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Summary

One of the many unexpected turns of the Syrian conflict has been the rapid rise and enduring relevance of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and their associated political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). This development was largely made possible by three factors. The first is the substantial transnational support that the YPG/PYD received from the Iraq-based, Turkish-origin Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the early years of the Syrian civil war. Their linkage remains strong today, to the point that the YPG/PYD cannot independently take strategic decisions. The PKK-YPG connection is inextricably connected with another key factor, namely the YPG/PYD's informal arrangement with the Syrian regime that combines a long-term cease-fire with ongoing trade and the provision of limited mutual support. This deal provided the YPG/PYD with space and additional resources for growth in 2011/2012, for example in the form of state assets. Finally, the YPG/PYD struck up a tactical partnership with the US after the battle for Kobani against Islamic State (IS) in 2015. This partnership remains active today, even though US objectives have partially shifted from defeating IS to countering the Syrian regime and Iran.

Turning to the present, it bears noting that the YPG/PYD is many things at the same time, making assessment of its role in the Syrian conflict a complex undertaking. At one level, the YPG/PYD is the result of a longstanding relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime in a context of decades of ruthless regime repression of Syrian Kurdish political representation. This combination enabled a fast rise of the YPG as quasi-paramilitary organisation with the PYD as associated political party, as well as the group's establishment of control over the patchwork of communities of northern Syria. It also helped repress the revolution, in part by not joining it. At another level, the YPG/PYD nevertheless also 'freed' Syria's Kurdish areas (and others) from longstanding repression of the Assad regime and largely saved Kurdish YPG-held northern Syria from the ravages of civil war. The paradox here is that it replaced the Assad regime with an authoritarian system of its own. Moreover, the YPG/PYD has become a US-linked armed group in control of resource-rich areas of Syria that are not, however, populated chiefly by Kurds, with the aim of keeping the Syrian regime and Iran out. This creates a situation in which the US supports a group that is linked to the PKK, which both the US and its NATO-ally Turkey label as a terrorist organisation. At a deeper level, the YPG/PYD is also a consequence of Turkey's longstanding denial of greater Kurdish rights and autonomy, manifested in part by the violent suppression of groups that aspire to it by political or militant means. In this fight, the PKK viewed the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 as an opportunity to gain advantage through the YPG/PYD. Yet, among other developments, its move into Syria aggravated the conflict with Turkey

even further. Finally, at a more generic level, the YPG/PYD is a product of civil war in which opportunities arise for those with arms, funds and recruits to establish new political order(s).

Irrespective of the precise balance of factors and forces, the reality today is that the YPG/PYD runs northeast Syria in a fairly autocratic fashion despite promises and some efforts at more inclusive governance. It does not tolerate dissent, regularly commits human rights violations (at times possibly war crimes) and, with US support, controls parts of Syria where it is not necessarily welcome. At the same time, it also provides basic security and services and keeps the Assad regime at a distance. Paraphrasing an anonymous resident of Raqqa in Enab Baladi (a Syrian media organisation): 'it is the best of the worst' – compared with the Syrian regime, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State (IS).

Efforts to make the PYD-run Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) or the PYD-dominated Syrian Democratic Council (which runs Arab-majority areas – roughly southern Hasaka, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces) more inclusive, have so far met with limited success. Negotiations between the YPG/PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) stumble over the willingness of the former to publicly – and practically – cut ties with the PKK, implement effective power-sharing arrangements, and increase transparency regarding financial flows. The absence of prospects for a broader resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey itself also plays an important role, since it means that the Turkish military continues to put significant pressure on the PKK in both Turkey and Iraq – enabled by the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – which makes resolution of the Kurdish question in Syria less attractive to the PKK.

In our analysis, there is only one actor with sufficient leverage over the YPG/PYD to put pressure on it to change course towards a more inclusive and rights-based governance arrangement for northeast Syria: Washington. Yet, the US suffers from a principle-agent problem as long as it values the YPG/PYD to keep eastern Syria out of the hands of other actors like the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran. It is for this reason that continuation of the status quo is the more likely short-term scenario, which means that the YPG/PYD retains authoritarian control over northeast Syria under US protection, and that the civil war will continue in stalemated form. It is a profoundly unattractive situation for other external actors who can offer support, such as the European Union (EU), to engage with.

Regarding longer-term change that is more positive, the ball is mostly in the court of the YPG/PYD as it faces an important choice: either it remains an entity that is strategically dominated by the PKK and that is under pressure from all sides – Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Syrian regime and Russia – without improving either the political or economic prospects of northeast Syria; or it begins an uncertain transformation into a more Syrian organisation that could play a role in a more inclusive governance system for northeast Syria and facilitate the area's reconstruction. Given the

limitations on US action noted above, the EU especially should use all the diplomacy it is capable of mustering and all the tools it can mobilise to cajole and pressure the YPG/PYD into the second direction because it has a higher likelihood of being less violent, bringing more long-term stability, and enabling greater human development.

As a transition creates vulnerability, enabling it will require some form of assurance of external protection against both the Assad regime and Turkey, as well as an arrangement that enables greater access to Turkish markets. Reaching such quid pro quo's require backroom negotiations between the US, EU, Turkey, KDP and PYD. A key task for the EU going forward is to explore and create the space in which these conversations can take place.

Acknowledgments

Glossary

AKP *Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)*
Turkey's ruling party since 2002. Initially a moderate incarnation of the Virtue Party inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideology, it is increasingly centered on the person of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

KCK *Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan)*
An umbrella platform of Kurdish political and insurgent groups across the region, comprising for example the PKK (Turkey), Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) (Iran), PYD (Syria) and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK) (Iraq).

KDP *Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê)*
One of the two leading parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It operates out of Erbil and is centred on the Barzani family. It has close ties with Turkey and features its own KDP-Peshmerga forces.

KNC *Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)*
An umbrella movement of 15 parties that support the Syrian revolution. The parties represent a segment of the Syrian Kurds, including youth and women's movements as well as independents. Its largest constituent parties are PDK-S and Yekiti.

PDK-S *Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê)*
Kurdish Syrian political party founded in 1957 in northern Syria.

PKK *The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)*
A Turkish-origin, Iraqi-based Kurdish political party with several armed wings that fights for greater Kurdish autonomy in Turkey, using both guerrilla and terrorist tactics. It is active in Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Turkey, the US and the EU consider the PKK a terrorist group (see also footnote 7).

PUK *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Niştimanî ya Kurdistanê)*
The other of the two leading parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It operates out of Sulaymaniya and is centred on the Talabani family. It has close ties with Iran and features its own PUK-Peshmerga forces

PYD *Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)*
A Syrian Kurdish political party founded in 2003 that runs the Autonomous Administration of North Eastern Syria (AANES) from Ain Issa. The PYD is the political wing of the YPG. Their relationship is probably best understood as ancient Sparta, i.e. an 'army' (YPG) with a 'state' (PYD). In other words, the YPG dominates the PYD. The PYD has links with the PKK and the Syrian regime as well as the US.

SDC *Syrian Democratic Council* (مجلس سوريا الديمقراطية)
A PYD-led political platform that brings 25 parties together. It was established in 2015.

SDF *Syrian Democratic Forces* (قوات سوريا الديمقراطية)
A YPG-led armed force that is militarily and financially supported by the US with the aim of defeating IS in northeast Syria and suppressing any of its remnants. It is led by Mazloum Abdi.

YPG *People's Protection Units. Kurdish (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)*
A Syrian Kurdish armed group of which the PYD is the political wing. The group forms the core of the SDF and features Kurdish fighters mostly from Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. The YPG is linked with the PKK (see introduction).

Introduction

The twists and turns in the Kurdish quest for equal rights and greater autonomy have been many over past decades. One of the more intriguing developments in this journey has been the meteoric rise of the People's Protection Units (YPG; an armed group) and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD; a political party) since 2011. Controlling roughly between 20 and 30 per cent of the country's territory (see Figure 1 below),[1] including much of Syria's oil, gas and wheat-producing areas, the YPG/PYD has become a fixed feature in the conflict map of the Syrian civil war. The question is not whether it will endure once the civil war tapers off, but in what form and, specifically, with what status.

The rise of the YPG/PYD has many of the elements of the greater Kurdish struggle.[2] It features the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK) providing large-scale support to the YPG/PYD in the form of staff, resources and experience once the opportunity arose with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The YPG/PYD has also been pragmatic in seizing any support it could get, preserving good relations with the Syrian regime since 2011, and building a tactical partnership with the United States (US) after 2014/2015. Such deal-making has been instrumental in maintaining its autonomy and extending it into Arab-majority areas of Syria. In contrast, the YPG/PYD did not join the revolution against Assad.[3] The story of the YPG/PYD also contains the usual divisions between the Kurds themselves. For example, the Kurdish National Council (KNC; also Syrian) protests against the YPG/PYD's autocratic methods, its links with the PKK and with the Assad regime. Finally, the rise of the YPG/PYD features an existential fight: first with Islamic State (IS) and then with Turkey.

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1   Depending on the point in time under consideration. Figure 1 offers snapshots in 2017 and 2021.

2   On this broader struggle: Natali, D., *The Kurds and the state: Evolving national identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005; Marcus, A., *Blood and belief: The PKK and the Kurdish fight for independence*, New York: New York University Press, 2007.

3   A prominent KNC member stated: 'Their [PYD] basic struggle is not with Bashar al-Assad but with Erdogan. The PYD is the political authority for YPG and both of them have another authority who is giving them orders in the first place.' *Source*: Interview in Qamishli, 2 October 2019. The YPG also fought the FSA several times, for instance in Aleppo in 2012, around Ayn Daqna as well as in and around Tel Rifaat in early 2016. See: Phillips, C., *The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*, New Haven: YUP, 2020; Stein, A., *The YPG's Next Move: A Two Front War for the Manbij Pocket*, Atlantic Council, 2016, online. After the second incident, the YPG paraded dozens of bodies of killed FSA fighters on a flatbed truck in Afrin. It claimed they were jihadists. See: https://observers.france24.com/en/20160502-video-kurdish-bodies-victory-parade-afrin (accessed 23 April 2020).

The YPG/PYD used a number of opportunities that arose in the course of the initial uprising and the subsequent civil war to good tactical effect. For instance, it built on Syrian regime weakness to gain dominance and establish a limited alternative governance structure; it used the fight for Kobani as a source of pride among Syrian Kurds as well as inspiration for the international community in its fight against IS);[4] it exploited the US focus on IS to obtain temporary patronage; and it projected the image of inclusive local governance as well as gender equality to enamour Western policy makers. The YPG/PYD also made poor strategic decisions, such as expanding beyond Syria's Kurdish heartlands[5] – triggering both Turkish offensives and Syrian Arab resistance – suppressing all Kurdish political opposition, yielding Afrin to Ankara, and failing to anticipate the timing of a (partial) US withdrawal. The balance remains undecided.

This report analyses the role of the YPG/PYD in the Syrian civil war as a 'hybrid coercive organisation'. That is to say, an organisation that simultaneously competes and cooperates with the government on whose territory it operates (here: the Syrian regime) with intensity and modalities depending on the overlap of interests on particular issues.[6] Building on a number of recent publications about the Syrian Kurds,[7] the purpose of our research is to obtain a better understanding of the nature, objectives and methods of the YPG/PYD as a 'hybrid coercive organisation' involved in a quasi-statebuilding project during an internationalised civil war. The primary audience of the report are Western opinion-, policy- and decision-makers engaged with the Syrian civil war and we hope it will help them to craft policies and initiate interventions that are feasible and appropriate to the situation in northeast Syria.

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4   Filkins, D., *The fight of their lives*, The New Yorker, 2014, online.

5   These are Afrin, Hasaka and Kobani/Ayn al-Arab.

6   See: Van Veen, E. and F. Fliervoet, *Dealing with tools of political (dis)order: Coercive organisations in the Levant*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

7   Such as: Mulla Rashid, B., *Military and security structures of the autonomous administration in Syria*, Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Special Report, 2018a, online; Mulla Rashid, B., *The Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria: Questions of Legitimacy and Identity*, Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2018b, online; International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A struggle with a struggle*, ICG, Middle East report no. 136, 2013; ICG (2017), *op.cit.*; Gunes, C. and R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish politics across the Middle East*, London: Chatham House, 2015; Allsopp, H., *The Kurds of Syria*, London: IB Tauris, 2015; Allsopp, H. and W. van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of northern Syria: Governance, diversity and conflicts*, London: IB Tauris, 2019.

As to the relationship between the PYD and YPG, based on available evidence we use the analogy of ancient Sparta, i.e. where the 'army' (YPG) dominates the 'state' (PYD, in this case a political party).[8] This stands to reason in a situation of war preceded by autocracy. As to the relationship between the YPG/PYD and the PKK,[9] we view these organisations as closely intertwined in terms of their ideology, leadership and combat forces to the point that, at present, the YPG/PYD cannot make autonomous decisions on strategic issues.[10] These require agreement from the PKK. However, this does not necessarily mean the YPG/PYD is a proxy or 'under full control of' the PKK since there is both US influence and the YPG/PYD's own 'Syrian' faction to consider.

Section 1 sketches broad factors that mostly pre-date 2011 and help to explain the rise of the YPG/PYD after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Section 2 analyses the main strategies of dominance and governance that the YPG/PYD has deployed to establish an alternative centre of governance to the Assad regime. Section 3 discusses short- to medium-term challenges to the YPG/PYD's project of establishing governance and control in northern Syria. The report concludes by highlighting a number of scenarios based on the current power configuration in the area.

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8   For a more detailed analysis of the military structure(s) of the YPG and SDF, as well as their relationship with the PYD and SDC respectively: Mulla Rashid (2018a), *op.cit.*

9   Turkey, the US (1997) and EU (2002) have designated the PKK a terrorist organisation. This re-labels an 'internal armed conflict actor' as 'a terrorist group', which is reflected in the 2018 judgment by the European General Court (case T-316/14, here). It rejects Council implementing regulations from 2014 to 2017 that give effect, i.e. impose restrictive measures, to the PKK's listing as a terrorist organisation. The Court found that the Council failed to state sufficient reason (in other words, it failed to provide adequate evidence).

10   See, for example: Van Dam, N., *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, London: IB Tauris, 2017; ICG, *The PKK's fateful choice in northern Syria*, Middle East report no. 176, 2017; Stein, A. and M. Foley, *The YPG-PKK connection*, Atlantic Council, online, 2016 (accessed 19 October 2020). This view of the YPG-PKK relationship is also supported by many of our interviews (see 'Methodology').

Figure 1   YPG/PYD territorial expansion in northern Syria from 2015 to 2017 *(part 1)*
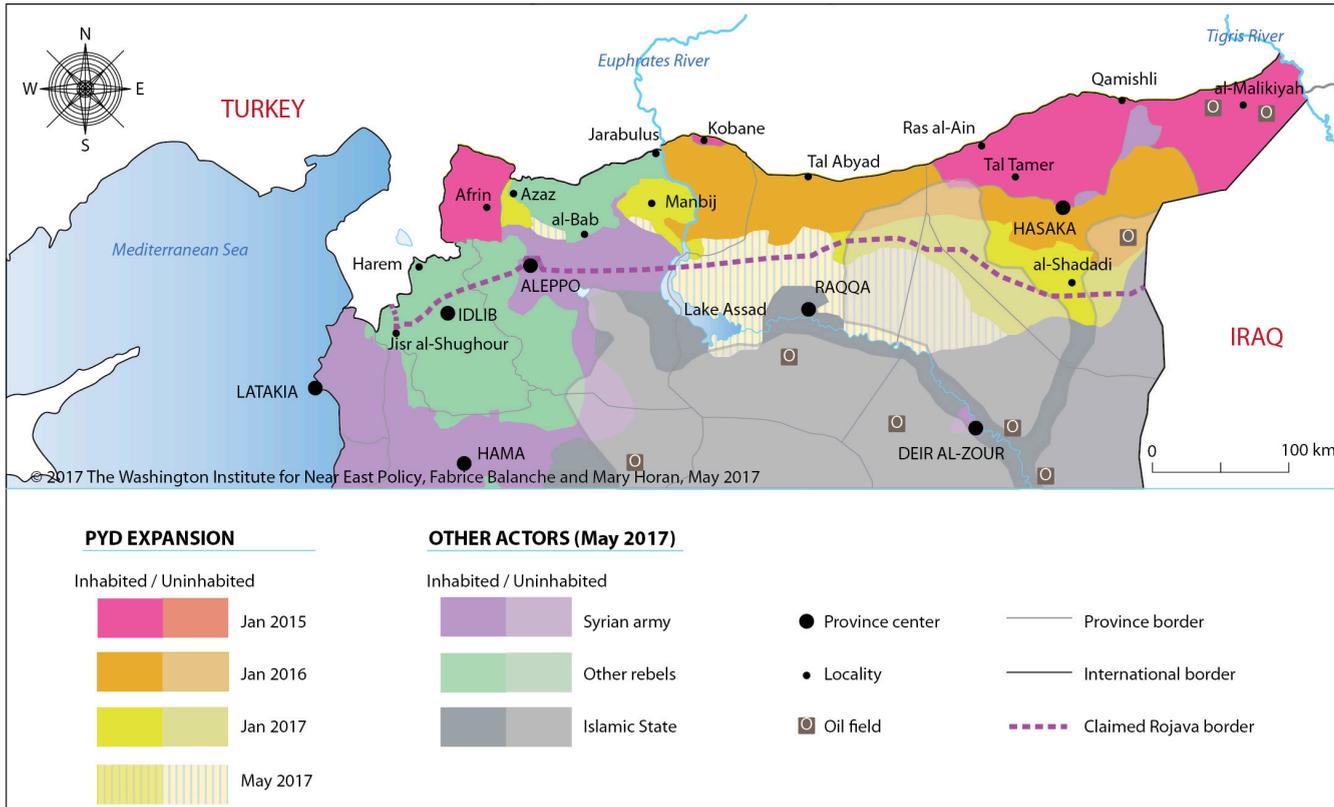
Source: Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018 (reproduced with permission).

