiring officers. Crisis Group interview, Jwan Ibrahim, Asayesh general commander, Qamishli, 16 November 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 February 2017. According to YPG officials, the SDF has 50,000 fighters, 23,000 of whom are Arabs.

<sup>37</sup> A Qamishli resident gave an example of YPG-PYD failure to administer or understand local society's needs: "At one point, we were short of diesel, unable to heat our homes .... Some people went to a PKK-trained cadre to complain. He said, 'when we were in Qandil, we had no heating. If we could survive without it, you can'". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 12 March 2017.

<sup>38</sup> The PKK's Syria command centre's composition changes continuously, preventing any commander from accumulating too much power. It usually consists of top PKK leaders, mainly Syrian. In 2016, they included Bahoz Erdar, in charge of organising front-line troops; Haval Mazloum, in charge of logistics and relations with the U.S.-led coalition; and Serdar Derek and Taulim (both *noms de guerre*). Since early 2017, a PKK commander of Turkish origin, Sabri Ok, has been the operations room's overall commander. Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, January 2017.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, Badran Jia Kurd, a PKK-trained commander who serves as "spokesperson of the Jazeera canton government", has greater decision-making power over appointments of district

The PKK has woven a web of PKK-trained cadres who infiltrated formal institutions and function as a shadow command chain. Thus, the head of Jazeera's energy commission oversees refining of oil from the Rumeilan field into diesel fuel and gasoline, but a PKK-trained cadre decides distribution, prices and revenue collection.<sup>40</sup> YPG-PYD security police (Asayesh) sign off on many administrative decisions.<sup>41</sup> A lawyer in the Jazeera district sub-administration's judiciary commission said he could not issue an arrest warrant "without first consulting with the Asayesh, while they can detain anyone without a judicial warrant".<sup>42</sup>

PKK-trained cadres issue orders across the network of regional commanders. Assignments depend on a location's strategic importance. The YPG puts its most senior, experienced, trusted commanders along the ISIS front and younger commanders who joined the PKK in the late 1990s in the Kurdish hinterland. The latter, many without university degree, unlike the PKK's "ideological generation", have found the war a way to rise through the ranks. They appoint squadron and platoon commanders, coordinate with other regional commanders and redistribute military supplies in the areas under their responsibility.<sup>43</sup> Squadron and platoon commanders, who mostly joined the YPG after its 2012 creation and were trained in its military and ideological academies, are often placed in administrative rather than strategic or other decision-making posts. They have little chance to advance, as the ideological academies that offer promotion prospects require long-term commitment to the PKK's struggle, directly under PKK control in Qandil.

With the battle against ISIS raging, the PKK faces a pressing need for experienced commanders. Unwilling to empower regional commanders or capable locally-recruited squadron or platoon commanders, it has started to send growing numbers of its Qandil-based cadres to northern Syria, including Kurds from Turkey and Iran. This allows it to enforce strict command and control, as well as ideological unity, but not to gain local legitimacy.<sup>44</sup>

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commission chiefs than the Jazeera "head of government", Abdul-Karim Saru Khan, who has no PKK background. Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, January 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Suleyman Khalaf, energy commission head, Qamishli, 2 January 2017.

<sup>41</sup> According to Kheder Khaddour, who has researched governance in Syria, "the [YPG-PYD] practices are not new in the particular context of Jazeera. Since the 1970s, the Syrian regime proved unable to establish full sovereignty over this corner .... It controlled it by delegating to security officials decision-making on key issues (like oil, security) and resorting to the local administrative structures only to contain the local population". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, November 2015. The Asayesh general commander is Jwan Ibrahim, a Syrian Kurd, while a PKK-trained commander of Turkish origin leads Qamishli's Asayesh. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, January 2017.

<sup>43</sup> A PKK and PYD founder recounted: "At the regional commanders level there is a bit of everything. You have people who were only military cadres [*kawadir askariya*] but were given responsibilities usually assigned to ideological cadres [*kawadir nadhariya*]" . Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 February 2017. Thus, the regional commander for Hasaka, Lewend Rojava, is a Syrian military commander in his early 40s (so relatively young) who fought in Turkey during the 1990s and returned to Syria after 2012. Crisis Group interviews, Hasaka, March 2016.

<sup>44</sup> The YPG put a PKK-trained commander of Iranian origin in charge of Tel Abyad after taking it from ISIS; the campaign to take Manbij included Qandil-trained commanders from Iran and Turkey. In 2016, a PKK-trained commander from Iran replaced a Syrian PKK-trained commander at the



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### III. A Military-driven Approach

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#### A. *Complementary Objectives, Different Priorities*

In September 2014, after ISIS seized the Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border, the U.S. partnered with the YPG to drive it out, providing air cover and weapons delivered indirectly via Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga who entered from northern Iraq via Turkey as part of a deal negotiated with Turkey. The U.S.-YPG military relationship continued, as Washington began pressing ISIS in its strongholds. After Kobani, the YPG, backed by the U.S.-led Western coalition, wrested other towns from the group's control, gradually expanding its reach across a swathe of northern Syria highly diverse in population that extends along nearly the entire length of the Turkish border and successfully connecting Jazeera and Kobani districts.<sup>45</sup>

The anti-ISIS campaign drew the YPG beyond majority-Kurdish areas into adjacent majority-Arab ones. The YPG-PYD cadres saw in this an opportunity to leverage the group's military strength to make territorial gains with U.S. support that would connect Jazeera/Kobani with Afrin, establish a federal region recognised by the international community and enhance their bargaining power in negotiations over Syria's future. For those cadres prioritising the conflict against Turkey, however, an additional goal was clear: utilising U.S. support to press Turkey militarily and isolate it politically by persuading the U.S. to choose the Kurds' side over time. But those divergent priorities mattered little in the short term, since both favoured a military-focused strategy that would give the YPG-PYD new leverage by establishing facts on the ground. Aldar Khalil, a PKK-trained cadre, said:

In Iraq, the Kurdish parties tried to assert control by building a political alliance with the U.S., but this did not work for them, because it did not allow them to annex all the disputed territories [the Kurds claim, such as Kirkuk]. This is why we have to put facts on the ground militarily and use our military power to get what we want politically.<sup>46</sup>

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Samalka border crossing with Iraq. Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO official who travelled in northern Syria, March 2016.