Figure 1   YPG/PYD territorial status in northern Syria in late 2020 / early 2021 *(part 2)*
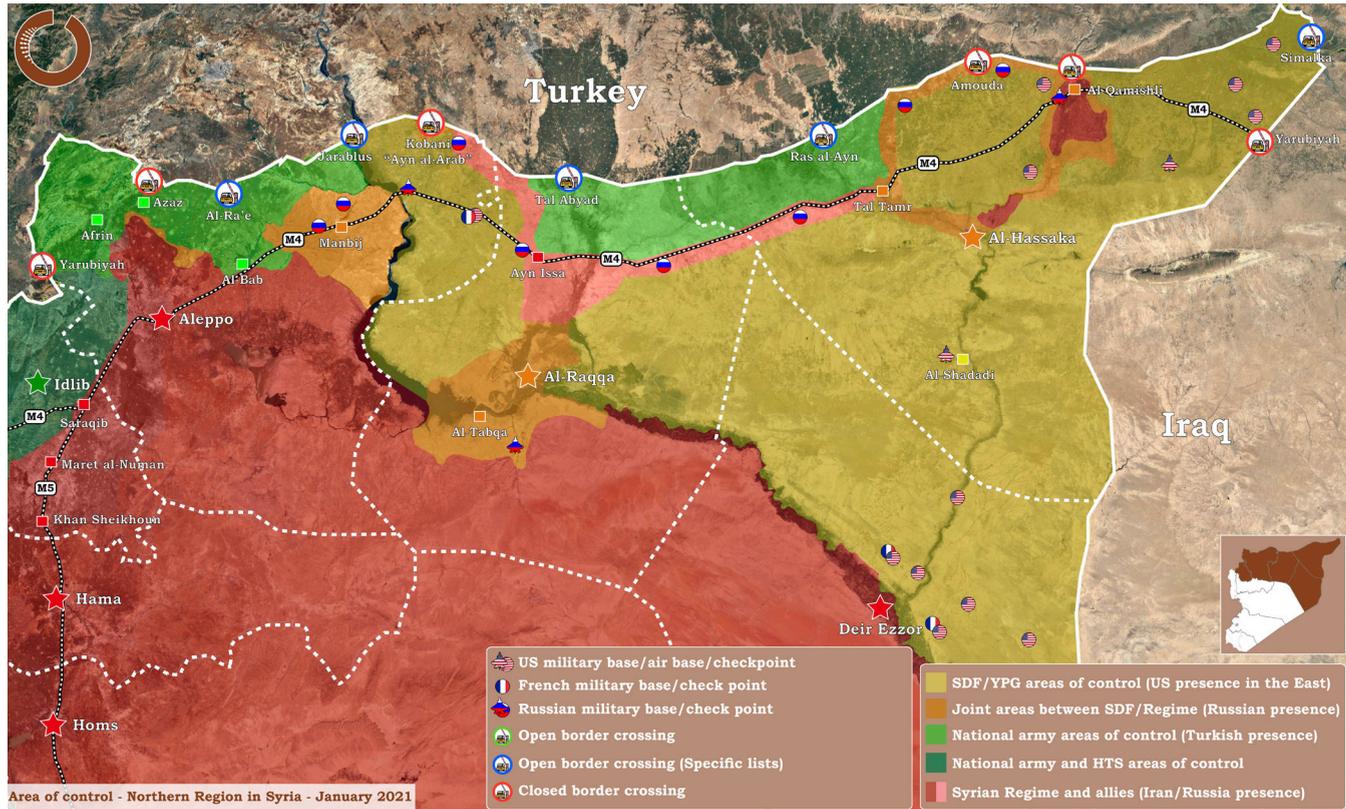
Source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2021 (reproduced with permission).

1 An extraordinary tale: The YPG/PYD rises

This section outlines broad contextual factors that help to explain the YPG/PYD's rise to power during the early years of the Syrian conflict. It seeks to understand what circumstances enabled the organisation to achieve remarkable gains and autonomy in the space of just a few years after decades of repression by the Syrian regime of most domestic Kurdish political activity. As a PYD representative put it: 'Let us go back to before 2011. The PYD was forbidden in Syria and Turkey. You can say that the majority of the PYD was locked up in regime prisons. In Damascus? In all provinces!'[11] Our analysis suggests that at least five storylines must be woven together to explain the rise of the YPG/PYD in the early years of the Syrian civil war, regardless of the specific strategies the group has pursued since then (these are analysed in Section 2).

A **first** element of the story are the policies of marginalisation, Arabisation and repression that Gamal Abdel Nasr applied to the Kurdish population of Syria after 1958 (during the United Arab Republic) and Syria's various Ba'ath regimes after 1963. Lasting for decades, such policies broke up many communities in Syria's Kurdish areas through a mix of symbolic and material measures, ranging from re-naming cities and villages.[12] keeping tens of thousands of Kurds stateless, enacting demographic changes, purposeful underdevelopment, and the incarceration of political dissidents.[13] It should be noted that the autocratic nature of the various Ba'ath regimes, especially under the Assads, created a generic level of repression across Syrian society in which Kurdish-specific repression was nested.[14] Moreover, Syrian Kurds could be part of the state apparatus and army as long as they fully embraced the regime and relegated their

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11   Interview with a PYD representative, Ra's Al-Ayn, 5 October 2019.

12   For example, the official name of the town of Kobani is Ayn al-Arab; of Derik it is Al-Malikiya; of Tirbespi it is Al-Qahtaniyah.

13   It should be noted that the 'othering' of the Syrian Kurds by the regime was echoed by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in the early years of the war, which did not inspire confidence among Syrian Kurdish parties. See: Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*; Gunes and Lowe (2015), *op.cit.*; Van Dam (2017), *op cit.*; Phillips (2020), *op.cit.;* HNC (Etilaf), *Executive framework for a political solution based on the Geneva communiqué of 2012*, 2016, online. The latter offers mixed messages, e.g. pages 3 versus 9.

14   See: Seurat, M., *Syrie: l'État de barbarie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012.

Kurdishness to the background.[15] Nevertheless, the regime did single Syrian Kurdish communities out for particularly intense and targeted repressive treatment out of concern that the country's most substantial non-ruling minority might threaten its hold on power. Since the regime perceived the Kurds as not fitting the Arab nature of the Syrian state, the loyalty of this group was in doubt and its 'othering' facilitated a prism of repression to take hold.[16] For the purpose of this report, the relevance of these policies is that they created a climate of fear and distrust among Syrian Kurdish communities and political leaders. This climate was maintained by the presence of widespread regime intelligence informant networks.[17]

A Syrian activist described the climate this engendered in the following manner: 'Back in 1977, when Hafez al-Assad was in power, […] if you spoke Kurdish, or if they saw a Kurdish book with you, that was enough to arrest you: then you were a threat to state security. More than 250,000 Syrian Kurds did not have passports, let alone civil rights. My father is a Syrian national, but his sister and her children are not. Moreover, the regime removed Kurds to bring about demographic changes. They brought Arabs from Aleppo and Raqqa to our territory, took land from Kurds and gave it to the Arabs. Under Hafez al-Assad, no fewer than 68 leaders of the Kurdish democratic parties have been detained without trial.'[18]

By 2011, these policies of marginalisation and repression had fragmented the Syrian Kurdish socio-political community, created a deep-seated fear of the regime and its

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15 One consequence was that Kurdish residents in urban areas had greater access to state-enabled opportunities than Kurds resident in rural areas, since the former tended to be (seen as) more integrated into Syria as nation-state.

16 Marcus (2007), *op.cit.*; Allsopp (2015), *op.cit.*

17 Allsop (2015), *op.cit.* A 1996 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the situation of Syrian-born Kurds who were arbitrarily denied the right to Syrian nationality in violation of international law. By the government's count, this concerns 142,465 individuals; Kurdish sources suggest well over 200,000. These individuals are discriminated against in the land of their birth but cannot travel abroad. The crucial year was 1962, when an exceptional census stripped some 120,000 Syrian Kurds (about 20 per cent of the Syrian Kurdish population at the time) of their Syrian citizenship. The census was part of a broader plan to Arabise the resource-rich northeast of Syria, an area with the largest concentration of non-Arabs in the country. According to Syrian lawyers: 'thousands of people went to sleep as Syrians and woke up to find that they no longer were [citizens].'. See: HRW, *Syria: The silenced Kurds*, 1996, online; also: Loqman, R., 'Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Volume 17, Issue 4, 2016, online.

18 Interview with a Syrian activist, Geneva, March 2017; for greater detail see also: Dukhan, H., *State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns*, London: Routledge, 2020; Netjes, R., *Als Assad oprecht zou zijn, dan had hij de Koerden rechten geven* [had Assad been sincere, he would have given the Kurds greater rights], OneWorld, 2017, online.

repressive practices among Syrian Kurdish political leaders – given the often fatal consequences of resistance – and produced appreciable mistrust between such leaders.[19] One example of how fear of repression influenced political thinking is how the parties, youth and women's movements in the Kurdish National Council (KNC; created in 2011) hesitated to take up arms to protect their communities in 2011/2012 when the Syrian civil war started.[20] As a result, Syrian Kurdish capacity to engage in collective action was low.

A **second** element is that from the early 1980s until 1998, the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad hosted the PKK in Yafour, Zabadani and Lebanon's Bekaa valley[21]. Assad's objective in supporting the PKK was to gain leverage over its much larger northern neighbour so as to influence various territorial and water disputes. The PKK's long-standing presence highlights the contrast between the Syrian regime's treatment of domestic Kurdish political activity and its treatment of externally-oriented Kurdish political and militant activity on Syrian soil. The former was harshly suppressed in most cases; the latter supported. Such support was naturally conditioned on the PKK staying out of Syria's domestic politics. Instead of mobilising Syria's Kurdish community against Damascus, the PKK harnessed it to its struggle against Turkey.[22] From the PKK's point of view, the Syrian Kurdish community became a recruitment pool for its guerrilla war in Turkey.

Regime hospitality grew over time and PKK training, meeting and resting facilities in Syria multiplied. According to a former director of one of the Syrian regime's security services: 'In the beginning, Hafez al-Assad was a safe haven for the PKK. Abdallah Öcalan stayed a long time in Syria and he trained his fighters in the Lebanese Bekaa, which was under the control of Hafez al-Assad, and in Zabadani, on Syrian soil.

A visual display of YPG-PKK linkages at the Samalka border crossing between Iraq and Syria

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19 Consider, for example, the brutal repression by the regime of the 2004 Qamishli protests that is estimated to have resulted in 40 deaths, over 100 injured, and over 2,000 incarcerations. See: Lowe, R., *The Syrian Kurds: A people discovered*, London: Chatham House, 2006.

20 Allsopp (2015), *op.cit.*; ICG (2013), *op.cit.* A few small initial efforts to set up protection units in Qamishli were undone by the YPG/PYD.

21 Syria administered parts of Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war and exercised substantial political control.

22 Marcus (2007), *op.cit.*

There is a strong relationship between the PKK, the Assad regime and Iran.'[23] Although the relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime was transactional (meaning it waxed and waned with the priorities of the Syrian regime) it was never fully severed. This did not even happen after Hafez al-Assad, under pressure from Turkey, expelled the PKK in 1998, although the expulsion did lead to the incarceration of many PKK cadres and fighters in Syria.[24]

With this context in mind, it is possible to understand why the regime's May 2011 overtures to the PDK-S to split the Syrian Kurds from the rest of the uprising failed,[25] but those to the PYD succeeded. The former harboured a deep mistrust of the regime as a result of its legacy of repression. The latter had been party to the relationships that were maintained between the PKK and Syria's intelligence chiefs, as well as its rulers. Together with gestures like the release of PKK personnel from prison, it is these relationships that smoothed the PKK's re-entry into Syria under cover of the PYD in 2011. The PKK connection also helps explain how the PYD could create, mobilise and arm the YPG so quickly.[26] All of this moreover feeds into Turkey's view that the PYD merely serves as a PKK franchise and its expectation that northern Syria would simply become a rest and recuperation area for the PKK's Turkish battlefront.[27]

The situation of the PKK itself is a **third** element to consider. The organisation did not manage to translate its fighting successes of the 1980s into sufficient political pressure to force the Turkish state to compromise on the matter of Kurdish autonomy. Despite a tentative effort towards peace in 1991 under President Turgut Özal (of Kurdish descent), an upgraded Turkish military hit the PKK hard in the 1990s and restricted it to a mix of guerrilla attacks and urban hits from its base in the Qandil mountains.[28] The subsequent

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23 Interview with a former high-ranking official of one of Syria's intelligence services, Istanbul, 19 August 2019.

24 About the period around the PKK's expulsion, see: Alantar, Ö., *The October 1998 crisis: A change of heart of Turkish foreign policy towards Syria*, CEMOTI: Persée, Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien, 2001, online.

25 The PDK-S dates from 1957, is close to Barzani's KDP, and became the largest party of the KNC once the latter was founded later in 2011.

26 ICG (2017), *op.cit.*; Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*; Interview with a prominent PYD representative, Ra's al-Ayn, October 2019; Dagher (2019), *op.cit.*; Stein and Foley (2016), *op.cit.*; see also this statement by US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCWYaEZ6B4w&feature=youtu.be (accessed 18 November 2020).

27 Acun, C. and B. Keskin, *The PKK's branch in northern Syria: PYD-YPG*, Ankara: SETA, 2017.

28 Marcus (2007), *op.cit.*, also: Aydin, A. and Emrence, C., *Zones of rebellion: Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish state*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2015.

formal peace negotiations between the AKP and PKK ran from 2006 to 2011 (the 'Oslo talks') and then from 2013 to 2015 without producing results acceptable to both parties.[29]

In this context, the Syrian uprising offered the PKK an opportunity to increase its leverage and to hedge against the peace talks' potential failure. Funnelling fighters and resources into Syria via PYD infrastructure and under its untarnished name enabled the PKK to build a presence in an area adjacent to Turkey and within reach of its main base.[30] Its prior relations with the Syrian regime enabled both initial entry as well as subsequent expansion. However, this same intervention contributed to the failure of the peace talks the PKK was conducting in parallel.[31] Persistent reports about PKK control over PYD and YPG decision making, as well as Turkish fears about a PKK presence along its southern border, must

Mural of Abdullah Öcalan in the city of Qamishli

be considered from this perspective.[32] In essence, the Syrian civil war offered the PKK a new field of action in its long struggle against Turkey by mobilising its fighting capabilities against Syrian adversaries that were much weaker than the Turkish army.[33]

This connects with a **fourth** element, namely the rise of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) as a new entity after 1991 when Iraq's Kurds carved out a substantial autonomous area under the duopoly of the KDP, which controls the western part of the KRI, and the PUK, which controls the eastern part. In 2005, the KRI even became a formal entity. Its newly established self-rule in the context of a federalizing Iraqi state radically altered the

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29 Kadioglu, I. (2019), 'The Oslo Talks: Revealing the Turkish government's secret negotiations with the PKK', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 42, Issue 10; Krajeski, J., *The consequences of the battle for Kobani*, The New Yorker, online, 26 February 2015.

30 ICG, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's precarious rise in Syria*, Middle East report no. 151, 2014.