<sup>45</sup> In October 2014, the U.S. began supporting the YPG indirectly via Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga deployed in Kobani, and since early 2015 via the SDF, a militia that incorporated, but was also led by, the YPG. By late 2015, the U.S. had three military bases in northern Syria: Kobani, Rumeilan and Tel Abyad. The main operations room for YPG-U.S. cooperation is in Rumeilan. Eric Schmitt, "The US considers further arming Syrian Kurds against ISIS", *The New York Times*, 26 September 2016. The U.S. has also given the YPG-PYD access to Qandil from northern Syria by flying commanders to Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan, stronghold of Talabani's PUK, which has strong PKK ties and controls access to the Qandil Valley. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, September 2016, and observations, Qandil Valley, 24 June 2016. See also, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°158, *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, 12 May 2015.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. officials seem to have encouraged this transactional relationship. Khalil continued, referring to the U.S. envoy to the international coalition fighting ISIS: "Brett McGurk came with people from the UK defence ministry. I asked him: 'When will you recognise Rojava? When are we going to participate in the Geneva negotiations?' He replied: 'Let's retake Raqqa, and then we can start discussing all that'". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, March 2016. A U.S. official said, "the Kurds are like a

The more territory the YPG has seized, the more the PKK has appointed trusted Qandil-trained cadres, including Kurds from Turkey and Iran, in sensitive locations, and the more closely the YPG-PYD has remained tied to the PKK and its conflict with Turkey.

**B. *The Unintended Consequences of Military Assistance***

In the YPG, the U.S. found an efficient and reliable anti-ISIS military partner, first demonstrated in the September 2014 Kobani battle, which obviated the need to deploy U.S. troops. Since then, Washington has indirectly channelled arms to the YPG without giving it political support to avoid further angering Turkey, its NATO partner. The U.S. has performed a semantic dance to pre-empt accusations by Turkey or domestic critics that it is supporting the PKK, an organisation on its terrorism list. The Obama administration claimed that the YPG and PKK were not the same organisation and channelled arms to the YPG indirectly via Iraqi Kurds in Kobani and, after October 2015, via the newly established SDF.<sup>47</sup>

The SDF is nominally a mixed Syrian force, but in reality both non-PKK-trained and non-Kurdish commanders have no authority, while the YPG is in overall command and controls military supply. Yet, semantic sleight-of-hand has not rescued the U.S. from the obvious fact, acknowledged by leaders of both PKK and YPG-PYD, that the latter is the former's Syrian affiliate, fully integrated within its chain of command.<sup>48</sup> U.S. State Department officials assert that the U.S. can provide weapons only through the SDF. Meanwhile, the military cooperates directly with the YPG, fuelling its hopes of diplomatic recognition for the federal region.<sup>49</sup>

Because the U.S. can channel support to the YPG only by accepting its hierarchy, it reinforces the PKK-imposed chain of command that favours PKK-trained cadres over local Syrian commanders for strategic posts. External military aid thus has had a somewhat paradoxical effect. It allows the PKK to consolidate absolute control while, by enabling the YPG-PYD territorial expansion that necessitated massive local recruitment, forcing it to relax its internal rules and ideological purity in order to attract new fighters.

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mistress or a girlfriend for the U.S. We come to them when we need them, and we know they will be there". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 November 2016.

<sup>47</sup> A U.S. spokesperson said, "the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under U.S. law". State Department press briefing, 20 October 2014. YPG commanders see the arms deliveries differently. Sipan Hammo has said expressly that the YPG has received weapons directly from the U.S. [www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-10-15/u-s-airdrop-in-syria-ends-up-arming-the-kurds](http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-10-15/u-s-airdrop-in-syria-ends-up-arming-the-kurds). Crisis Group interviews likewise indicate that the U.S. military began with airdrops to "Arab fighters" (the SDF), then, once it had established bases in Rumeilan and Kobani, shipped weapons there. Collection and distribution is invariably and exclusively in the hands of PKK-trained SDF commanders. Crisis Group interviews, northern Syria, 2015-2017.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Qandil, June 2016; Qamishli and Amoude, March 2016.

<sup>49</sup> A U.S. State Department official specified: "We have a legal problem in dealing with an organisation listed as a terrorist group". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 10 October 2016. A U.S. Department of Defense employee posted in Syria stated, however, that the U.S. had coordinated with YPG commanders during the Manbij operation and continued meeting with them. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 November 2016.

The Syria-focused YPG-PYD cadres have been disappointed in their expectation to strengthen diplomatic ties with the U.S. or be included in Syria peace talks. Interactions with Washington have been largely informal. In January and September 2016, Brett McGurk, the U.S. special presidential envoy for the anti-ISIS coalition, twice visited YPG-controlled areas, Rumeilan and Kobani respectively, was filmed with YPG-PYD and SDF commanders but did not discuss the issue foremost on the group's mind: U.S. protection and recognition of the self-rule area.<sup>50</sup>

Nor has the YPG-PYD realised its ambition to connect Kobani with Afrin, and the window may be closing. In February 2016, the YPG received U.S. military support to defeat ISIS in Sheddadi, an Arab town between Hasaka and Deir al-Zour with no strategic importance for the group. It also received U.S. backing (through the SDF) to take Manbij from ISIS, west of the Euphrates, but Washington had told it that it would have to leave the town in charge of the SDF once the situation was stabilised.<sup>51</sup> Precisely to thwart the YPG-PYD ambition, Turkey led, with U.S. support, the November assault on ISIS in Al-Bab, a town whose control would allow creation of a land bridge to Afrin. A U.S. official said:

There is a problem of expectations [with the YPG]. We are not going to give up our relationship with Turkey. We have been clear with them from the beginning: we will not help you to take Al-Bab, and we cannot prevent either Turkey or the regime from taking it.<sup>52</sup>

The U.S. has also refrained from providing economic support to YPG-PYD areas, not wishing to fuel Kurdish separatist aspirations and further upset Turkey.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the local administration's domination by PKK-trained cadres has discouraged Western states from giving it stabilisation funds, lest that would bolster the PKK in Turkey more than foster reconstruction in Syria.<sup>54</sup>

U.S. military support has unintentionally bolstered the thinking of those who favour continued struggle with Turkey over those willing to contemplate a political settlement for the Kurds in Syria. Since that support has been channelled through the Qandil-appointed commanders, it has further empowered those commanders over locally-recruited ones and made them even less accountable to the local population and local administrators more dependent on PKK-trained cadres. This has

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<sup>50</sup> Liz Sly, "US envoy goes to Syria to press the fight against the Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2016, and Eric Schmitt, "The US considers further arming Syrian Kurds against ISIS", *The New York Times*, 26 September 2016.

<sup>51</sup> In March 2017, YPG commanders claimed the group had withdrawn from Manbij, leaving it to the "Manbij military council". YPG fighters remain on the outskirts, however, ensuring perimeter and access control. Crisis Group interviews, Manbij, March 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, 10 October 2016.

<sup>53</sup> The U.S. Pentagon and State Department have taken differing approaches on reconstruction aid to the YPG-PYD. A Pentagon official said, "in areas taken from ISIS we needed an entity to provide services; they [the YPG] are very efficient at bringing back government. In Manbij, we favour ... supporting the local administration with reconstruction funds. The State Department takes a different view. [For] their Syrian Transition Assistance and Response Team based in Turkey, it is sensitive to fund a PKK-linked project". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 November 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group Skype interview, NGO official dealing with donors, November 2016.

prevented a truly civilian-led administration from emerging in northern Syria. It also has permitted the PKK to strengthen its authority over the Kurdish movement in Syria, tie the Kurdish question in Syria and Turkey more closely together and hitch the YPG-PYD self-rule project to the wagon of the PKK's fight with Turkey.

The result has been a vicious circle: as long as PKK-trained cadres control Kurdish and non-Kurdish lands, the YPG-PYD will be denied reconstruction funds, and the absence of reconstruction will increase local hostility to its rule and thus further empower the more military/security oriented PKK-trained cadres. Over time, however, changing regional alignments and growing numbers of locally recruited Syrians may encourage a degree of autonomous YPG-PYD decision-making and allow a shift toward those who favour a Syrian solution to the Kurdish question in Syria.

### *C. More Land, More Challenges*

The YPG-PYD's successful strategy of establishing facts on the ground is beginning to show diminishing returns and could become self-defeating. Territorial expansion is limiting its ability to establish sustainable self-rule, under whatever name. Its expansion also has antagonised the self-rule area's neighbours, prompting a near-total embargo: Turkey to its north, the KRG (the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government) to its east and ISIS and the regime to its south and west, forcing the YPG-PYD to resort to smuggling in all directions.<sup>55</sup> It also compelled the YPG to redirect financial and military resources to new ISIS fronts at the expense of maintaining security and improving services. This has generated discontent among Syrian Kurds, who accuse the YPG of recruiting its youth and diverting resources toward Arab-populated front-line areas while keeping Kurdish areas impoverished.

The group had to confront this reality when its fighters seized Tel Abyad, a predominantly Arab town on the Turkish border, from ISIS in May 2015. Suleyman Khalaf, Jazeera's energy commission chief, explained:

In 2013, we had to provide electricity to the population of Jazeera canton only. A year later, we also had to provide electricity to Kobani canton, and now even to Arab villages around Tel Abyad – all this while our administration is under a total embargo, and we cannot easily trade or sell our Rumeilan oil.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> On the area's northern boundary, Turkey has closed its border to trade; to the east, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq has allowed basic goods to enter Syria at Samalka but little else. The PYD is thus reliant on smuggling with regime-held areas via ISIS-held areas to the south and west, exchanging limited quantities of grain, oil and cotton for basic goods. In western Syria, Afrin district is under a Turkish embargo, so relies on the regime for trade. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 14 March 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rumeilan, 13 November 2015. Since the YPG-PYD asserted its presence in northern Syria, the KRG and Turkey have intermittently shut their borders with Syria to place economic pressure on the group. In 2016, as the YPG-PYD extended its territorial control, they both closed their borders indefinitely. The energy commission chief said he was considering ways to break the embargo: "We have a lot of oil in Rumeilan but cannot export it. We hope to conclude a deal with Baghdad so that we can export oil there". (While the YPG-PYD currently has no direct land access to Baghdad, its involvement in northern Iraq, in cooperation with Iran-backed Shiite mili-