31 Van Veen, E., E. Yüksel and H. Tekinis, *Waiting for blowback: Turkey's new regional militarism and its Kurdish question*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

32 See ICG (2017), *op.cit.*; Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*; Acun and Keskin (2017), *op.cit.*

33 After the total collapse of AKP-PKK peace negotiations in 2015, the rationale for PKK involvement in Syria grew only as Turkey doubled down on its securitised anti-terrorist approach against the PKK. Today, even the PKK's Qandil stronghold is under quasi-siege through various Turkish military operations that have sought to cut PKK lines of supply between Turkey, Iraq and Syria. See: Van Veen, Yüksel and Tekinis (2020), *op.cit.*

regional Kurdish power configuration by strengthening that of the KDP and PUK while weakening that of the PKK. As both Iraqi Kurdish parties shifted from waging guerrilla war to exercising territorial rule, the PKK became a competitor for authority, loyalties and resources more than a transnational kinship organisation.[34] The initial KDP-PKK understanding, based on the 1983 'Principles of Solidarity' agreed between Barzani and Öcalan, which enabled the PKK to establish itself in northern Iraq, was discarded. It was replaced by open fighting between the PKK and KDP as well as PUK, resulting in a defeat of the PKK. Having been saved by the PUK in an advantageous 'surrender deal', the PKK sided with the PUK in the Iraqi Kurdish civil war from 1994–1995.[35] Afterwards, KDP-PKK tensions were kept manageable by an informal arrangement that saw the PKK stay out of urban areas of the KDP-run parts of Iraqi Kurdistan and the KDP refrain from supporting operations against the PKK in rural areas. Over the past decade, this arrangement has gradually broken down as the KDP grew closer to Turkey after 2005 and the PKK moved into Syria after 2011. Today, KDP pre-eminence in the KRG[36] and its cordial relations with Turkey mean that it has become more ambivalent towards the PKK. It has reframed the organization as foreign element instead of one of transnational kinship, and enables an array of Turkish military bases and operations on its territory. The PUK, however, continues to support the PKK that also remains on good terms with Iran.[37]

The start of conflict in Syria in 2011 offered the PKK an opportunity to increase its power base in Syria via the YPG/PYD.[38] Initially, this was not necessarily viewed as problematic in Erbil. As a Syrian Arab-Kurdish TV journalist told us: 'The countries in the region facilitated it. Barzani, for example, has thousands of fighters in the Qandil mountains

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34   For the evolution of the role of the Peshmerga in this broader picture: Fliervoet, F., *Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq*, Clingendael: The Hague, 2018.

35   Černy, H., 'Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed: The PKK Sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict Revisited', *Ethnopolitics*, 2014, online (especially pp. 12–16).

36   Due to its geography and the general dependency of the KRI on oil exports and other trade via Turkey for part of its revenue. More recently also because of leadership contestation in the PUK after the dead of Jalal Talabani. See: Ali Saleem, Z. and M. Skelton, *Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's stability: How patronage shapes conflict*, London: LSE, IRIS and CRP, 2020.

37   The manner in which some of the Kurdish parties were established offer indications of their relations and alliances. For example, the PUK was established in Syria (1975) while the PYD was established with strong support from Talabani and his PUK (2003). See for example: Dagher (2019), *op.cit.* On regional relations see also: Wahab, B., *Iran's Warming Relations with the PKK Could Destabilize the KRG*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017, online.

38   In the material, but also in the ideological sense. For instance, by making Öcalan's notion of 'democratic confederalism' the centrepiece of the PKK's (and YPG/PYD's) governance philosophy (at least on paper) in contrast to the KDP ideology-light, patronage-heavy methods of rule (as discussed more under 'identity strategies' in Section 2). See: Öcalan, A., *Democratic confederalism*, International Initiative edition, 4th edition, 2017, online.

that he cannot control [*Authors*: the number is not verified]. It is in his interest that many of them leave for Syria. For Turkey, it is the same. What happened is that Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian Kurds entered Syria.'[39] But as YPG/PYD influence in Syria grew, the KDP formed the Rojava Peshmerga (which later joined the KNC) and worked more closely with the KNC, in addition to trying to come to an agreement with the YPG/PYD (starting with the 2012 Erbil declaration).[40]

As a representative of the Syrian National Coalition confided: 'In Iraq, you know, you have Barzani and you have Talabani. On the other side you have the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan. The real problem with the Kurds in Syria is the competition between these two parties, between Öcalan and Barzani – who is going to control the Syrian Kurds? Unfortunately, Qandil is winning this competition.'[41] Although the dichotomisation of political choice is a bit simplistic since there are more than two Syrian Kurdish parties, such a statement does correctly point out that the key to a solution to Kurdish divisions in Syria does not lie within Syria itself. There have been several efforts to patch up PKK-KDP relations via PYD-KNC negotiations, including the Erbil-1 (2012), Erbil-2 (2013) and Duhok (2014) agreements, as well as more recent US-sponsored talks.[42] While some of these efforts enjoyed modest success on paper, reinforced temporarily by the wartime exigency of jointly fighting IS in Kobani and Sinjar, they failed to improve the strategic relationship.[43] In sum, we can say that the rising KDP-PKK tensions played a role in turning northeastern Syria into a more active area of KDP-PKK contestation after 2011.[44]

Villages between Debersiya and Ra's al-Ain

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39 Interview with a Syrian Kurdish-Arabic journalist in Istanbul on 21 August 2019. While these Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish fighters are viewed as Kurdish from a PKK/YPG perspective, from a Syrian Arab and a KNC perspective, they are considered foreign.

40 Gunes and Lowe (2015), *op.cit.*; ICG (2013), *op.cit.;* Rifai, O., 'The Kurdish identity: From banishment to empowerment', *Syria Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2016.

41 Interview with a representative of the Syrian National Coalition, Istanbul, 19 August 2020.

42 Netjes, R., *Why is it so difficult for the Syrian Kurdish parties to unite?*, Acta Fabula, online 2020.

43 Gunes and Lowe (2015), *op.cit.*

44 See for instance: Allsop (2014), *op.cit.*

A **fifth** and final element, which partially overlaps with the previous one, are the longstanding divisions between the Syrian Kurds themselves.[45] The main point to consider is that the YPG/PYD is far from the only representative of Syria's Kurds. In other words, there are sizeable groups of Syrian Kurds who do not support the party. However, it has become impossible to assess the size of the constituencies of the existing range of Kurdish political parties correctly due to the volume of flight and displacement in northern Syria since 2011, PYD-dominated employment and YPG-run conscription practices in northeast Syria, and wartime propaganda.[46] Two indicators can nevertheless serve as proxies for popular support:

- The rough division of Kurdish Syria into loyalists of Öcalan (YPG/PYD), supporters of Barzani (mostly KNC, with its largest party being an ally to Barzani), and followers of other Kurdish parties (appreciating that there are also differences within each group). Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg write: 'Broad ideological differences were apparent, however, between the two regions of the Jezirah and Kobani. Öcalanism (also referred to as Apoism) was chosen by 42 per cent of the participants in Kobani compared to just 17.5 per cent in the Jazirah'.[47] In short, popular support for different Kurdish parties and ideologies varies significantly per area.

- The density of the Kurdish political party landscape. Here, Allsopp points to the personalised nature and personal ambitions of Kurdish political figures in Syria before 2011 as primary causes of fragmentation. Syria's context of repression of political dissent also precluded the formation of a culture of political dialogue and compromise that could have helped surmount such differences. In 2014, she counted 21 Kurdish political parties in Syria on a total of several million inhabitants

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45 See Netjes (2020), *op.cit.*; for a more detailed assessment of the matter in the early years of the civil war: International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A struggle within a struggle*, Brussels: ICG, 2013.

46 As a former senior US official put it: 'It is hard to gauge who enjoys what support among Syrian Kurds. The culture of democratic political behaviour is at best just starting and the YPG repressed opponents, sometimes even killing them, prior to 2016. Some repression continues to the present day.' Interview with a former senior US official by email, February 2020.

47 Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.* Our own interviews suggest that this percentage may be exaggerated since many Kurds in the area support Apoism for the simple reason that it increases their job prospects with the PYD.

(Kurds, Arabs and others).[48] In 2020, Kajjo lists 15 parties that make up the KNC and 23 constituting the PYD-led Kurdish National Unity Party, totalling 38 parties.[49]

A number of these parties are small and centred on a single person. Others are simply 'follower parties'. Yet, this context provided a ready supply of clients that facilitated the rapid expansion of a patronage system around two poles: the YPG/PYD as PKK proxy and the KNC as ally of the KDP. Such fragmentation also created a collective action problem in 2011/2012 when the level of violence of the civil war gradually increased. While there were (renewed) initiatives to unite politically, these remained emergent, insufficiently capacitated, or were not joined by the YPG/PYD. Instead, the YPG prioritised action over consensus for the dual purpose of seizing control and protecting communities. Once established, it for example repeatedly refused the Rojava Peshmerga entry into northeast Syria – except under its command – including after these originally KDP-linked forces joined the KNC in 2015.[50] In summary, longstanding divisions between Syria's Kurdish political parties and the individualist, dominant behaviour of the YPG made a joint response difficult in the early days of the conflict.[51]

Table 1 below brings these five elements together to help explain the rise of the YPG/PYD in the early years of the Syrian conflict. They are best understood as enabling context factors.

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48   Allsopp (2015), *op.cit.* The CIA Factbook estimates a population of 2 million Syrian Kurds. See: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html (accessed 19 August 2020). UN OCHA estimates the entire population of northeastern Syria at about 3 million today (including Raqqa and Deir Ezzor). See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northeast-syria-half-million-people-gradually-regain-access-safe-water#:~:text=There (accessed 15 November 2020). Due to the scale of displacement and flight between 2011 and 2020, all such figures should be viewed with caution.

49   Kajjo, S., *Prospects for Syrian Kurdish unity: Assessing local and regional dynamics*, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020 (annexes).

50   The Rojava Peshmerga were formed in 2012/2013 in the KRI as a KDP-trained force and were formally linked with the KNC in 2015. See: Netjes, (2020), *op cit*; Allsop and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*; ICG (2014), *op.cit.*; Kajjo (2020), *op.cit.*

51   Also: ICG (2014), *op. cit.*

Table 1   Summary of contextual factors that enabled the YPG/PYD's rise in the early days of the war

Main elements	Consequences	Relevance to PYD rise
(1) There was a long-standing policy of marginalisation, Arabisation and repression of Syria's Kurds (plus other minorities) by Gamal Abdel Nasr, the Ba'ath party and the Assads (1958–2000s)	• A decrease in demographic and cultural cohesiveness • Creation of deep-seated fear of repression and mutual mistrust • Practices of consensus building and compromise were suppressed • Creation of deep-seated need for protection	• There was limited Kurdish desire to support an armed rebellion that might re-create an Arab-dominated Syria, which was one undercurrent in a number of opposition statements alongside those more supportive of Kurdish rights.[52] • As the YPG provided early protection against the risk of violence from an escalating civil war for Kurdish communities, it gained support, which it used to grow further (output legitimacy). • The mix of fragmentation of the Kurdish political party scene and the YPG/PYD's own suppression of alternative forms of protection beyond its control helped it achieve dominance.
(2) There was a positive relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime (1980s–1990s)	The actors developed detailed knowledge and familiarity with one another over the course of two decades	• The familiarity and relationship between the Syrian regime and PKK facilitated re-entry of PKK fighters and, later, deal-making between the regime and the PKK-linked YPG/PYD. • It also helps to explain the PKK's ongoing dismissal/neglect of Kurdish society in Syria before 1998 and in a context of YPG/PYD-regime dealings after 2011.
(3) The peace process between Turkey and the PKK is uncertain, the PKK down and needs a new purpose (1990s–2000s)	The PKK is looking for a strategic revival and new opportunities	The Syrian civil war offers the PKK a chance to create more strategic depth and to have its own kind of 'autonomy model' in Syria by working with and through the YPG/PYD. An informal arrangement with the regime enabled the PYD to expand further.
(4) The creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) changes the KDP-PKK relationship and mutual perceptions (2005–today)	• The KRI shows Kurdish territorial autonomy is possible under particular conditions • Creation of the KRI changes the KDP from guerrilla movement to territorial ruler, with the PKK becoming a 'difficult guest'	• The PKK became a strategic risk to the KDP after 1991 and more so after 2005. When the PKK used the Syrian civil war to expand and circumvent the KDP by supporting the YPG, the PKK became a strategic threat. • The more competitive dynamics of the PKK-KDP relation made PYD-KNC negotiation/cooperation difficult and created incentives for the PYD to sideline the KNC by acting as spoiler.
(5) The many divisions between Syrian Kurdish parties make effective joint action difficult (1965–today)	• It is not clear whether any single party enjoys majority support • Parties engage in cooperative relations with the KDP or PKK	• The YPG/PYD opts for achieving political control and coercive dominance, using the circumstances of an expanding civil war level to establish and justify protection mechanisms. • The fragmented political landscape makes it difficult to operate more collaboratively.

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52   See, for example: Gunes and Lowe (2015), *op.cit.*; Van Dam, N., *Destroying a nation: The civil war in Syria*, London: IB Tauris, 2017; ICG (2013), *op.cit.* In Istanbul in July 2011, opposition leaders insisted on keeping a reference to Syria as 'Arab' without offering the prospect of Kurdish representation. Ghalioun furthermore created widespread indignation in 2012 by stating 'there is no such thing as Syrian Kurdistan'. See: Phillips (2020), *op.cit.* Even in 2016, the HNC (Etilaf) offered mixed messages in its 'Executive framework for a political solution based on the Geneva communiqué of 2012' (online: compare e.g. pages 3 and 9). This situation shifted within a few years as the KNC joined the Etilaf (the Syrian National Opposition) in 2013 and KNC-leader Abdel Hakim al-Bashar has acted as vice president of the Etilaf for much of the period 2014 – 2020.

The factors listed in Table 1 provide the context in which two events could have had a decisive influence on the fortunes and rise of the YPG/PYD after the start of the Syrian conflict. First, the 2011/2012 informal co-existence arrangement with the Assad regime brought the YPG/PYD relative autonomy as well as new coercive and administrative capabilities. These capabilities enabled the YPG/PYD to establish a firmer hold over northeastern Syria after mid-2012 while helping to suppress the revolution and, later on, battling various radical extremist groups. Second, the YPG's reconquest of the town of Kobani in 2015 became the starting point of a period of sustained US support while also turning the YPG into a fighting force to reckon with, which caused growing concern in both Ankara and Erbil. Both events are analysed in the next sections.

The regime throws in the towel – for now

The parallel 'day of rage' demonstrations against the Syrian regime in Damascus and Aleppo on 15 March 2011 marked the moment that a series of geographically dispersed acts of protest and defiance across the country – in places like Deraa, Hasaka, Homs and Deir Ezzor – transformed into an embryonic national movement that rapidly gathered force.[53] By the summer of 2011, the revolution had started to become more militant, in large part because of relentless and brutal regime repression. By late 2011, as Charles Lister puts it, 'many areas of Syria had become open battlegrounds between Syrian opposition fighters and the military'.[54] The strains on the Syrian Arab Army and the country's various intelligence services grew in consequence.

But it was well before the summer of 2011 that the regime reached out to several Kurdish factions in a bid to alleviate such strains and increase the likelihood of its own survival. Bashar al-Assad, Ali Mamlouk (head of the General Security Directorate at the time), Hisham Bakhtiyar (then head of the National Security Office; died 2012) and Riyadh Hijab (Prime Minister at the time) are said to have agreed to reach out to both the KDP-S (the first Kurdish party in Syria founded in 1957) and the PYD, using the regime's longstanding relationship with the PKK.[55] However, several entreaties from Salih Muslim (PYD), Aldar Xelil (PKK Central Committee; today also member of the PYD's Co-Presidency[56]) and Assad himself (via the governor of Hasaka) to build an KDP-S – PYD alliance in April/May 2011 came to nought. Recent experiences played a key role: while the PKK and PYD had a mixed relationship with the Assad regime, in large part due to

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53 Dukhan argues that it was in these more rural areas that protests against the regime commenced as high levels of social capital within tribal communities enabled them to confront regime agents more readily. Dukhan (2020), *op.cit.*

54 Lister, C., *The Syrian Jihad: The evolution of an insurgency*, London: Hurst & Co, 2017.

55 Interview with a KDP-S representative, Istanbul, 21 August 2019 and follow-up exchanges in 2020.

56 On the PYD's Co-Presidency: https://pydrojava.org/english/internal-system/ (accessed 5 February 2021).

Hafez al-Assad's longstanding support for the PKK, the KDP-S' experience was much less positive.[57] As one interviewee put it: 'it already had the experience of the Assad regime and it brought them nothing.'[58]

While the exact sequence of events is hard to establish, the regime's objectives were clear enough. Assad *et al.* wanted to prevent a northeastern front opening up against it and to maintain their longstanding narrative of the regime as 'protector of minorities' (the Kurds are Syria's second largest minority after the Alawites). Only the PYD proved willing to talk.[59] Further meetings reportedly followed later in 2011 and early 2012 between PKK delegations from Qandil and regime representatives. Allegedly, PKK representatives entered the country via the Samalka border crossing, were met at Qamishli airport by intelligence officials, and flown to Damascus to meet with regime officials.[60]

A tacit and unwritten understanding between the Syrian regime and the PYD was reached in early 2012. It was a kind of pragmatic arrangement that saw the Assad regime transfer key security resources and economic infrastructure in northeastern Syria to the PYD in exchange for the PYD suppressing protests against the regime, steering clear of the revolution, and maintaining economic relations with the regime (see also Annex 1).[61] From the perspective of a Kurdish political party wishing to establish dominance over northeastern Syria, agreeing a tacit arrangement with the Syrian regime proved to be both a bold move and an appreciable liability.