As in Kurdish areas, PYD-led local administrations in non-Kurdish areas are designed to control the population by co-opting it. In some Arab areas, such as Tel Abyad, the YPG-PYD is discovering that middle-class professionals are even more reluctant than their Kurdish counterparts to join an administration dominated by PKK-trained military commanders.<sup>57</sup> Part of the reason is that the YPG has co-opted tribal members previously excluded (by the Syrian regime) from leadership positions and appointed them to local administrative posts with only nominal authority, but they are not automatically accepted by local Arab society.<sup>58</sup> When, in August 2016, the YPG-SDF took Manbij, which had been under successive Syrian anti-regime rebel and ISIS control, it put in charge tribal leaders excluded by the rebels, who instead had empowered urban notables with Islamist leanings.<sup>59</sup> In Syria, the tribes' domain is mainly outside urban centres; the imposition of tribal leaders in towns taken from ISIS could, therefore, be expected to cause frictions.

Whether in Manbij or Tel Abyad, the underlying problem remains that PKK-trained cadres retain overall control. Kurdish-Arab relations are shaped by Arab recruits' dependence on YPG commanders who rule their areas without effective civilian oversight. These commanders are in charge of military logistics, providing the most powerful weapons to YPG fighters while delegating to Arab SDF fighters the secondary role of maintaining local security.<sup>60</sup> Local officials working for the administration are tasked with day-to-day management, such as aid redistribution, local security and setting the price of bread.<sup>61</sup> Thus, more by default than design, the U.S. has amplified the problems emanating from the YPG's PKK link and, due to its singular focus on defeating ISIS, encouraged the YPG's territorial expansion. This is now pulling the Turkey-PKK conflict into Syria and, possibly, pushing the fragile YPG-PYD administration back under Damascus's wing.

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tias, may be aimed at opening a corridor from northern Syria to Baghdad via areas south and west of Mosul). Crisis Group interview, YPG commander, Sinjar, 8 September 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tel Abyad, March 2017.

<sup>58</sup> In Tel Abyad, YPG cadres co-opted local Arab tribal leaders desiring to take revenge on those who collaborated with ISIS. They were allowed to run security and administration in return for allegiance to the SDF. While services did improve somewhat, the YPG found no lawyers or other professionals willing to co-operate with a PKK-run administration to set up a dispute-resolution committee (*lijna al-musalaha*). Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Qamishli, 14 November 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, NGO official travelling in Manbij, 14 December 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, former SDF commander, Rumeilan, 14 March 2017. Talal Silo, an SDF spokesperson and local Turkman, said, "the YPG is the SDF's logistical backbone. The SDF's central command in Hasaka is composed of the YPG, YPJ and Syriac Military Council [al-Majlis al-Askari al-Suriyani]. The Sanadid Army [an SDF faction of Arab Shammar tribal fighters] doesn't receive the best weapons, because only the YPG is deployed on the front lines". Crisis Group interview, Hasaka, 16 November 2015. A member of the Syriac Military Council said of his group's relationship with the YPG, "we are working under the YPG in order to protect the Syriac community". Crisis Group interview, Hasaka, 16 November 2015. Syriacs, who belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church, are one of several Christian communities in the Middle East.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, NGO official travelling in Manbij, 14 December 2016.

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## IV. An Escalating PKK-Turkey Conflict in Northern Syria

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### A. *The PKK-Turkey Conflict Spills into Syria*

In early 2013, Ankara froze its conflict with the PKK in Turkey, agreeing to a ceasefire and reviving peace talks.<sup>62</sup> During the two-year peace process with the PKK that followed, Turkey tolerated the rise of the YPG-PYD in northern Syria and invited PYD leader Salih Muslim to Ankara for discussions. In parallel, it opened up political space to Kurds in Turkey, perhaps calculating that the participation of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), in parliament would disempower and de-legitimise the PKK military leadership in both Turkey and Syria.<sup>63</sup> Turkish security officials acknowledged a potential divergence between the PKK's hard-core leadership in Qandil and younger cadres, especially among the YPG-PYD in Syria, but warned that a breakdown in peace talks would disempower the latter.<sup>64</sup>

However, internal developments in Turkey compounded by the YPG's fast-paced military expansion challenged this pragmatism and helped precipitate a return to open conflict. During the ISIS siege of Kobani, Turkey, after prolonged refusal, agreed to let the YPG's campaign to free the town proceed once a fig-leaf solution was found: the U.S. brought peshmerga fighters, mainly belonging to Turkey's Iraqi Kurdish partner, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to Kobani and channelled weapons to the YPG through them. But continuous U.S.-backed YPG advances alarmed Ankara, which could not countenance a PKK affiliate seizing areas along its Syrian border or the emergence of a YPG-PYD-run federal region in northern Syria that it saw as part of the PKK's anti-Turkey strategy.

In the aftermath of the peace talks' collapse in April 2015 and Turkey's inconclusive parliamentary elections two months later, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling

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<sup>62</sup> In 1999, after the 1998 arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, Turkey and the PKK launched a first round of peace talks, known as the "Oslo process". It lasted until 2011, when fighting resumed, a two-year conflict in which the PKK lost nearly 1,000 fighters. Crisis Group Europe Report N°234, *Turkey and the PKK: Saving the Peace Process*, 6 November 2014, pp. 2-3.

<sup>63</sup> According to a Turkish security official, speaking well after the 2013 ceasefire had collapsed in 2015, the PKK's potential transition from a military to political movement was the basis for the ceasefire that started the peace process: "The way out is for the HDP to renounce violence and then for the PKK to do the same. In addressing their base, they can point to their 80 parliament members and announce their efforts will now be exclusively political. They can focus on building their ecological paradise, or whatever, talk in parliament about how they want to divide Turkey, or create federalism or whatever. As long as they don't have weapons, the political sphere is open to them". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, June 2016. The PKK's view is the polar opposite. PKK leader Cemil Bayık said, "the PKK has pursued armed struggle because we have been given no choice, no room for political activities. The HDP has been banned, lawmakers have lost their immunity, Öcalan remains in prison .... The PKK has given Turkey a lot of chances. We declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1999. Yet, the state continued the war. When Kobani happened [October 2015], we were in negotiations with Turkey, but they attack[ed] the Kurds in Rojava.... Now they are changing the south east's demography, leaving us no option except resist or be eliminated". Crisis Group interview, Qandil, 24 June 2016. Today, Ankara's position has hardened, focused on managing the conflict more than bringing it to an end, while the PKK appears to assume Turkey is losing ground internationally, and the group thus will have a stronger hand if it postpones talks.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ankara, June 2016.

Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and the PKK seemingly shared an interest in ending the ceasefire. Having lost its majority in a major rebuff, the AKP abandoned its pragmatic approach to the conflict with the PKK and launched a new confrontation to shore up support among Turkish nationalist constituents. In turn, the PKK thought it could, and perhaps should, return to fighting, as it did not trust Erdoğan's motives in pursuing talks, saw the process beginning to crumble, feared the political rise of the HDP potentially at its expense and believed it could capitalise on its Syrian affiliate's success.<sup>65</sup>

Relations between the two started to deteriorate at the time of the Kobani siege and nosedived in July 2015 following an attack in Suruç that killed more than 30 pro-Kurdish activists. Though ISIS claimed responsibility, the PKK blamed the AKP-led government for failing to provide security. In September 2015, as both sides undermined negotiations by building up forces in the south east, the increasingly fragile truce crumbled, giving way to a new and furious round of conflict.<sup>66</sup>

The PKK's losses in that fight did little to discourage it from doubling down on the YPG's territorial push in Syria. In taking Tel Abyad in July 2015, the YPG gained control of a contiguous stretch of territory bordering Turkey from Malikiya to Kobani. That December, it crossed the Euphrates, seizing the Tishreen dam. In February 2016, it took Tel Rifaat, north of Aleppo, with the help of Russian air cover.<sup>67</sup> In May, the YPG-SDF made another thrust and in August took the predominantly Arab town of Manbij from ISIS.

In response, Turkey sent its military across the border in Operation Euphrates Shield. While Ankara publicly stated it aimed to expel ISIS from Jarablus – and indeed succeeded in doing so – it also, and mainly, wanted to prevent the YPG from taking additional territory between Jarablus and Azaz, thus to block its route to Afrin. Turkish forces subsequently moved south toward IS-held Al-Bab, on which the YPG had also set its eyes, and declared that following victory there their next step would

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<sup>65</sup> The HDP performed strongly in the June 2015 elections, winning votes of citizens wary of Erdoğan's ambition to create an executive presidency. Its growing strength was a threat to the PKK leadership's entrenched interests in continuing armed struggle. See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°77, *A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks*, 17 December 2015.

<sup>66</sup> In November 2015, this strategy appeared to pay off, as the AKP won an absolute majority in what in Turkey is referred to as the "repeat" election. The war reinvigorated the PKK's military branch at the expense of the HDP. Ibid and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°49, *Steps toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, 8 April 2016. Since July 2015, at least 2,721 have been killed, including more than 900 Turkish troops and close to 1,200 PKK fighters. "Turkey's PKK Conflict: the Rising Toll", Crisis Group info-graphic, [www.crisisgroup.be/interactives/turkey](http://www.crisisgroup.be/interactives/turkey).

<sup>67</sup> A YPG leader said in early 2016, "our priority is to consolidate our relationship with the U.S., but ... we benefit from both sides .... We should have pushed on as far as Manbij. The Russians made us understand that as far as they were concerned, we could take Jarablus and go as far as the Mediterranean". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 13 March 2016. A U.S. official said, "before and after they crossed the Euphrates, we told them many times that if they were going to make such a dangerous move, we would not be able to help them. We told them clearly that for us it is not a matter of choosing between Turkey and them. It is that we do not want problems with Turkey, and we want them to fight ISIS". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 12 October 2016.

be to retake Manbij from the YPG-SDF.<sup>68</sup> By early 2017, the furious conflict between the Turkish military and the PKK in Turkey's south east threatened to spill over into Syria in the form of a proxy conflict opposing Turkey-backed Syrian rebels and the YPG's Syrian PKK-trained commanders. Turkey's military intervention strengthened the narrative of the PKK Turkey-focused cadres. A PKK-trained cadre of Syrian origin asked: "If Turkey invades Syria, why shouldn't Kurds from Turkey come to help us?"<sup>69</sup>

### **B. *Facing a Fateful Choice***

Six years after the start of the Syrian conflict, the regional and global alignment that allowed the YPG-PYD to thrive is changing. Having failed to obtain local or external support for its self-rule project, it finds itself besieged, without allies it can rely upon to protect it and dangerously exposed. As a result, the PKK has come to a crossroads: it must choose between continuing to hitch the Syrian self-rule project it so successfully established to the wagon of its ongoing fight against Turkey or giving it the chance to develop and thrive with its own Syria-driven logic. These have become competing objectives in Syria's rapidly evolving terrain.