Bold, because it enabled the YPG/PYD to acquire control over Syrian Kurdish majority areas such as Afrin, Kobani, Amouda, Derbesiya and Derik/Al-Malikiya but also mixed areas in Hasaka province, in a short amount of time. When Kobani and Hasaka later

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57 See this useful backgrounder by Carnegie Middle East: https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502

58 Interview with a KDP-S representative in Qamishli, 2 October 2019 and Istanbul 10 January 2020.

59 Interviews with KNC representatives, Istanbul, 21 August 2019; several interviews with KDP-S representatives, Istanbul, 19 August 2019 and Qamishli, 2 October 2019; Interview with a former SOC member, Istanbul, 27 August 2019. The regime oiled the wheels by releasing a number of PKK-linked people from prison in early 2011.

60 Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of the Syrian intelligence services, Istanbul, 19 August 2019; Interview with a KNC representative, Istanbul, 21 August 2019. A further meeting between PYD co-chair Salih Muslim and KDP-S leader Abdulhakim Al-Bashar reportedly took place in Tehran in August 2013, presumably with the idea of forming a broader Kurdish front in favour of the Assad regime in exchange for warfighting support and promises for the future. See: Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*

61 See also: Dagher (2019), *op.cit.* and ICG (2014), *op.cit.* Allsop and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.* are not clear on the matter and seem to accept the YPG/PYD's denial of the existence of such a relationship. Annex 1 contains a synopsis of nine leaked (verified) documents that clarify that the regime relied on the PKK/YPG to suppress protests in the northeast and to maintain trade.

floundered in the face of the IS onslaught in 2014, US support proved critical and the fight against IS became an opportunity for the YPG/PYD to become stronger than the regime is likely to have anticipated (see next Section), extending its authority over both mixed and Arab-majority/-only areas (e.g. Hasaka province, parts of Aleppo province, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces).

But its arrangement with the regime also became a significant liability for the YPG because, as one of our interviewees put it: 'our biggest problem with the YPG is that they are allying themselves with the regime. We did not demonstrate against Assad to have him replaced by a non-Syrian, Öcalan.'[62] One consequence of the rejection by one segment of the Syrian Kurdish population of the YPG/PYD's link with the PKK has been that the YPG/PYD has had to use more coercion and repression to govern northeast Syria than it might have anticipated (this is further discussed in Section 2). It should be noted that both PYD and SDC spokespersons either denied the existence of such a tacit arrangement between the PYD and the regime or remained ambiguous on the matter. Yet, the sequence of events that took place in 2012 provides plausible proof of its existence, as do the documents listed in Annex A.[63]

To begin with, a number of military and police assets started to change hands peacefully in early 2012 as Syrian military forces largely withdrew from the Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria. A former high-ranking intelligence official of the regime told us: 'I got orders from Damascus by phone, only by phone. In the first phase, the border posts were handed over, starting with the 95 km border between Qahtaniya and Amouda. There were 15 border posts and each of them had a big Toyota vehicle, a machine gun, and a few Kalashnikovs.[64] Later, the regime gave them [the PKK] more advanced weapons. We could see the difference at the checkpoints. Entire police departments, including equipment, followed at Amouda, Derbesiya, Qahtaniya, Jawadiya and Rumeilan.'[65]

Next, administrative and service delivery state infrastructure followed: bakeries, state services for electricity and distribution, water, city councils and so on. But some infrastructure was retained by the regime, like banks and schools (although the PYD gradually took over the latter nevertheless). One interviewee noted that: 'They [the PYD] received key administrative buildings from the state. The people saw clear coordination

62   Interview with a Syrian researcher from Tel Abyad, Istanbul, 11 March 2020.

63   Interview with an SDC spokesperson, Qamishli, 2 October 2019; Interview with a Syrian activist from Tel Rifaat, Istanbul, 20 February, 2019; Interview with a PYD representative, Ra's al Ayn, 5 October 2019. The PYD explanation is that the regime withdrew due to greater needs elsewhere.

64   Similar border control posts proved essential to enable the influx of PKK equipment and fighters into Syria.

65   Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of the Syrian intelligence services, Istanbul, 19 August 2019; see also: Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*

between the regime and the PYD. Today, there are still offices with two floors where on the ground floor the regime is present and on the first floor the PYD is present.'[66]

Finally, several of our interviewees confirmed the transfer of oil and gas fields in Rumeilan, Sweidiya and Jebeisa from the regime to the YPG/PYD on the condition that it kept supplying the regime (see Annex 1).[67] Indeed, throughout the conflict a lively trade has been kept up between the PYD and the regime.[68] As another interviewee put it: 'The deal was that the YPG would continue to deliver oil to the regime as long as it had these areas under its control.'[69]

Beyond this staged handover of key security and economic assets, there are more indirect indicators pointing to the existence of a tacit arrangement, such as the fact that the YPG suffered very few regime or Russian airstrikes throughout the conflict despite such strikes being trademark anti-rebel tactics of the regime.[70] What also needs to be considered is the question as to how the YPG could grow from a few hundred to a few thousand fighters in a short period given that, until 2011, the slightest suspicion of armed resistance meant imprisonment or execution. A Syrian Kurdish-Arab journalist knowledgeable on the matter framed it as follows: 'What you used to see is fighters going from Syria and Turkey towards Qandil, but in 2011/2012 we witnessed the reverse: fighters going from Turkey and Qandil to Syria. Turkey and the KRG considered these fighters as a problem and figured that if they went to Syria it would ease their problem a bit. These fighters, with decades of experience in combat training in harsh mountain conditions, had a big influence on the organisation and operations of the YPG. And the

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66   Interviews with Assyrian opposition representatives (to the regime and PYD), Qamishli, 1 October 2019.

67   Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of the Syrian intelligence services, Istanbul 11 August 2019; Interview with a KDP-S representative, Istanbul, 17 August 2019. Annex 1 contains a synopsis of seven leaked (verified) documents that indicate PKK/YPG-regime collaboration in respect of oil extraction and trade.

68   Interviews with a Syria analyst, Istanbul, 14 August 2019; Interview with a representative of the Assyrian community, Qamishli, 1 October 2019; Jesrpress.com, online (accessed 6 November 2020).

69   Interview with a former Dutch official by email, December 2019.

70   See, for example: Martinez, J. and B. Eng, 'Stifling stateness: The Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 49 (4), 2018, pp. 235-253; or: https://airwars.org/conflict/russian-military-in-syria/ (accessed 5 May 2019). There are examples of small-scale direct confrontation between regime and YPG forces, as well as examples of YPG forces working directly with the regime (e.g. in the Sheikh Maqsood neighbourhood in East Aleppo in 2016 and the fighting over Tel Rifaat and surroundings). However, the limited number of such instances suggests there was a general 'live and let live' arrangement in place between the regime and YPG. It should be noted though that YPG support contributed significantly to the regime's 2016 victory in the battle for Aleppo. See: Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*; Andresen, P., *Friends or Foes? A Closer Look on Relations Between YPG and the Regime*, 2016, online; Middle East Eye, 2016, online; Balanche, F., Kurdish forces bolster Assad in Aleppo, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016, online (all accessed 4 December 2020).

Countryside between Amouda and Hasaka with Jebel Kawkab in the background

KNC was weak in terms of organisation and coercive capabilities. The people embraced the dream of Kurdish rule and of raising the Kurdish flag across the area.'[71]

The regime did not, however, hand over control fully or unconditionally. It retained a military presence in Qamishli (several blocks in the centre of the town towards the Turkish border, as well as at the airport) and Hasaka (several blocks in the town centre, plus a strategic hill, Jebel Kawkab, outside the town) as well as a wider intelligence footprint in Syria's Kurdish areas.[72] A KNC representative put it thus: 'Despite the PYD running all these checkpoints, the regime is still present in Qamishli. What does this indicate? This is an indicator of an agreement between the PYD and the regime. I give you the area, you can exploit it, you have local authority, you can use the oil and gas as well, but I will stay present' [Authors' note: It also maintains a more informal and less visible presence in places like Derik/Al-Malkiya].[73] Or, as it was alternatively put by another interviewee: 'There was an agreement between them [the regime and PYD]. That agreement is: "You will be present today and one day when the matters have calmed down and I have taken control over the revolution, I will require everything back.'[74]

In exchange, the PYD did not join the revolution and on several occasions helped to repress protest. A Syrian politician from Hasaka recalled the following episode: 'They started to be an agent for the Assad regime by cracking down on demonstrations.

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71 Interview with a Syrian Kurdish-Arabic journalist, Istanbul, 21 August 2019; see also: ICG (2014), *op.cit.*; Stein, A. and M. Foley, *The YPG-PKK connection*, Atlantic Council, January 2016, online.

72 Several interviews with SOC representatives, Istanbul, mid-late August 2019.

73 Interview with a KNC representative, Istanbul, 21 August 2019.

74 Interview with a SOC representative, Istanbul, 27 August 2019; Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of Syria's intelligence services, 11 March 2020.

The military intelligence of the Assad regime's security forces were cooperating with the intelligence of the PYD. Both of them oppressed the protests, they were doing control rounds together. I recall an incident in 2012 when, during a peaceful demonstration in the Tel Hajar neighbourhood of Hasaka, both Assad's military intelligence and a group of PYD opened fire on the demonstrators. They killed three people.'[75] There are furthermore quite a few testimonies from the early years of the civil war about the YPG/PYD killing activists who opposed the regime and its own efforts to establish dominance. Consider, for example, Nasreddine Barheik (PDK-S) and Mash'al Tammo (Kurdish Future Movement).[76] Finally, the PYD killed at least six Kurdish 'opposition' politicians and/or activists in Amouda on 27 June 2013 who were part of a demonstration against the regime.[77]

In sum, it is clear from the early days of the Syrian civil war that, as a route to achieving greater Kurdish autonomy based on the concepts of Öcalan, the YPG/PYD and PKK preferred an informal understanding with the devil-they-knew rather than joining the opposition to the regime.

A perfect enemy: Islamic State

In addition to its efforts to split the Kurds from the general opposition, the Assad regime also sought to change the image of the uprising from one of peaceful protest to one of radical Islamist violence. Both strategies coincided further down the road of civil war, but in ways not necessarily intended by the regime. The analysis below sheds light on their first major crossroads during the battle for Kobani in 2014/2015.

The regime recognised early on that there was arguably no greater threat to its rule than sustained non-violent resistance. To prevent it, the regime combined harsh repression with releasing some Islamists and jihadists (in addition to the noted PKK members)

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75   Interviews with a Syrian/Arab politician from Hasaka, Istanbul, 19 August 2019 and 4 February 2020; Interview with a Syrian Kurdish-Arabic journalist in Istanbul, 21 August 2019.

76   Interview with a KNC representative, Qamishli, 2 October 2019; Interview with a PDK-S representative, Istanbul, 21 August 2019; Interview with a Syrian/Kurdish politician from Hasaka, 4 February 2020. The funeral of Mash'al Tammo led to several more deaths. See: https://twitter.com/RenaNetjes/status/1201 864673194889506?s=08.

77   Interview with a Syrian activist, Amouda, 1 October 2019; See also: Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*, HRW, online, June 2014; https://www.syrcenter.com/en/ sdc/5730 or Nudem.org (both accessed 5 February 2021). The YPG apologized for the event in June 2020 – seven years later – but no one was held accountable: https://syriaaccountability.org/updates/2020/07/09/ a-historic-apology-the-ypg-acknowledges-wrongdoing-in-amouda/ (accessed 26 February 2021).

from its prisons around mid-2011.[78] It also re-activated networks once used to transport foreign fighters into Iraq to fight against US forces in the mid- to late 2000s. This time, they intended to facilitate the rise of Islamist armed groups.[79] January 2012 did see the entry into the conflict of Jabhat al-Nusra and April 2013 that of IS. Both groups would soon get into conflict with YPG-led forces in the Kurdish areas of Syria,[80] including the pivotal battle for Kobani from September 2014 to January 2015.

The rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and IS had the effect the regime had intended: it helped to gradually switch Western attention from the revolt against Assad to fighting radical Islamist terrorism, alongside Western concerns about the growing religiosity of the revolution at large and the limited quality of rebel governance. The notions that the Assad regime was the 'biggest terrorist in town', or that a radical Islamist group with a reasonable degree of local legitimacy like Ahrar al-Sham[81] could also be part of any post-war order, were not seriously considered in Western policy making. An additional benefit to the regime was the split between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in April 2013, which increased conflict within the armed radical opposition.[82]

The second half of 2013 saw IS steadily increasing its territorial presence in Syria and adopting an aggressive posture against other opposition forces. Early 2014 witnessed an alteration in offensives and counteroffensives between several opposition factions and IS with the initial effect of driving IS forces out of western Syria (Latakia, Idlib and the Aleppo area). However, the capture of Mosul by IS in June 2014, together with its declaration of a Caliphate in June 2014, boosted the group enormously. Awash with equipment and cash, enjoying high morale and benefiting from numerous new recruits and allies (from local tribes to franchises beyond Syria), it launched major offensives in the following months in both Syria (north of Aleppo towards Tel Rifaat and in Azaz) and

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78   Dagher (2019), *op.cit.*

79   Lister (2017), *op.cit.* Even though there were also Islamists speaking out against the revolution.
     See, for example, this clip from a Jaish al-Islam commander: https://www.youtube.com/
     watch?v=YwJ5LrkPu80&feature=youtu.be (accessed 12 February 2021).

80   For example, the fighting in and around Ra's al-Ayn between Jabhat al-Nusra (plus some of its allies) and
     the YPG in July 2013 set off a longer chain reaction of conflict between Islamist and YPG forces in northern
     Syria.

81   Adraoui even makes such a case for Jabhat al-Nusra. See: Adraoui, M., 'The case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in
     the Syrian conflict 2011–2016: Towards a strategy of nationalization?', *Mediterranean Politics*, 24:2, 260-267,
     2019; also: Lister (2017), *op.cit.* The legitimacy of such groups resulted in part from their fighting successes
     (output legitimacy), but also from the absence of corruption in their ranks and their more disciplined
     behaviour.

82   Lister (2017), *op.cit.*

Graves at a burial ground between Debersiya and Amouda. The deceased fought the Islamic State

Iraq (first towards Baghdad and then Erbil).[83] Part of the Syria offensive was aimed at YPG-led forces and resulted in the battle for Kobani that started in mid-September 2014.

It is this battle that is of interest to our analysis as it marks the second post-2011 accelerator of YPG/PYD rule over Kurdish Syria and beyond. The battle itself was a prolonged and bloody affair that spanned five months of uninterrupted fighting concentrated mostly in the dense urban spaces of the town itself. It should be noted that the town had almost completely fallen to IS due to the group's fighting prowess, the initial lack of defence put up by YPG, the initial absence of US support and the initial Turkish refusal to facilitate the passage of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga reinforcements (Kobani lies on the Syrian-Turkish border).[84] Ultimately, YPG forces, a mix of FSA brigades, Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga,[85] and US supplies and airpower turned near certain defeat into a narrow victory with hugely symbolic consequences. Either overconfident or keen to maintain its image of invincibility, IS kept pouring manpower into the battle even when it was being lost.[86] In the end, IS had to withdraw, marking the battle as an important turning point in its gradual roll-back in Syria.

Another major consequence of the battle was that it restored, to some extent, the YPG/PYD's local legitimacy, catapulted it to international fame, and secured it a steady supply of US military aid until well into 2021 to continue the fight against IS. A Syrian Arab-Kurdish journalist put it to us thus: 'Kobani enabled the YPG to establish

83   Van Veen, E. and I. Abdo, *Between brutality and fragmentation: Options for addressing the Syrian civil war*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2014; Lister (2017), *op.cit.*

84   Filkins, D., *When bombs aren't enough*, The New Yorker, online, October 2014.

85   See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-peshmerga-syrian-rebels-battle-islamic-state-in-besieged-kobani-idUSKBN0IK15M20141103 (accessed 21 August 2020).

86   Lister (2017), *op.cit.*

themselves internationally: "we are the partners of the world in the fight against IS".'
In addition, success in battle also pushed the YPG/PYD's suppression of dissent to
the background, as well as its measures taken in the name of the fight against IS
that forcibly displaced thousands of Arabs and burnt down dozens of Arab villages.[87]
It should be recalled that the popularity of the PYD in northern Syria among Kurds was
at a low point in September 2014 due to a string of human rights abuses (imprisonment
of activists, killing political dissidents) and possible war crimes (such as recruiting
children).[88] The shooting in Amouda on 27 June 2013 of about six Kurdish politicians
and supporters who had protested against the regime and the PYD was a particularly
dark stain on the PYD's reputation. The party killed its fellow Kurds and forbade them
to raise the flag of the revolution in Kurdish areas. However, the pride generated among
different Kurdish communities by the YPG's success in the battle for Kobani relegated
its repressive practices to the background for some time, facilitated recruitment, and
bolstered its reputation and control.

The battle for Kobani was also the 'start' of the US underwriting the YPG's fight against
ISIS. Our interviews suggest that it was clear from the start that this was understood
as a temporary alliance of convenience against IS. In consequence, the uproar that
resulted from President Trump's withdrawal of the bulk of US forces in 2019, which
elicited phrases like 'betraying the Kurds once more' and 'abandonment of Syria',
largely served propaganda purposes rather than reflecting reality.[89] One interviewee
indicated: 'The Americans do not promise anything political. They do not promise land,
nor do they promise a state. The American is a military ally. There is a strategic alliance
between the Americans and the PKK. But they do not promise them anything political.'[90]
Or, alternatively: 'They do not have any political agreement with them, with PYD, YPG,
only to fight ISIS. That is what happens.'[91] From a US perspective, support for the PYD

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87   Interview with a Syrian Kurdish-Arabic journalist, Istanbul, 21 August 2019; see also: Amnesty
     International, *We had nowhere else to go: Forced displacement and demolitions in northern Syria*, London:
     Amnesty International, 2015; UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 10 March 2017, online
     (accessed 5 February 2021).
88   See, for example: Human Rights Watch (2014), *op.cit.*; also: Interview with a Syrian Kurdish-Arabic
     journalist, Istanbul, 21 August 2019; Interviews with a Syrian politician from Hasaka, Istanbul, 19 August
     2019 and 4 February 2020; on the matter of legitimacy: Mulla Rashid, B., *The Autonomous Administration in
     Northern Syria: Questions of Legitimacy and Identity*, Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2018b,
     online.
89   For instance: Mogelson, L., *America's abandonment of Syria*, The New Yorker, online, 20 April 2020.
     The outgoing US Envoy, Ambassador James Jeffrey, recently cast doubt on the precise extent of the US
     'withdrawal'. See: https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/11/outgoing-syria-envoy-admits-hiding-us-
     troop-numbers-praises-trumps-mideast-record/170012/ (accessed 18 November 2020).
90   Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of the Syrian intelligence services, Istanbul,
     11 March 2019.
91   KNC representative, Qamishli, 2 October 2019.

Reception area of a burial ground between Debersiya and Amouda. The deceased fought the Islamic State

indeed appears to have been intended as a tactical military partnership against IS but without support for a Kurdish political project.[92] Yet it was always likely that access to military resources from a superpower in times of war would have political consequences, especially given the YPG's objective of uniting Syria's Kurdish-populated regions, despite the fact that the Syrian Kurds are spread across a large area that is also inhabited by many others.

These consequences have extended far beyond the defeat of IS in Syria.[93] The partnership also enabled the PYD to maintain its monopolistic position as the dominant Kurdish party in northeastern Syria, expand into large minority and even non-Kurdish areas of Syria that are rich in natural resources (especially east of the Raqqa–Deir Ezzor axis), increased US-Turkish tensions as the US conveniently ignored the role the PKK plays in the YPG/PYD, and triggered several Turkish offensives into northern Syria.[94] For example, in 2016 Joe Biden (then US vice president) explicitly warned the YPG to pull back east of the Euphrates river after seizing control of the Syrian town of Manbij to ensure continued US support.[95] His remarks indicated that the YPG was not to advance from Manbij on Tel Rifaat, which would have created a connection between Afrin

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92   See, for example: Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*

93   For an initial assessment at the time: Krajeski (2015), *op.cit.*

94   Namely: Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 to prevent a geographical connection being established between the YPG/PYD-held Afrin and Hasaka province, and to push back IS; Operation Olive Branch in 2018 to capture Afrin; and Operation Peace Spring in 2019 to force the YPG/PYD away from parts of the Turkish-Syrian border. These offensives are part of Turkey's broader securitised regional approach against Kurdish organisations that, peacefully or by militant means, advocate for greater Kurdish rights. See: Van Veen, E., E. Yüksel and H. Tekines, *Waiting for blowback: The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism*, Clingendael: The Hague, 2020.

95   See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUxN2K1_7v0&feature=youtu.be (accessed 6 November 2020).

and Hasaka province. However, his words were not backed by action when the YPG nevertheless advanced.[96] Subsequently, this led Turkey, together with a number of FSA brigades, to launch Operation Euphrates Shield to counter the perceived YPG threat on its southern front – in addition to the presence of IS in the area and the Turkish intervention also being part of the Global Coalition's strategy.

Today, however, the US is faced with the consequences of having enabled the YPG/PYD to acquire Arab-only areas that include parts of the provinces of Hasaka, much of Raqqa and all of Deir Ezzor along the Euphrates towards the Syrian/Iraqi border. While useful to keep IS down, the YPG/PYD's presence is not universally welcome in these areas. Many tribal leaders view both the SDC and SDF as vehicles to project and legitimise YPG/PYD rule.[97] The challenge these leaders face is that their tribes are not capable of contesting YPG/PYD rule effectively due to their lack of external support and their decline as coherent political-security actors, which predates the start of the civil war (see Section 2). Rather than employing a finely tuned mix of resource-sharing, coercion and participatory governance tactics to maintain control, our interviews suggest that the YPG/PYD relies mostly on coercive and divide-and-rule methods.[98] Due to the local inability to resist meaningfully, this has so far not had major consequences. Nevertheless, with Iranian militias, Russian mercenaries and regime forces stationed west of the Euphrates, as well as resurgent IS activity in the Badia desert and east of Deir Ezzor (SDF-controlled), it is hard to imagine the current relative calm as permanent. Meanwhile, the area has grown in importance to the US because keeping its resources out of reach of the Syrian regime is a key component of its maximum pressure strategy against Iran's 'axis of resistance'.

The US-YPG partnership did not, however, cause the YPG to break off its relations with the Assad regime. One interviewee, reflecting on US-PYD relations after the partial US withdrawal of 2019, recounted: 'The PYD's relations with the regime are still good, but their relations with the Americans are better. However, the relations between the PKK and the regime are still good. They do not trust the Americans so much because they are

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96 See: https://www.businessinsider.com/joe-biden-says-syrian-kurdish-forces-must-retreat-after-manbij-victory-to-keep-us-support-2016-8 (accessed 9 October 2020).

97 See, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRd2w3h4HUc&feature=youtu.be (a demonstration against SDF rule in August 2020 in Dibban (Deir Ezzor province) after the assassination of sheikhs of the Ogeidat and Baggara tribes, demanding from the International Coalition that the area be ruled by its people and not by a militia [referring to YPG/SDF]); https://twitter.com/RenaNetjes/status/1293616793710481408?%20s=08 (both accessed 2 December 2020).

98 Several interviews with tribal sheikhs and local residents in the summer of 2020 in southern Turkey.

afraid the Americans will let them down and leave them.'[99] Nevertheless, the boost that US support has given the YPG in terms of equipment, international standing, territorial and resource control has created appreciable blowback for the Assad regime, which had originally intended to split the opposition by empowering the YPG/PYD only to the extent that the party could later be folded back into regime structures without much resistance or compromise. But the aggressive rise of IS helped bring about the battle for Kobani, which subsequently saw the start of US support for the YPG/PYD. US support gave the YPG/PYD scope to evolve from the regime's unofficial 'partner-in-crime' (until end 2014) into more of a true rebel group (by 2020).

Taking stock: Assessing the nature of the YPG/PYD

The YPG/PYD emerges from the preceding analysis as a quasi-rebel group (working indirectly against the regime by establishing its own autonomous sphere) as well as a quasi-paramilitary group (working indirectly with the regime by selling it oil, trading with it, not attacking it, suppressing dissent against it, and providing limited battlefield support – especially in and around Aleppo in 2016). It has been engaged in fighting IS as much as it has been in consolidating and expanding its own rule. The quasi-rebel character of the YPG/PYD as armed-group-cum-political-party stems from the fact that it is unlikely to surrender its hard-won autonomy or its newly-acquired territories to Damascus without serious negotiation of its future status, and perhaps even a fight.[100] A return to the status quo before the civil war – in which many Syrian Kurds were second-class citizens without rights and political representation – is difficult to imagine unless by application of sustained brute force. From the perspective of Syria's Kurds, this is a substantial achievement.

The quasi-paramilitary character of the YPG/PYD has been on display in, for example, its refusal to join revolutionary forces such as the FSA in their fight against Assad (there are a few exceptions where the FSA has joined forces with the YPG to fight IS), engaging

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99   Interview with a high-ranking former official of one of Syria's intelligence services, Spring 2020; echoed by another interview with a KNC representative, Qamishli, 2 October 2019. See also: https://www.nytimes. com/2019/10/21/world/middleeast/us-withdrawal-syria-iraq.html (accessed 21 August 2020).

100 The current deadlocked negotiations between Damascus and the YPG/PYD provide some evidence. See, for example: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/russia-syria-kurds-outreach-lavrov-assad-turkey-dual-track.html (accessed 10 October 2020). As Aldar Xelil framed YPG/PYD negotiations with the regime: 'I think, the other sides in other parts of Syria … all boarded green buses and had themselves transferred to Idlib or to the Turkish border. But as far as we are concerned, we are in our areas, and we run more than 30 per cent of Syria, and we are still on our areas, and we are in a powerful position… If we were weak and ready to hand over [parts], then we would not have accepted the principle of negotiation in the first place.' *Source*: Syria TV online (minute 5:50).

in occasional fights with such revolutionary forces that escalated after the taking of Tel Rifaat, and repressing political competition / suppressing revolutionary protests against the regime in areas under its control. Nevertheless, the YPG retains full operational control of its armed forces and there is no evidence of it taking direct orders from Damascus.[101]

The YPG/PYD's fight with IS was a crucial contribution to the defeat of the Caliphate in Syria. But while this fight was forced upon the YPG/PYD in 2014–2015, it also became a strategy to extend YPG/PYD control beyond Kurdish-inhabited areas after 2015 – with US support. Ironically, both IS and the YPG/PYD were part of Assad's survival strategy. But instead of killing each other off and allowing Assad to emerge victorious, the defeat of IS strengthened the YPG/PYD beyond what had been anticipated in Damascus.

In sum, the YPG/PYD can be conceptualised as a hybrid coercive organisation with the caveat that it has so far not engaged in significant violence against the Syrian regime with which it engages in practical deal making. Based on the available evidence, it is reasonable to say that from 2011 to 2016 the YPG/PYD behaved more as a paramilitary than as a rebel group, and that from 2016 to the present day more as a rebel group than as a paramilitary one.

Either way, further examination of the YPG/PYD's strategic relations, political economy and constituency is warranted to assess its evolution, since these elements are the foundations of its power base.[102] We undertake this task below through a study of the strategies of dominance and governance the YPG/PYD has applied during the Syrian civil war.

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101 For an in-depth study of paramilitarism: Üngör Ümit, U., *Paramilitarism: Mass violence in the shadow of the state*, Oxford: OUP, 2020.

102 Van Veen and Fliervoet (2018), *op.cit.*

2 Strategies of dominance and governance

Initial support from the PKK, a practical understanding with the Assad regime, and emergent US support after the battle for Kobani help explain how the YPG/PYD *became* dominant in northeast Syria, but not how it *maintained* such dominance. This requires additional study of the YPG/PYD's coercive, deal making, identity and basic service strategies enacted since 2011 to consolidate its power base (Box 1 provides definitions).[103] These strategies are discussed below.

Box 1   Strategies to maintain dominance deployed by the YPG/PYD (2011–2020) in north and northeast Syria

Coercive strategies are about intimidation, repression, assassination and forced recruitment of local elites and elements of the population in areas under YPG/PYD control that resist it. In other words, coercive strategies are about the rough edge of 'domestic' policing strategies employed by the YPG/PYD.

Deal-making strategies refer to the tactical partnerships the YPG/PYD has concluded to reduce external threats, increase its autonomy and improve its external legitimacy, such as by maintaining its relations with the Syrian regime, building a tactical partnership with the US, and creating the SDC/SDF to enable US arms deliveries and create the image of working with the Arab populations (tribes included) of Hasaka, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

Identity strategies are about the introduction of Kurdish symbols and education to increase solidarity and in-group feelings among Syrian Kurds that, although far from uniformly, form the core constituency of YPG/PYD rule. They also refer

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103 For the purpose of this paper, we consider 'governance' as a form of dominance that is exercised through a mix of coercive, symbolic, identity and service provision elements. For armed groups, the point of governing as a 'counterstate', i.e. to be perceived and act as a viable alternative to the state against which the armed group militates, is to maintain control over an area so that it can gradually be steered away from the sovereign entity to which it belonged. Closely connected with 'governance', control can be defined as '… the ability of a rebel group to exert its power over a defined territorial space and to induce collaboration from the civilian population living within this area'. See: Mampilly, Z., *Rebel rulers: Insurgent governance and civilian life during war*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2011.

> to the introduction of new governance concepts to attract the mixed populations under YPG/PYD rule.
>
> *Basic service strategies* include the provision of security, bread and other necessities that show the YPG/PYD is capable of providing minimum material governance benefits.

An important point to flag before discussing these strategies in-depth is that the area of Syria that was majority-Kurdish or Kurdish-only populated in 2011 is actually quite small.[104] In fact, only Afrin, Kobani, Amouda, Debersiya, Derik/Al-Malikiya, several Kurdish-majority towns in Hasaka, the Al-Ruz district of Damascus as well as the Sheikh Maqsoud district of Aleppo qualify. Cities like Hasaka, Qahtaniya, and even Ra's al-Ain are patchworks of identities (Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, and Armenian etc). Tel Abyad and Raqqa only have small minority Kurdish populations, while Deir Ezzor is fully Arab.[105] It is therefore no surprise that the YPG/PYD frame their quasi-statebuilding project not in the mantle of Kurdishness, but in the language of equal rights for all (especially minorities). There is simply no way an agenda centred on the interests of ethnic Kurds will resonate in a sufficiently large territory to be viable. And yet, in addition to widening its conceptual appeal based on Öcalan's concept of 'democratic federalism',[106] the YPG/PYD has had to bring significant coercive pressure to bear in both Kurdish and non-Kurdish-dominated areas to maintain its hegemony. This is discussed in more detail below ('coercive strategies').

Another important point to note is that a mixed rebel-paramilitary group like the YPG/PYD was always unlikely to acquire, consolidate and control territory in the midst of a civil war by means of participatory democracy or consensual enlargement. In other words, the four strategies of dominance discussed below are neither particularly new nor surprising given the existing literature on rebel group governance during civil war. This is why we have sought to extract key factors from the literature on rebel groups that influence the type of rebel governance that is likely to emerge under conditions

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104 An underlying issue that complicates statements like this is of course the longstanding policy of Arabisation of originally Kurdish-inhabited areas under the Assads. On this topic: Allsopp (2014), *op.cit*. We take 2011 as the benchmark since it represents the key baseline for understanding current realities and because it is unlikely that the policy of Arabisation can be undone (although it arguably ought to be compensated for at some point in the future).

105 Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018 (especially p. 52); Allsop and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit*.

106 Öcalan, A., *Democratic Confederalism*, International Initiative, online, 2011.

of conflict (Box 2 below and Annex 2). We outline these factors here, then discuss YPG/PYD strategies to maintain dominance and, at the end of the Section, assess how these factors have worked out in northeastern Syria under YPG/PYD rule.[107]

> ### Box 2   Factors influencing the type of governance/control by rebel groups
>
> The seven factors below have been extracted from the existing literature on rebel governance in times of civil war. The studies we reviewed are listed in Annex 2 and present only a sample of what is available. Nevertheless, they provide a useful starting point for understanding what type of rebel governance is likely to emerge. All factors listed below represent sliding scales (i.e. not binary) and their assessment can vary at different periods of the same conflict.
>
> **(1) Fighting intensity that a rebel group faces** *(influences extent of governance)*
>
> High levels of fighting result in less focus and fewer resources being available for governance since the battlefield takes precedence. Low levels of fighting indicate a less fragmented rebellion, or less counterpressure from government forces, both of which facilitate limited dominance of a single/a few rebel groups. In this situation, more focus and resources are available in principle for the governance of any territories held by rebels.