With the gradual deterioration of the U.S.-Turkish relationship in 2016, Russia and Turkey started pursuing a rapprochement. Determined to block the YPG, Ankara apparently struck a deal with Moscow in late 2016, standing back as the regime retook rebel-held eastern Aleppo in exchange for gaining a free hand in taking Al-Bab from ISIS. Russia thus seemed to de-prioritise its relationship with the PYD in favour of Turkey and put itself in a stronger position to shape an eventual political solution in Syria. While it has courted the PYD and allied parties inside the country by organising meetings with them, it was unable or unwilling to override a Turkish veto of PYD participation in January 2017 peace talks in Kazakhstan.<sup>70</sup>

Because the U.S. relationship with the YPG involves strictly the anti-ISIS fight, the group can only marginally count on U.S. protection from a Turkish attack. Washington embedded special forces with both the Turkish army and the SDF in northern Syria for the fight against ISIS, but also to prevent a confrontation between the two; and it accepted Turkey's drive on Al-Bab that prevented the YPG from moving westward.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ilnur Çevik, a senior Erdoğan adviser, said, "we will knock them [YPG] out from Manbij, west of Euphrates. We're not going to touch them east of the Euphrates". Quoted in Patrick Kingsley and Tim Arango, "Erdoğan curbs criticism of Trump, seeking warmer relationship", *The New York Times*, 11 February 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 12 March 2017.

<sup>70</sup> A Qamishli resident who has served as intermediary between the regime and the PYD said, "with the Russian-Turkey rapprochement, the dream of territorial continuity is over, because the PYD has failed to build stable political relationships. They kept changing sides and never joined an alliance: first they dealt with the regime, then with the Iranians, then with the U.S. and the Russians, and now they are all alone". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 3 January 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Turkish and YPG forces in northern Syria are deployed in close proximity. The U.S. embedded military advisers with the Turkish army as it moved across the border. According to a U.S. official, the U.S. aims to play a stabilising role between the army and YPG, deterring the former from advancing eastward toward Kobani and containing the latter's ambition to expand westward toward Afrin. Crisis Group interview, Washington, 15 October 2016.



Whatever U.S. protection the YPG has enjoyed is likely to end the moment the battle with ISIS ends. At that point, it arguably will become far more a liability than an asset for Washington, unless the Trump administration decides to maintain a longer-term military foothold in northern Syria.

After Turkey took Al-Bab at the end of February 2017, Syrian and Syrian-allied forces pushed northward from Aleppo to the east of Al-Bab, taking pockets of ISIS territory and proceeding toward Manbij. In March, Russia brokered a deal between the YPG and the regime under which the YPG-SDF allowed 200 Syrian border guards to be stationed in eight villages west of Manbij, established the SDF-run “Al-Bab military council” to control the area and raised the Syrian flag. This created a buffer between the YPG and Turkish forces that satisfied neither party but served Russia’s aim of limiting the scope of Turkey’s Syria incursion while giving Damascus a role north of Aleppo.<sup>72</sup> Because this opened the way for YPG fighters and civilians to move from Kobani to Afrin indirectly, via regime-controlled areas, it suggested the YPG-PYD had partially achieved its land bridge – but only with Damascus’s tolerance.<sup>73</sup>

The PKK now must decide how to proceed. It vacillates between seeing the Syrian theatre as a springboard for its struggle against Turkey and viewing YPG-PYD gains as the foundation for realising Öcalan’s ideas in Syria separate from that conflict.<sup>74</sup> PKK-trained cadres may go back and forth between these preferences or remain undecided, continuing in default mode. Two, now senior officials in Syria, voiced opposing positions. One, reflecting the prevailing PKK view, said:

The Kurdish question in Syria and Turkey cannot be delinked. We will not repeat the mistake of Iraqi Kurdistan. Even if Syrian Kurds gain a political status in Syria, this won’t last if the Kurds in Turkey don’t succeed .... As long as there is no change in Turkey’s policy toward Kurds there, it won’t change its policy toward Kurds in Rojava either. Turkey haunts the Kurds wherever they live.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, he said, the PKK had no choice but to continue its struggle against Turkey, using all the assets it has accumulated, including and especially in northern Syria (but also increasingly in northern Iraq). The other official said, in contrast:

There are different ways to interpret Öcalan’s writings. The struggle against Turkey has gone on for 30 years. We are now ready to shift our priorities away from that fight. The PKK’s struggle against Turkey is negatively affecting us. We intend to

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<sup>72</sup> Since then, Euphrates Shield forces have reportedly shelled the area of the eight villages.

<sup>73</sup> According to Sipan Hammo, a YPG commander, YPG forces could transit from regime-controlled western Manbij to Tadiif, south of Al-Bab, and from there reach Aleppo and Afrin. In future these could be jointly controlled by regime and YPG-SDF forces. Hammo denied the YPG delivered Manbij to regime forces: “In Manbij there is no regime or Russian presence. We left the administration in the hands of a local council”. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 13 March 2017.

<sup>74</sup> A former PKK commander said, “both the uprising and the war in Syria led us to revive our [Syrian Kurdish] national identity. We were without guidance on how to strike a balance between ideology and national identity. We had no phone calls with Öcalan and faced a lot of pressure from the street”. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 12 November 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 10 March 2016.

create a region here in Syria that will be friendly toward the U.S. and Israel, with the same diplomatic access that [Masoud] Barzani enjoys.<sup>76</sup>

These visions were compatible as long as the immediate objective was to gain ground but now that Turkey has blocked further advances westward, the PKK will have to decide what to do next.