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107 We focus here on the 'rebel' component of YPG/PYD governance with two caveats. First, the YPG/PYD never joined the original revolution against Assad. Nevertheless, it holds significant territory by means of armed force. In this territory, it has created governance structures that are largely independent of Damascus. These are hallmarks of rebellion, irrespective of whether the future holds re-integration, limited autonomy, or defeat. Second, the YPG/PYD has supported Assad's regime by not fighting against it and by providing a limited bundle of paramilitary support services (e.g. suppressing dissidents, intelligence sharing, trading in oil, and limited battlefield support). With the exception of its role in the siege of Aleppo (cutting off Castello road from the Sheikh Maqsoud area), YPG/PYD battlefield behaviour does not suggest the existence of networks of regime-YPG contacts to plan YPG military actions, let alone an informal command structure run out of Damascus. Most YPG/PYD actions on the battlefield and in establishing territorial governance have been as much in its own interests as in Assad's or the US's. In this sense, it follows the standard rebel group 'manual' for establishing control. See: Mampilly (2011), *op.cit.*; Üngor Ümit (2020), *op.cit.*; Allsop and Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*

(2) Firmness of rebel group territorial control *(influences extent of governance)*

A high degree of rebel territorial control suggests more permanent authority that is less at short-term risk of conquest by other fighting parties. A low or limited degree of rebel territorial control suggests a level of authority that is at risk of short-term erosion or overthrow. In the second situation, a rebel group has fewer incentives to invest in governance.

(3) Rebel group resources *(influences extent and type of governance)*

Rebel groups that rely mostly on 'extractive' resources (e.g. natural resources, smuggling/illicit activity) are less dependent on 'collaborative' resources (e.g. taxes and contributions). This is likely to result in less governance, or at least less attention to local expectations and priorities. If the opposite applies, rebel groups will be more inclined towards limited forms of participatory governance and pay more attention to local needs and priorities. Note that a rebel group's resources also play a role in its ability to recruit and garner local support (especially when other livelihoods become scarcer during conflict), but this is less relevant to the nature of rebel *governance*.

(4) Extent of 'proxy-ness' of a rebel group *(influences type of governance)*

A high level of 'proxy-ness' suggests that a rebel group's allegiance is largely transnational, that it receives critical material support from a specific sponsor abroad, and that local interests are less relevant. A low level of 'proxy-ness' indicates the rebel group is more locally rooted, generates critical material support from a diverse set of sources, and that local interests matter more. In the second situation, more 'benign' governance is more likely.

(5) Local resonance of rebel group ideology *(influences type of governance)*

A substantial level of alignment between rebel group ideology and local attitudes/perceptions facilitates tapping into local resources (legitimacy, material support, shelter, manpower and intelligence) but also necessitates a greater focus on symbolic and service delivery elements of governance (as opposed to coercive elements). In contrast, a poor level of alignment will tend to have the opposite effect as armed groups need to resort to coercion to extract resources and govern / retain control.

(6) Internal structure of the rebel group *(influences type of governance)*

Out of necessity, all rebel groups are more or less authoritarian and violent. Yet, rebel groups that are more organisationally complex (e.g. having an embryonic political party or social movement in addition to an armed core) are more likely to engage in limited forms of participatory governance (without necessarily ceding control). Simpler 'fighting only' rebel groups are more likely to be inclined towards authoritarian governance.

(7) International perception of a rebel group *(influences type of governance)*

A rebel group that is perceived with sympathy at the international level may be more cautious about public displays of authoritarian governance (or try to cover these up) and more likely to introduce limited elements of more participatory governance with fewer human rights abuses. A rebel group that is perceived to be more akin to an extremist group is more likely to engage in authoritarian governance and/or commit human rights abuses.

Sources: These seven factors are extracted from the sources listed in Annex 2.

Coercive strategies

The establishment of YPG/PYD control over predominantly Syrian Kurdish-inhabited areas and beyond was possible because of the factors discussed in Section 1. The next step – maintaining dominance vis-à-vis competitors, enemies and dissenters – was achieved in part through a coercive strategy of repression and intimidation (discussed here), and in part through more benign deal-making, identity and basic service strategies (discussed in the following sections). However unsurprising it may be in a context of rebellion and autocracy, it is worth noting that coercion has been a key element of YPG/PYD rule from the beginning (including institutions like the Asayish and revolutionary youth groups). This holds true for the early days of the uprising as well as for the ensuing civil war and is still true today, even though it has been somewhat moderated by international coalition support and consolidation of YPG/PYD rule. But in the main, the YPG/PYD has so far not tolerated competitive political activity or governance independent of its own structures.

The evidence for this is clear-cut. For example, there was a series of attacks, arrests and disappearances or killings ascribed to the YPG and PKK in 2011/2012 that included Zahida Rashkilu, Mash'al Tammo (Kurdish Future Movement), Nasr al-Din Barheik (PDK-S), Juan Kotna, Jamil Omar, and a dozen members of the Assyrian Democratic

Association.[108] Human Rights Watch also conclusively investigated the violent incidents in Amouda on 27 June 2013 when YPG forces used excessive force against anti PYD-demonstrators, killing at least six men that day and the next. Overnight, they also detained and beat around 50 supporters of the Yekiti Party at a YPG base.[109] One of our interviewees remarked: 'The past two-and-a-half years have also seen at least eight unsolved killings and disappearances of the PYD's political opponents in areas controlled by the PYD. The PYD has denied responsibility for all of them, but the lack of a credible investigation stands in contrast to its response after other security incidents, such as the rapid mass arrests after most bomb attacks.'[110] In brief and to paraphrase Sam Dagher, 'as one of its first actions, the YPG cracked down on its rivals and all those who took part in peaceful protests against Bashar.'[111]

The PYD has argued that some of these interventions were necessary because the wartime environment required unity of effort against the many threats to the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited areas of Syria, in particular those of radical Islamist groups. In such a context, dissidence without the ability to join the armed struggle was not welcome. A PYD spokesperson told us: 'The KNC and the other parties that are with them, they went out on Friday, the people went out on Friday from the mosque, and said Allah akbar, Allah akbar [God is great]. For one hour only. They finish and only return next week. The revolution is not this of course [author's note: he suggested that revolution demands more active efforts and more frequent action].'[112] While the argument that protection against external threats brooks no dissidence has some validity, it is not clear why this required the killing of peaceful demonstrators. Such intolerance of opposition has parallels with the manner in which the PKK itself maintains internal discipline and has at times sought to suppress political alternatives in Turkey itself.[113]

The creation of the Self Administration in 2014 did not really change YPG/PYD dominance despite its veneer of collaborative partnership. This is mostly because

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108 Interview with a KNC representative from Qamishli, 10 January 2020, Istanbul; Interview with a SNC Assyrian representative and a SNC Arab representative, 19 August 2019 and 11 March 2020, Istanbul; Interview with a representative of the Association of Independent Kurds, 22 January 2021, Istanbul. For some context: https://en.qantara.de/content/alliance-between-the-pkk-and-the-assad-regime-a-political-sect-on-the-wrong-track (accessed 2 December 2020).

109 HRW (2014), op.cit.

110 Ibid.

111 Dagher (2019), op.cit.; see also: ICG (2014), op.cit.; on a similar incident in Burj Abdou in Afrin (2013): Rebz News, 2020, online (accessed 14 February 2021). The YPG apologized for the events in Amouda in June 2020, seven years later: https://syriaaccountability.org/updates/2020/07/09/a-historic-apology-the-ypg-acknowledges-wrongdoing-in-amouda/ (accessed 26 February 2021).

112 Interview with a PYD representative, Ra's al-Ayn, 5 October 2019.

113 See: Marcus (2009), op.cit.

the Self Administration is a structure that has been implemented top-down based on YPG/PYD conceived parameters (which are in turn based on Öcalan's ideology of democratic confederalism) and does not exercise command over YPG forces. According to an interviewee linked with the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Etilaf), 'Today it is well known that the Self Administration is PYD. The basic decisions are taken by the PYD and, importantly, in Qandil also by the PKK. The Self Administration are Turkish Kurds, not Syrians. And when they meet you, they do not even let this be a secret. They bring the Turkish person to have a meeting with you…'[114] Allegations of direct PKK control are, however, categorically denied by the PYD who only acknowledge ideological affinity.[115] Be this as it may, the Self Administration is probably best seen as an effort to rule on the basis of Öcalan's concepts, hemmed in by wartime resource and mentality constraints.[116]

During its fight against IS, the YPG/PYD resorted to coercive practices with some frequency. Reasons include the fact it was not necessarily welcome in the Arab-majority territories it acquired, the YPG/PYD framing of the FSA as a Turkey-linked construct in the north (west), (although some groups worked with the SDF against IS), and simply its own objectives of growth and control. In one of its most egregious acts against the revolution, in 2016 the YPG took the Arab-majority town of Tel Rifaat from the FSA with Russian air support.[117] As an Arab politician from Hasaka put it: 'They took Tel Rifaat

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114 Interview with a Assyrian representative, Qamishli, 1 October 2019; see also: Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, *Centralization and decentralization in Syria: The concept and practice, Istanbul*: Fourth annual book, 2018.

115 Interview with a PYD representative, Ra's al-Ayn, 5 October 2019.

116 Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.* analyse it extensively, but somewhat inconclusively.

117 Interview with Christoph Reuter (journalist with Der Spiegel), by email, 6 October 2018; Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*

from the FSA. This was with the support of Russian warplanes. And they carried out a massacre and displayed the bodies of FSA fighters.[118] They also forcibly displaced people from the area. I visited camps in Northern Syria [Azaz, Bab al-Salama] with the Etilaf several times. The displaced fled to those areas and are in very bad humanitarian conditions. They are still waiting to return to their places of origin.'[119] The YPG did not necessarily engage in this aggression because of its antipathy towards the revolution, but to connect Tel Rifaat (FSA controlled at the time) with Manbij (IS controlled at the time) as part of its broader aim to create a contiguous territory from Afrin to Hasaka province. It nearly succeeded when it also captured Manbij from IS a few months later, despite US assurances to Turkey that the YPG would withdraw.[120] These YPG/PYD moves caused growing concern among Turkish political elites and triggered Operation Euphrates Shield (2016/17), in which Syrian opposition forces and the Turkish army took control of the area between Azaz, Jarablus and Al-Bab to expel ISIS and to prevent a contiguous YPG/PYD-controlled area from becoming reality.[121]

As YPG control expanded and the war continued, it took recourse to another coercive strategy, namely forced conscription including child recruitment.[122] In a sense, this was a consequence of the war's battlefield carnage and its insatiable appetite for new fighters. A Syrian Kurdish mother in Amouda told us her son was now in Deir Ezzor, guarding the Omar Oilfields. "He did not want to go but YPG forced him. He is very afraid as he has to review CCTV footage to check there are no IS militants coming. But how can he distinguish between one Arab or another? He was just here on leave for ten days and now he is back for two months. It is two months in Deir Ezzor and ten days off. For one year and a month. For a very small salary. He is very scared".[123] Or, as an Assyrian representative put it: 'They take youth from the streets and force them into military camps. There are military training camps everywhere in the area here.'[124]

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118 https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/26785/ypg_trucks_roam_afrin_packed_with_bodies_opposition_fighters.html (accessed 9 November 2020).

119 Interview with an Arab politician from Hasaka, 19 August 2019, Istanbul; see also: Al-Khateb, K., *Displaced Syrians demand to return, seek regime-YPG exit*, Al-Monitor, online, 2019.

120 Frantzman, S., *Turkey's War in Syria Was Not Inevitable*, Foreign Policy, online, 2019; Business Insider, 2016, online (accessed 9 November 2020).

121 Cockburn, P., *War in the age of Trump: The defeat of ISIS, the fall of the Kurds, the conflict with Iran*, London: Verso, 2020.

122 The text of the enabling law of the Self Administration can be consulted here (accessed 14 December 2020); see also: UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/45/31, 2020, online; Zaman, A. and D. Wilkofsky, *Child recruitment casts shadow over Syrian Kurds' push for global legitimacy*, Al-Monitor, 2020, online; Szuba (2020), *op.cit.*

123 Interview with Kurdish woman, 7 October 2019, Amouda.

124 Interview with Assyrian representative, 1 October 2019, Qamishli.

Forced conscription significantly increased YPG fighting numbers, but the practice of also had a significant negative impact on the YPG/PYD's local legitimacy. Child recruitment, moreover, is a war crime. In addition, many inhabitants of YPG-controlled areas fled or migrated because of the mix of repression and forced conscription it applied. For example, there are about 240,000 Syrian (mainly Kurdish) refugees from the country's northeast in the KRI today and a number of Syrian researchers estimated there are about a million Syrian refugees from the northeast in Turkey, of which several hundred thousands are Syrian Kurds.[125] To some extent, however, the high level of poverty in northeastern Syria mitigates the flight and resentment generated by the YPG's forced conscription practices because it offers a job and some livelihood prospects, despite meagre salaries.[126]

On a final note, the YPG/PYD has been able to use coercive strategies in part because it is not dependent on the local population for an appreciable part of its finances, even though it levies a range of local taxes. Much of its revenues accrue from the sale of oil from the fields it has conquered in northeastern Syria, financial support from the US to continue the fight against IS (salaries for fighters), and a thriving illicit smuggling economy.[127] This is not to say the Self Administration or SDC are well resourced, but rather that the use of coercion is likely to remain a feature of YPG/PYD governance as long as, especially, the oil/gas fields of eastern Syria remain under its control and its US partnership remains intact. It also means that the YPG/PYD will fight tooth and nail to maintain control over the area.[128]

In sum, coercion has been a key element of YPG/PYD governance and dominance throughout, but particularly in the early years of the civil war. To position itself as the pre-eminent Kurdish force protecting Kurdish communities and Kurdish identity, the YPG/PYD first suppressed and – when needed eliminated – Kurdish political rivals.

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125 Interview with a KNC representative on 2 October in Qamishli; see also: http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5 (accessed 19 October 2020). Interviews with Syrian Kurds in Istanbul, 2018-2020, Suruc, Sanliurfa and Mardin in August 2020, as well as in Istanbul January 2021.

126 Eyewitness account of one of the authors during travel and research in the northeast; see also: Butter, D., *Syria's economy: Picking up the pieces*, London: Chatham House, 2015; World Bank, *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, Washington DC: WB, 2017.

127 See: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/sdf-syria-avoid-fight-budget-trump.html (accessed 9 November 2020); Kajjo (2020), *op.cit.*; Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*; Dagher (2019), *op.cit.*

128 Interview with a senior former US official, 24 January 2020, by email. In this context, the recent Caesar Act-exempted oil exploitation deal between the SDF and Delta Crescent Energy LLC strengthens both the US-YPG/PYD partnership and ensures a steady stream of revenue for the YPG/PYD. See: Al-Ghadhawi, *Implications of the Oil Deal for the Kurds in Syria*, Chatham House: London, 2020, online. Despite the US request to halt oil deliveries to the regime and despite the Caesar Act, according to our interviews the YPG appears to continue supplying the regime. This must be seen in the broader illicit economy that thrives in the region, including artifacts and people smuggling.

This has avoided the emergence of an Iraq-type scenario where political power and armed force is split between KDP and PUK, creating tensions and risks as well as accommodation and compromise. Once dominant among Syria's Kurds, the YPG/PYD commenced a gradual process of enlargement with US support after the battle for Kobani. Its conquests served the fight against IS as much as increasing its own sway over territory, people and resources. This included more and more areas where Syrian Kurds are a minority or where they are not present at all, necessitating further use of (the threat of) coercion as well as more co-optive tactics to maintain control (see Section 3).

In a sense, the YPG/PYD is stuck in a tense trade-off between size and legitimacy. Its aspiration for autonomy requires a certain size that cannot be generated based on Syria's Kurdish-majority areas alone since these are too small. Connecting the three main Kurdish areas – Afrin, Kobani and Hasaka province – necessitates the occupation of Arab-inhabited lands. Furthermore, Kurdish communities have become smaller in relative terms due to Arabisation policies. In consequence, realisation of the required size can only be achieved through occupation of non-Kurdish areas and in times of war this inevitably requires the use of coercive methods. But such methods have undercut YPG/PYD legitimacy and popularity in these very same areas, as well as triggering three Turkish interventions, thus rendering moot the sustainability of the YPG/PYD's presence in its current form.

Deal-making strategies

In times of civil war, deal making is essential to survival and growth, and the YPG/PYD has been no exception. Its initial 'deal' with the regime and its emergent tactical partnership with the US have been discussed extensively in the previous section and it is these arrangements that have been central to much of its success. As they are rather

different in nature, the distinction between them needs to be made with care. Dealings between the YPG/PYD and regime take place on a much more informal and less visible footing,[129] feature the occasional fight,[130] and are inconclusive in terms of their desired end-state.[131] In contrast, the YPG/PYD's alliance with the US was, at least initially, a highly visible tactical partnership with a single-purpose: eliminating IS from Syria.

In the category of 'other deals', there are also the relationships between the YPG/PYD and Arab tribal brigades to consider as expressed in the SDF, as well as with minority armed groups like one of the two Assyrian/Syriac Sutoro (linked with the Syriac Union Party). Finally, there are the relationships between the SDC/SDF[132] and the Arab population to be mindful of, especially in Deir Ezzor. In this regard, the SDC and SDF arrangements are partnerships that co-opt and connect newly-created political parties (by the YPG) and part of the Arab population (including clans and tribes) with the YPG/PYD in a marriage of necessity or convenience.[133] The creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) enabled the YPG/PYD to expand beyond both Kurdish-majority and -minority areas. It was and is a mixed force composed of (mostly) Arab, Kurdish and other minority fighters controlled by the YPG to give the fight against IS a more Arab face in Syria's IS-held Arab areas. As the SDF expanded into such areas, the Self Administration did so too via the creation of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), co-opting key individuals from the area's major tribes and enforcing compliance with its governance. Typically, 'civilian' bodies like the SDC have remained under YPG/PYD control.[134]

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129 It appears that the YPG/PYD initially perceived the remaining presence of the Syrian regime in Qamishli and Hasaka as a means to forestall problems with local Arab communities worried about domination by Syrian Kurds. Source: Interview with a PYD official in 2013.

130 Phillips (2020), *op.cit.*

131 International Crisis Group, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, Brussels: ICG, 2018.

132 We posit the relationship between SDF and SDC as similar to the one between YPG and PYD, i.e. in times of war following decades of authoritarianism, the military core holds sway over the political wing.

133 AANES is not discussed here since it is not an alliance, but rather a YPG/PYD internal governance mechanism that was imposed by it. One of our interviewees put it thus: 'We sat with them, and they proposed the project, we sat more than two sessions with them. It was a complete week in which we sat here daily together. The leadership of the PYD was here daily. It was before they announced the Self Administration. We read the project, it was a project of one party, PYD. We wanted a project in which all ethnic entities negotiate together and rule in agreement with each other. Not that one party comes and says "I am the one who is controlling leading this period of time". There are 30 parties in the Self Administration, but basically the only party which takes decisions is the PYD. These parties joined the PYD because of interests.' *Source*: Interview with an Assyrian politician, 1 October 2019, Qamishli. The difference between the SDC and the Self Administration is that the SDC is for the whole of Syria and the Self Administration for northeast Syria only, according to a Syrian researcher from Tel Abyad familiar with the issue (Interview, 11 March 2020, Istanbul).

134 Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*; Omran (2018), *op.cit.*

The savviness of the YPG/PYD has been to ensure that its deals with the regime and the US complemented one another and to have used its US partnership to create the SDF as a vehicle to extent its power base. That is to say, the YPG/PYD recognised the likely longevity of the regime as a powerful neighbour, never fully closing the door to it. At the same time it maximised the benefits from America's reluctance to put its own boots on the ground in the fight against IS to increase its strength for the inevitable negotiations, or even showdown, with the regime. As Mazloum Abdi, the SDF's commander, put it recently: 'However, we remain in constant contact with the regime because we live side by side and we face common security problems.'[135]

This dual strategy almost failed in October 2019 when US forces acting as guarantors against greater Russian/regime pressure partially withdrew at the behest of President Trump, who had greenlighted the Turkish operation Peace Spring.[136] Had the US fully withdrawn in the following weeks or months, it is quite likely that regime-linked forces would have moved east of the Euphrates and then moved north to contest the core Kurdish areas of Syria.[137]

In addition to internal manoeuvring within the US administration,[138] the YPG/PYD was saved from full US withdrawal by the Trump administration's shift in focus from anti-IS to anti-Iran. By 2019, this shift had turned northeast Syria from an area of rearguard action against IS into an essential area in terms of the Syrian regime's recovery (by preventing access to its natural resources, which could be used for reconstruction) and in blocking an Iranian land corridor via the Ya'rubia border crossing (on the Iraqi side, Iran-linked PMF groups established control over the Tel Afar area in the offensive on Mosul in 2017). This shift also turned the YPG into somewhat more of a US proxy.[139] Additional factors that played a role include American admiration for the PYD's stated goals of gender equality and inclusive local governance, as well as well the blossoming ties between the US military and YPG fighters.[140] While the US had always been clear

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135 Zaman, A., *Syrian Kurdish commander sees chance to ease tensions with Turkey under Biden*, Al-Monitor, online, 2020 (accessed 12 November 2020).

136 Philips (2020), *op.cit.*

137 Even though local tribes do not necessarily regard the YPG/SDF positively, this is even less the case for the regime given that the protests started in tribal areas and thousands of tribesmen linger in regime prisons. See for instance: Dukhan (2020), *op.cit.*; several interviews with tribal leaders in southern Turkey in the summer of 2020.

138 See: https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/11/outgoing-syria-envoy-admits-hiding-us-troop-numbers-praises-trumps-mideast-record/170012/ (accessed 19 November 2020).

139 It is not really its size that matters, but rather the credible threat of swift retaliation from US bases in Al-Tanf, Iraq or further afield in the Gulf. The Wagner Group found that this threat was real in February 2018. See: New York Times, online, 2018 (accessed 12 November 2020).

140 Interview with a senior former US official by email, 2020.

about the temporality of its interests,[141] with time it nevertheless came around to officially supporting the idea of some kind of self-administration or decentralised self-administration for northeastern Syria.

All of this notwithstanding, the YPG/PYD had to call in border control support and protection from Russia and the regime immediately after Ankara's launch of operation Peace Spring in 2019 to prevent the Turkish army and the Arab forces that fought with/for it from penetrating more deeply into northeast Syria than they ultimately did.[142] Its pragmatic relationship with the regime made it possible to do so swiftly. While the YPG/PYD is on speaking terms with Russia, this cannot be called a partnership in the sense of a relationship based on shared objectives. Rather, Russia seeks to reunite the YPG/PYD with the regime that is clearly not (yet) willing to entertain anything like a more federal governance structure for Syria if the informal negotiations between YPG/PYD and the regime are anything to go by.[143]

The SDF was created as early as 2015 to address two challenges that threatened the emergent alliance between the US and the YPG in their fight against IS. First, Turkey, among others, views the YPG as a franchise of the PKK and has always objected to US support for the organisation. Creating the SDF at least changed the perception of the US supporting a PKK-linked group directly. What did not go down well with Turkey is that the US prioritised the fight against IS over observing the legal ramifications of the YPG's linkage with the PKK, which Washington itself marked as a terrorist organisation. The situation thus arose that US military aircraft took off from the same Incirlik airbase to bombard IS as did Turkish fighter planes to attack the PKK in northern Iraq.[144] Second, defeating IS would take the US-YPG partnership deep into Syrian Arab territory and it was not wise to do this with an overly YPG-dominated force, hence the need for an organization with a more mixed Arab-Kurdish composition.

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141 As aptly summarised by Mazloum Abdi himself here: 'Our military ties with the United States are very good, but we consider our political relations to be insufficient. Despite all our efforts, they have not attained the desired level.'See: Zaman (2020), *op.cit.*

142 As most of the area covered by operation Peace Spring is Arab-populated, some of the Turkey-linked Syrian forces viewed the offensive as 'liberation' from the YPG – ironically also Syrian, except for some of its PKK contingents. See: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/14/amid-turkish-push-displaced-arab-syrians-eye-return-to-homeland (accessed 12 February 2021).

143 ICG (2018), *op.cit.*; Kajjo (2020),*op.cit.*; Sayigh, Y., *What's Happening in Idlib?*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2020, online; Zaman (2020), *op.cit.* It should also be recalled that the Syrian government's official ideology rejects decentralisation. Neither does it have any experience with decentralisation. Implementing such a policy would be difficult under more peaceful circumstances. Plus, the Syrian authorities surely noticed that the relative autonomy of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq did not stop it from a bid for full independence in 2017.

144 Stein and Foley (2016), *op.cit.*

While the degree of collaboration between the SDF and the Arab populations (tribal figures and clans are among its key structures) straddling the Euphrates varies for reasons that include existing networks and loyalties, material interests and the absence/presence of alternatives, perceptions of the SDF appear to be fairly similar.[145] They view it as a YPG-dominated force that is backed by the US and the SDC as its political wing, which has little actual sway over the YPG-dominated SDF although the latter formally became the defence force of the re-labelled Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria in 2016.[146] A journalist familiar with the matter put it to us as follows: 'Those Kurdish advisers to Arab chairmen speak Sourani not Badjani (Kurmanji), the Syrian Kurds do not speak Sourani at all. I give you an example – the head of the local council of Deir Ezzor is Arab Ghassan al-Youssef, from the Shaitaat clan of the Ogeidat tribal confederation,[147] and they appointed an adviser to him, a Kurd. The latter decided everything. Ghassan al-Youssef allowed demonstrations of the Shaitaat after Baghouz was taken from IS, demanding that the Kurdish forces (SDF) leave the areas. This tribal pressure caused Souhad Kobani (a SDC leader in charge of the administration and base in Raqqa) to fire the Kurdish adviser, but then a new one was appointed who is a bit softer, a bit more ready to listen.'[148] In other words, there appears to be a continuous process of fine-tuning modalities of rule that maintain YPG/PYD control but also allow for some participatory governance (see Section 3 for more detail).

Another part of the picture is that the Syrian Arab tribes in Hasaka, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor are too weak and too divided to contest YPG dominance of the SDF, or PYD dominance of the SDC. Neither do they benefit from external sponsorship such as the SDF receives from the US. Formerly powerful structures of political allegiance, military mobilisation and social cohesion, tribes have become less authoritative and capable of collective action since the establishment of the Syian state as they were gradually co-opted.[149] National laws started to compete with tribal customs, police and army reduced the autonomy of tribal dispute resolution mechanisms, and the relevance of their armed might while national governance was centralised, in part by drawing tribal elites into it. The position of sheikh consequently lost status and today is less an active locus of

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145 Larger tribes in Northeast Syria include the Al-Baggara and Al-Ogeidat tribal confederations, as well as the Shammar, Al-Jabbour, Al-Qais, Taj, Albu Saraya, and Al-Walda.

146 Allsopp and Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.* Note several ambiguities on p. 121.

147 The Shaitaat suffered particularly from IS when its fighters put hundreds of its tribesmen to a gruesome death in 2014. See: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/syria-deir-ez-zor-shaitat-massacre-islamic-state-kurdish.html (accessed 2 December 2020).

148 Interview with a Syrian journalist of Arab-Kurdish descent, Istanbul, 21 August 2019.

149 See for instance: Jabar, F. and H. Dawod, *Tribes and power: Nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East*, London: SAQI, 2003 (although they maintain, especially in the Iraqi context, that tribes remain capable of socio-political action); Ahmed, A., *The thistle and the drone: How America's war on terror became a global war on tribal Islam*, Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 2013.

power than it used to be, although tribes have enjoyed a revival of late due to wartime destruction and political crisis in some states in the region.[150] Tribes remain socially, and sometimes politically, relevant but they are no longer central linchpins of political, social and military might. An interviewee put it as follows: 'Today it is impossible for the sheikh of a clan to make a reconciliation agreement with an international side, or with the Syrian regime, and have the whole clan walk after him. This is empty speech.'[151]

This state of affairs opens the door to competition for tribal clientelism, which is what we see unfolding in eastern Syria at the moment. Many tribes are divided. A Syrian researcher noted: 'Parts are with the SDF, parts with the FSA, parts with the regime, and there are people with IS. From the same tribe. And everyone is saying that they have a tribal council. SDF has a tribal council and the regime has a tribal council, and everyone is saying the tribes are with me.'[152] In this context, the response to the US semi-withdrawal has been mixed. As Mohammad Hassan notes: 'The response from Arab tribes in the north and east of Syria has been mixed. Those in al-Hasakah governorate are split between support for the regime, for Iran and for Turkey [*Authors' note*: SDF seems missing]. Meanwhile, the decision of US troops to stay behind to protect the oil fields east of the Euphrates has worked in the favour of tribes in Deir Ezzor that refused to allow Assad, Iran and Russia to enter their lands'.[153]

In sum, the durability of YPG/PYD control over large parts of northeastern Syria depends on two temporary and fragile partnerships remaining intact. First, control endures as long as US forces remain to ward off both the regime and its allies, as well as Turkey and the FSA brigades/Syrian National Army (SNA) working with it. Second, it persists as long as the area's tribes stay sufficiently 'loyal' to the YPG/PYD. In this context, relations between the YPG/PYD and the regime also serve as a safety net to cushion the blow should these partnerships between the YPG/PYD on the one hand, and the US and the main Arab tribes on the other, be ruptured.

Identity strategies

Identity is a powerful enabler of governance and control anywhere in the world. In northeast Syria, the YPG/PYD has followed a dual strategy in this regard. On the one hand, it has sought to project a modern image – to the West in particular – that is premised on inclusive local governance (as a form of incipient democracy), minority protection and gender equality on the basis of Öcalan's concept of 'democratic

150 Dukhan (2020), *op.cit.*; Jabar and Dawod (2003), *op.cit.*

151 Interview with Syrian researcher from Tel Abyad (Al-Qais tribe), Istanbul, 4 February 2020.

152 *Ibid*; see: Heras, N., *The Battle for the Tribes in Northeast Syria*, Geneva: GCSP, 2020.

153 Hassan, M., *Arab Tribes in al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor Choose Their Allies*, Chatham House, 2020, online.

Sunset between Ra's al-Ain and Debersiya

federalism'.[154] On the other hand, it has sought to strengthen Kurdish identity and PKK teachings/curricula throughout the Kurdish majority and minority areas of northeastern Syria.

Suppression of Kurdish identity under the Nasr, Ba'ath and Assad(s) regimes, the fragmentation of the Syrian Kurdish political landscape, competition between the views of Barzani and Öcalan, and the mosaic make-up of the area[155] made a dedicated identity development effort essential for anyone seeking to exercise long-term control over northeastern Syria. At the same time, depending on what identity is to be promoted, such an effort could end up being as divisive as earlier regime efforts to suppress Kurdish identity. Moreover, historically speaking, identity formation has as much been the process of the (violent) centralisation of governance and the expansion of state services and capacity as it has preceded and triggered these processes. For example, the contemporary French state was built between roughly 1870 and 1914 by the gradual expansion of its capabilities to control and provide via the standardisation of measurements, the introduction of a monetary economy, better infrastructure, and the standardisation of education, taxation and law and order.[156]

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154 It should be kept in mind that Öcalan has been incarcerated since 1999 and that his 'thought leadership' is mediated through other leading PKK figures via his lawyers and other visiters to Imrali island. This means that interpretation and interference are likely to play a role in claims made, and directions issued, on Öcalan's behalf.

155 See, for example: Balanche (2018), *op.cit.*

156 Weber, E., *From peasants into Frenchmen: The modernization of rural France, 1870-1914*, Stanford: SUP, 1976. See also: Bayly, C., *The birth of the modern world*: 1780–1914, London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004; Scott, J., *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale, 2009.

As the repression of other political entities and views has already been discussed under 'coercive strategies', this section focuses more on the softer aspects of identity building. There are several elements to the YPG/PYD's broader strategy to 'Kurdify' northern Syria along the lines of Öcalan's ideology. Domestically, it has taken a few pages out of the regime playbook by renaming villages and streets based on their Kurdish names even though many today are made up of a mix of people, including Assyrians, Turkmen and Arabs. It initially applied the same recipe to the entire area under its control, originally called 'West Kurdistan'. This subsequently changed to 'the Autonomous Regions', 'Rojava' (the west), 'Federal Northern Syria', 'the democratic confederalist autonomous areas of northern Syria', 'the Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava', the 'Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' and, ultimately, the more bureaucratic but neutral sounding 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria'.[157]

The struggle for an appropriate name for the YPG/PYD's governance project is not trivial given the area's patchwork of population groups. The many shifts showcase the difficulty in reconciling different strands of Öcalan's ideology. On the one hand, there is the notion of greater Kurdishness (reflected in the term 'autonomy'), but on the other hand there is the idea of empowering other communities (reflected in the term 'federation'). For the moment, YPG/PYD coercive control prioritises selective Kurdishness over inclusivity, in part because it keeps the many centrifugal (internal divisions) and centripetal (external pressures) forces on northeast Syria at bay and in part because it maintains the organisation's position of power.

An alternative tactic would be to ally with the KNC via a negotiated agreement that brings the KDP into play as a sponsor of the northeast, but this requires surmounting longstanding mistrust between the KDP and PKK, reconfiguring the KDP-Turkish relationship (discussed more extensively in the next section), and finding some form of accommodation with the majority of Arab population in northeast Syria, who may not necessarily agree with the outcome of YPG/PYD–KNC negotiations. In short, this alternative approach is unlikely to work, especially given the close relationship against the PKK that is developing between Ankara and Erbil.