The choice it makes in Syria will have political ramifications far beyond the Kurdish question, affecting regional and wider international stability. If the Turkey-centric view prevails, Turkey and the PKK may increasingly move their confrontation to Syria and Iraq. PKK-trained commanders in Syria say they are considering cementing the group's presence in Sinjar, a Yazidi town in Iraq's Ninewa governorate on the Syrian border, which the PKK helped take from ISIS in November 2015. As they see it, strengthening their position there and connecting with Iran-backed Shiite militias in nearby Tel Afar could open a road to Baghdad and so score another point against Turkey and its Kurdish ally, the KDP. The PKK sees in its Sinjar presence the potential to break the KDP-Turkey embargo on northern Syria by opening a trade route between Qamishli and Baghdad that would spare the self-rule area dependency on Damascus. This would also help Iran, which is forging a path to the Mediterranean through areas least likely to put up significant resistance.<sup>77</sup> So far, the PKK has been willing to go along.

The PKK may be misjudging the current balance of power and thus miscalculating its chances. It may exploit the Iranian corridor for its own anti-Turkey purposes, but it is unlikely Tehran and its allies in Baghdad would help the PKK's Syrian affiliates gain greater political and economic autonomy from Damascus. Iran seems to be using the PKK as a counterweight to Turkey but gives no sign it would support any Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Indeed, the PKK's moves in northern Iraq heighten the risk of escalation in the form of further Turkish intervention.<sup>78</sup> The early signals are already there: on 25 April, the Turkish air force carried out bombing raids on bases of the PKK and/or its local affiliates in Karachok in northern Syria close to the Iraqi border, and on Sinjar Mountain just across that border, killing a number of PKK fighters.<sup>79</sup> As the Turkey-PKK conflict metastasises, the YPG-PYD in northern Syria could be left empty-handed.

The better option for Turkey and the PKK would be to return to peace talks, but there is scant hope for now that either would. Yet, there are ways to de-escalate the situation and pave the way for an eventual return to talks. The PKK would have to forego its goal of territorially linking the three majority-Kurdish districts, except

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<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 11 March 2016.

<sup>77</sup> See Joost Hiltermann, "Syria: The hidden power of Iran", *The New York Review of Books*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Turkish troops have been at a base near Bashiqa, immediately east of Mosul, since March 2015, without Baghdad's consent; Turkey sent additional troops in late 2015 after the KDP and PKK, acting separately, retook Sinjar from ISIS. There is a risk yet more Turkish troops will enter Iraq, this time at Sinjar – to fight the PKK – and the nearby Turkoman town of Tel Afar – to ensure the area does not become a Shiite militia stronghold. Such a move would almost certainly spark conflict between Turkey and Iraq.

<sup>79</sup> Five Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga of the KDP were also killed in the strikes on Sinjar, apparently by accident. CNN and other news reports, 25 April 2017.

through the new regime-held corridor south of Al-Bab. It would also need to dilute its political dominance in Kobani, Jazeera and Afrin by removing the YPG from governance and encouraging the PYD to share the authority of budgeting and appointing senior officials with Kurdish and non-Kurdish groups. If the PYD were to offer better governance, it would gain greater local support.

It would help, of course, if the KDP-controlled Iraq-Syria border were to reopen, allowing goods to flow. For this, the PKK, through the YPG, would need U.S. help to mediate a solution to the Sinjar quandary with the Kurdistan Regional Government as well as Baghdad. A deal would need to involve a withdrawal of PKK-trained cadres from Sinjar in return for a full opening of the border to people and trade. As a final component, the YPG would need to refrain from directly aiding the PKK's fight against Turkey.<sup>80</sup>

Ankara showed in 2013-2015 it might be able to live with a PYD-run Kurdish entity if the PKK suspended its fight and talked peace. It suggested it could equally do so if the YPG-PYD cut operational links with Qandil.<sup>81</sup> PKK action to remove fighters from Sinjar in return for an open Iraq-Syria border might reverse the vicious cycle the group and Ankara entered in 2015, even if it did not yet solve the situation in northern Syria, much less address either's core demand: for Turkey, an end to the PKK's armed struggle; for the PKK, "democratic self-administration" in autonomous regions and recognition of basic rights such as mother-tongue education.<sup>82</sup>

If Turkey's main strategic concern – having a PKK-run entity on its border that caters to the group's fight in Turkey – is addressed, it should be willing to accept a Kurdish-run enclave in northern Syria and allow the PYD, along with other Syrian Kurdish parties, to participate in Syria peace talks and help draft a new constitution that would guarantee and protect Kurdish rights.

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<sup>80</sup> While the extent of YPG military support to the PKK is unclear, observers have cited the appearance of military tactics in cities in south-eastern Turkey that also have been used in Syria. Crisis Group interview, Brussels, April 2017. In one example, Turkish authorities claim a one-ton bomb made of RDX, ammonium nitrate, TNT and diesel was detonated via remote control in a 30-metre underground tunnel leading from an apartment in the Bağlar district in Diyarbakır to an adjacent police compound. "Emniyet'in altında 1 ton bomba" ("One-ton bomb under police station"), *Hürriyet*, 12 April 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2015.

<sup>82</sup> See "DTK – Declaration of political resolution regarding self-rule", HDP Europe, December 2015, <http://en.hdpeurope.com/?p=2402>.

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## **V. Conclusion**

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Having taken advantage of the chaos in Syria to improve its overall military position in its fight against Turkey, the PKK now faces a momentous choice. This is because its Syrian affiliates may soon reach the territorial and political limits of what is achievable, and risk losing some, if not all, of what they have gained in the past five years if they fail to adjust their behaviour. The PKK's Syria project spearheaded by the YPG-PYD has landed it in a quandary largely precipitated by its appetite for more territory and more control without offering the local population legitimate governance. The YPG-PYD faces hostile neighbours in Turkey and, in northern Iraq, in Turkey's ally the KDP. It has found Russia to be an unreliable ally intent on preserving the Damascus regime rather than helping the Kurds gain autonomy. The regime itself likely is simply biding its time, preparing for the day it will have recovered sufficient strength to return in force to oust the YPG-PYD from northern Syria.

The only potential ally the PKK has left is, incongruously, the U.S., which long ago placed the group on its terrorism list. This means its leaders cannot speak directly to U.S. military commanders but must do so through the PKK's YPG associates in their capacity as SDF commanders. That has worked so far but has not produced the kind of guarantees the PKK would need for its Syria project to survive. While U.S. military officers on the ground in Syria are clearly enamoured of the YPG's fighting spirit and acumen, it is not they but the Trump administration that will decide on the U.S.'s post-Raqqa military posture in the region. It remains unclear what that decision would be.

What seems clear is that the YPG-PYD will not be in a position to attract long-term U.S. protection if it fails to forego its ambition to link majority-Kurdish districts by force, separate its military control from governance, reach out to other Kurdish and non-Kurdish groups, begin to govern inclusively or put forward a realistic plan for Kurdish rights in Syria. The survival of one of Syria's few relatively stable and peaceful enclaves – the area carved out by the YPG's advances – should prevail in the PKK's calculations over the military utility these acquisitions might offer in the fight against Turkey. In the absence of a Turkey-PKK deal, the group's remarkable accomplishment in northern Syria is the maximum it can realistically hope to achieve.

**Ankara/Qamishli/Brussels, 4 May 2017**

## Appendix A: Map of Northern Syria



## Appendix B: Glossary of Abbreviations

**AKP or AK Party** – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party): Turkey's ruling party led by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım.

**ISIS** – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or just the Islamic State: Jihadist group fighting in Syria and Iraq, with affiliates elsewhere.

**Ciwanen Soresger** – (Revolutionary Youth): association of Kurdish youth activists established in Syria after 2003, comprising PKK-trained cadres and other sympathisers with Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK founder imprisoned in Turkey since 1999.

**KCK** – Koma Ciwakên Kurdistan (Union of Communities in Kurdistan): an umbrella organisation created by the PKK in 2005-2007 for its affiliates in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the diaspora. The PYD is formally a member.

**KDP** – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan): one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, founded in 1946 and headed by Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdish region.

**KDPKS** – Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria (Partîya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê), or simply Kurdish Progressive Party: Syrian sister party of Jalal Talabani's PUK in Iraq, headed by Abdulhamid Darwish.

**KDSP** – Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party: Iraqi affiliate of the PKK/KCK.

**KRG** – Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan): official governing body of the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq. The president of the Iraqi Kurdish region is Masoud Barzani; its two largest parties – the KDP and PUK – have ruled since the KRG's inception in May 1992.

**HDP** – Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples' Democratic Party): main political party representing the Kurdish national movement in Turkey.

**PCWK** – People's Council of Western Kurdistan: PYD-affiliated elected local assembly in Syria's Kurdish areas that provides social services, established in late 2011.

**PKKS** – Partîya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria): Syrian sister party of Masoud Barzani's KDP in Iraq, headed by Saud al-Mullah.

**PJAK** – Partîya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Party of Free Life for Kurdistan): PKK/KCK sister party founded in 2004 and focused on Iran.

**PKK** – Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Kurdish party in Turkey founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan.

**PUK** – Yeketî Nîştîmanî Kurdistan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): founded in 1975, one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, headed by Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq in 2005-2014.

**PYD** – Partîya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party): Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK/KCK, founded in 2003.

**SDF** – Syrian Democratic Forces (Quwwat Suriya al-Dimuqratiya): alliance of non-Kurdish fighters (Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmens) in addition to the YPG, which retained overall command and control.

**TEV DEM** – Rojava Democratic Society Movement, an umbrella for all organisations in Syria ideologically linked to the PKK, comprising PKK-trained cadres and other Abdullah Öcalan sympathisers.

**Yekîtiya Star** – Star Union: an organisation focused on women's rights established in Syria after 2003, comprising PKK-trained cadres and other Abdullah Öcalan sympathisers.

**YPG** – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Corps): established in 2012 and deriving from the PKK, the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria.

**YPJ** – Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units): established in 2012, the YPG's female equivalent.

## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013. Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in nine other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington DC. It also has staff representation in the following locations: Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Caracas, Delhi, Dubai, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kiev, Mexico City, Rabat, Sydney, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and U.S. Agency for International Development.

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**May 2017**

## Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2014

### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### Israel/Palestine

*The Next Round in Gaza*, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions*, Middle East Briefing N°39, 14 July 2014.

*Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question*, Middle East Report N°156, 9 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Toward a Lasting Ceasefire in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°42, 23 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Report N°159, 30 June 2015 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*No Exit? Gaza & Israel Between Wars*, Middle East Report N°162, 26 August 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement*, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, Middle East Report N°150, 28 April 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, Middle East Report N°151, 8 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, Middle East Report N°153, 27 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*, Middle East Briefing N°38, 20 June 2014.

*Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, Middle East Report N°155, 9 September 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies*, Middle East Report N°160, 20 July 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*New Approach in Southern Syria*, Middle East Report N°163, 2 September 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town*, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

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