Another key plank of the YPG/PYD's identity development strategy is educational. It introduced its own Kurdish curriculum to replace the state's Arabic one and made it obligatory for Kurdish populations in northeastern Syria. It also initially closed Christian schools in Hasaka province that refused the new Self Administration curriculum. Such moves proved contentious given that the curriculum is neither internationally nor nationally recognised. Also, it does not teach students more than a minimum level of Arabic, for about an hour a week, even though it is the national language and a majority language in many areas. The result can be described as 'voting with their

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157 Allsopp and Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.*

feet' since many families moved their children to schools in the regime's 'security square' (i.e. the areas of Hasaka and Qamishli that remain under regime control). As one Qamishli resident remarked: 'In the regime's schools there are more than 100 students in every classroom because the people move their children from Amouda and from the countryside so that they can study at the regime's schools. But in the Self Administration's schools, each class has no more than 10 or 15 students.' In addition, quite a few families moved their children to private educational institutions.[158] When the YPG realised that many people were choosing such alternatives, it closed a number of Christian schools (one such alternative) or sought to ensure that they accepted only Christian students. In the end, an agreement was reached that all 'church' [Christian] schools could keep teaching the regime curriculum without SDF interference in return for only accepting Christian students.[159] More recently, the Education Authority of AANES filed a lawsuit against a range of institutions that are still teaching the official Syrian curriculum (in Arabic), further increasing tensions.[160]

Underpinning the identity development efforts of the YPG/PYD is its adherence to the views and ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. This in itself has developed from emphasising Kurdish nationalism to a multi-ethnic society that includes all significant population groups. It is under the heading of 'democratic confederalism' that the YPG/PYD's governance modernisation project is spoken about and marketed. Yet, the problem is that the primary identity appears to remain Kurdishness as echoed by the enduring and relatively authoritarian control by the YPG/PYD over northeastern Syria. This is indirectly confirmed by the YPG/PYD itself in remarks such as: 'The PYD is an idea, present on the ground, we have a complete vision. The YPG is there to protect and defend the society. In the YPG there are Arabs, Syriacs and Kurds. It is a gathering from this society. It acted to protect this society. And everything should be in one hand.'[161] In other words, the accommodation of diverse interests under singular control of the YPG/PYD as a kind of protector and vanguard. This is arguably what the AANES and SDC represent today. In times of war, this is not a great surprise despite the obvious problems it raises. But the key question is perhaps rather what the system's evolutionary ability is. If it opens up, it could bring about greater diversification and participation; if it freezes or buckles down, it could bring greater authoritarianism. The second is more likely if the conflict persists.

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158 Interview with a KNC politician in Qamishli, 2 October 2019, Syrian analyst, Istanbul, 11 December 2019.

159 Several interviews with residents in northeast Syria in October 2019. See also: Safi, M., *Closure of Syrian Schools: Another Bleak Sign for Christians in Syria*, The National Review, 2018 online (accessed 15 November 2020).

160 Hardan, M., *Authorities in northeast Syria struggle to impose Kurdish curriculum*, Al-Monitor, 2021, online.

161 Interview with a PYD representative, Ra's al-Ayn, 5 October 2020.

Basic service strategies

Longer-term occupation of territory by an armed group that is not entirely predatory[162] usually sees it providing at least some basic services such as security, justice, bread, healthcare, water and electricity. This helps the armed group being seen as a legitimate authority by the local population, constituting a viable alternative to the *de jure* government. Even radical extremist groups like IS in Syria/Iraq, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din in Idlib (Syria) are no exception to this basic principle. In response, the Syrian regime and its allies have consistently bombed facilities needed to produce such services – bakeries, health centres, water installations and the like – to stamp out any output legitimacy that their provision might generate for alternative contenders for statehood.[163] YPG/PYD-held areas constitute a notable exception as they have largely been spared such bombardment for reasons discussed in Section 1.

Regarding basic services, according to locals the YPG/PYD has provided the minimum. On the upside, the YPG did provide a decent level of security for the expanding number of communities under its control in northern Syria in the early years of the conflict (roughly 2011–2014). As protection is a scarce commodity in times of civil war, this was valued a great deal by many inhabitants of the area.[164] Nevertheless, at the same time the noted internal repression of alternative political visions created stains on perceptions of the group. When YPG/PYD expansion took off in earnest after the battle of Kobani, the security it provided became more of a mixed blessing since it was not welcome everywhere and acceptance of PYD-dominated governance was increasingly seen as the price for YPG-protection.[165]

Unsurprisingly, water, electricity and healthcare services have deteriorated significantly since 2011 due to wartime limitations, a lack of administrative technical experience and modest resources. The YPG's capture of the Tishreen Dam in 2016 enabled limited

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162 Or, in terms of Mancur Olson, that is a 'stationary' as opposed to 'a roving' bandit. See: Olson, M., *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*, Oxford: OUP, 2000.

163 Martinez and Eng (2018), *op.cit.* YPG/PYD linked insurgency groups apply the same tactics today in Afrin as well as in Al-Bab and Azaz, including the indiscriminate targeting of civilians. See for instance: https://twitter.com/MarkCutts/status/1355991046581334016?s=08 (accessed 12 February 2021). Attribution of such attacks can be difficult since there are also IS cells and regime agents active in these areas. But as Abdi himself admitted stated: "We promised the U.S. that we would de-escalate and we are ready for a full unilateral ceasefire, including along the lines of separation with Turkish/opposition-controlled areas, if the U.S. or Russia could also elicit a commitment from Turkey to address the violations committed against civilians in Afrin and allow for the return of the displaced to their homes." See: ICG (2020), *op.cit.*

164 ICG (2014), *op.cit.*

165 Several interviews in northeast Syria, October 2019; several interviews in southern Turkey, August 2020.

Farmland lying fallow

improvement at the time, but substantial shortages remain.[166] Some local interviewees complained especially about having to pay bills twice: one to the regime and another to the Self Administration. They wondered aloud as to what happens to the oil revenues.

Income-generating activities are also in short supply despite the area's abundance of rich farmland and natural resources (e.g. oil). High levels of poverty are common and possibilities for employment are largely centred on the PYD administration and YPG recruitment. Salaries are typically low and party loyalty is required. Such lack of alternatives also means that professed support for the YPG/PYD is unlikely to represent reality. As an interviewee put it: 'People who go against them [YPG/PYD] do not have work, there are no businesses, life is very difficult. That is a big part of their support.'[167]

Despite being a newcomer to quasi-statebuilding, the PYD managed to maintain a fairly sophisticated, in part state-inherited, system of substate governance that carries out day-to-day administration. Currently called the 'Autonomous Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria', it has gone through various names and functional redesigns that at least demonstrate an effort to provide basic governance and administration in times of war and rapid change.[168] Views differ significantly on how inclusive the Autonomous Administration actually is in how it operates, and how it decides and allocates (aid) resources. While it is based on a fairly progressive 'Social Contract' (2014) as founding document, it also seems to be rather bureaucratic, slow and unduly influenced by both

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166 Sary, G., *Kurdish self-governance in Syria: Survival and ambition*, London: Chatham House, 2016.

167 Interview with a Syrian Kurdish resident of Amouda, 7 October 2019.

168 The evolution of the PYD's organizational structures are discussed in more detail in ICG (2014), *op.cit.*; Allsop and Wilgenburg (2019), *op.cit.* and Sary (2016), *op.cit.*

ethnic (Kurdish-ness) and security considerations (e.g. the internal security forces of the AANES are said to play a significant role).[169]

In sum, YPG/PYD service provision efforts operate under serious constraints. Some of these are beyond its control, such as being largely cut off from national grids and normal trade (excluding smuggling and barter), healthcare centres having been overwhelmed with the wounded, farmland lying fallow due to displacement, and the overall degradation into an informal war economy. But the YPG/PYD itself has contributed to other constraints. For example, its rhetoric, media coverage and battlefield behaviour fuelled Ankara's suspicion of the YPG/PYD, resulting in the closure of border control points with a major economic impact (trade).[170] Internal repression and a lack of transparency regarding the distribution of oil, tax, wheat, barley and other revenues also hamper service provision efforts.

Taking stock: YPG/PYD strategies in times of war

Having surveyed the bundle of coercive, deal-making, identity and basic service strategies the YPG/PYD has pursued since 2011 allows us to return to the factors influencing rebel group governance (Box 2 above). Table 2 below offers a tentative comparison of wartime realities, ex-ante expectations of YPG/PYD governance, and the reality of such governance based on our analysis so far.

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169 Sary (2016), *op.cit.*

170 As the YPG/PYD says it does not aspire to autonomy in the sense of independence, it could arguably have done a better job at convincing Turkey of its intentions for the sake of the area's civilian population. Instead, its consistent refusal to break material and personnel ties with the PKK strengthened Turkey's perception of its status as franchise-taker of the PKK. It is notable that even autonomy in the sense of federation does not necessarily make a lot of sense from a Syrian Kurdish perspective. It would not easily create a situation similar to Iraq's KRI without YPG/PYD coercive dominance, since the Syrian Kurds do not live in a contiguous area. See: Balanche (2018), *op.cit.*

Table 2   Expectations versus reality of YPG/PYD governance in the sense of control

Factors influencing rebel group governance	Wartime reality in Syria's northeast	Ex-ante expectation regarding the YPG/PYD	Provisional assessment of the YPG/PYD
(1) Fighting intensity that a rebel group faces	• High in Kurdish areas until 2014/2015 (Kobani); lower thereafter • High in non-Kurdish areas until 2019 (defeat IS in Baghuz); lower thereafter	Increases in extent of governance after 2015 and 2018	• Social Contract adopted in 2014 • Creation of SDF in October 2015 • Creation of SDC in December 2015 • Limited commune and municipal elections in 2017[171]
(2) Firmness of rebel group territorial control	Firm after 2015 (Kurdish) and 2018 (non-Kurdish)	Increase in extent of governance after 2015	See above
(3) Rebel group resources	Mostly extractive (oil, checkpoints, border crossing, informal trade / smuggling economy), but also agriculture and direct US support	Less participatory governance	Participatory governance on paper but not applied in reality; opposition leaders in exile
(4) Extent of 'proxyness' of a rebel group	• Strong linkage with PKK • Deals with US and Syrian regime / Russia	Less sensitive to local interests	Firm YPG/PYD control to the point of authoritarianism; suppression of Kurdish political opposition
(5) Local resonance of rebel group ideology	Limited given the modest popularity of 'Apoism' in Syria	Greater use of coercive strategies to extract resources and retain control	Substantial use of coercive strategies to eliminate internal division and retain control over non-Kurdish areas
(6) Internal structure of the rebel group	Armed group with a political party	Limited forms of participatory governance	Limited forms of participatory governance (paper vs. reality as above)
(7) International perception of a rebel group	• Positive but tactical (US) • Neutral to sceptical (most European countries)	Limited forms of participatory governance	Limited forms of participatory governance (paper vs. reality as above)

Primarily, Table 2 suggests that the relative independence of the YPG/PYD vis-à-vis the local population of northeast Syria (given its deals with the Syrian regime and the US, the role of the PKK, as well as its exploitation of the area's natural resources and its role in the illicit economy) has enabled the organisation to use greater repression and limit the creation of meaningful participatory governance structures than otherwise might have been the case. Simply put, the YPG/PYD has constructed its current territorial control

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171 Only parties linked with the PYD participated in the local elections. The KNC did not compete as party, although a few KNC-linked individuals did.

via deals external to Syria's Kurdish population. The table also indicates that pressure for positive change will have to come from external parties like the US or Europe.

This section has also highlighted the core tension in the YPG/PYD's overall project. It seeks to establish an autonomous area through a federal type of structure, but the Kurdish-populated areas of Syria are too dispersed and too intermixed to enable a Kurdish-dominated and populated federal unit. Based on the location and density of their population, it is more likely for the Syrian Kurds to be part of several different federal units. As this is not the YPG/PYD's objective, its solution to the problem is to increase the territories under YPG/PYD control. Yet, this creates a new challenge in the sense that it also brings new constituencies to the table, such as Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen and smaller minority groups, who want a say in the matter of how such territories are run. Thanks to the lingering threat of IS and abiding US support, the YPG/PYD can afford to deal with these groups in a top-down manner for now, co-opting and repressing them as needed.[172] But to thrive in the longer term requires the YPG/PYD to enlist greater US and at least some European support that is unlikely to be forthcoming unless it changes the mix of its strategies of dominance and control.

YPG/PYD reluctance to share power with the KNC indicates that this shift is unlikely to take place in the short term.[173] To paraphrase Eugene Weber: 'conditions will likely have to change before their wartime expression will change'.[174] A compromise in northeastern Syria will be particularly hard to realise without parallel progress on the Kurdish issue in Turkey, given how the PKK connects both theatres. In consequence, the YPG/PYD is likely to continue to rely on a mix of coercive and co-optive strategies in the near to medium future based on a Leninist vanguard type logic, i.e. implementation of Öcalan's notion of bottom-up democratic confederalism by the party. This reflects a more totalitarian understanding of revolutionary struggle.

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172 For example, it dominates the SDF and SDC with the effect that these are not (yet) vehicles for shared military and civilian governance, but rather for control.

173 See, for example: Netjes (2020), *op.cit.*; Kajjo, S., *Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing local and regional dynamics*, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020.

174 The original text speaks of 'criminal expression'. Weber (1976), *op.cit.* (p. 55).

3   Challenges to YPG/PYD rule

In the tenth year of the conflict, challenges to YPG/PYD's rule look different than they did in mid-2012. The group successfully managed to establish itself as the dominant Syrian Kurdish militia-cum-political-party in the Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria between 2012 and 2015. It subsequently extended its dominance over much of Syria's Arab-populated northern and eastern areas. Its main challenge today is how to retain its position of dominance that is precariously perched on US support to avoid another Turkish incursion as well as the ability to ensure sufficient Arab co-optation to forestall more serious efforts by the regime and its allies to infiltrate the Deir Ezzor and Raqqa areas. In this section we examine key elements of the equation that will – positively or negatively – influence the nature and quality of future YPG/PYD governance, namely: a) its relationship with the PKK; b) intra-Kurdish negotiations; c) the longer-term US presence in northeast Syria; and d) its relations with the Arabs / Arab tribes of northeastern Syria.

Table 3 Factors of influence on the future of YPG/PYD rule in northeastern Syria

Factors*	Negative development	Neutral development	Positive development
(1) PKK relationship	If PKK influence on YPG/PYD strategic decision making is maintained, the latter will likely have to use more coercion because: • Intra-Kurdish negotiations will fail • Relations with Arabs / Arab tribes will worsen • Another Turkish intervention becomes more likely	If PKK links with the YPG/PYD are publicly denounced, YPG/PYD control could relax somewhat because: • Intra-Kurdish negotiations could succeed if a workable power-sharing agreement with the KNC can be negotiated • Relations with Arab tribes could improve if non-Syrian and most non-Arab SDF withdraw from this area	If PKK influence on YPG/PYD strategic decision making is practically delinked, the YPG/PYD can become more legitimate because: • Intra-Kurdish negotiations could fully succeed • Relations with Arabs / Arab tribes could improve • The risk of another Turkish intervention would be reduced
Governance effect	More autocratic governance	Status quo governance with a plus	Less autocratic governance
(2) Intra-Kurdish negotiations	If negotiations fail, YPG/PYD governance will likely remain authoritarian with consultative elements	If negotiations continue in a holding pattern, time can be gained to avert a Turkish incursion and develop a larger deal	If negotiations succeed, a more inclusive basis for governance can be developed
Governance effect	Status quo governance	Status quo governance	Less autocratic governance
(3) Longer-term US role in Syria	If the US leaves entirely, a Russia/regime and Turkish take-over of northeast Syria is a real possibility	If the US withdraws more troops while reaching a broader deal including the KNC, KDP and Turkey, the YPG might relent in its control; if it just partially withdraws, greater territorial fragmentation and violence are likely	If the US combines a long-term stay – or over the horizon security guarantee – with diplomatic pressure to reach a feasible deal, a more stable and inclusive situation can arise
Governance effect	End of any Syrian Kurdish self governance	YPG governance diminishes or less autocratic governance	Less autocratic governance
(4) Relations with Arabs / Arab tribes	If YPG/PYD repression of Arab tribes increases through the SDF/SDC, unrest will increase and regime overtures have a better chance of succeeding	If YPG/PYD control and consultations with Arab tribes via the SDF/SDC, continue, unrest will remain but not escalate given limited tribal leverage	If an intra-Kurdish deal can be reached, this might pave the way towards joint Arab-Kurdish governance of the area
Governance effect	More autocratic governance	Status quo governance	Less autocratic governance
Potential longer-term consequences	Leads to a stubborn effort to hang on to 'Rojava' under YPG/PYD repressive dominance	Maintains an uncertain status quo in which sudden events may trigger new instability	Opens the door to Western support (US + Europe) with less risk of Turkish invasion

(*) Negative/neutral/positive are related to the nature and quality of governance that is likely to ensue.

The future of the YPG/PYD's relationship with the PKK

As has become clear from the preceding analysis, there are strong ties between the YPG/PYD and PKK at the level of ideology, leadership and rank and file. For example, several interviewees suggested that Aldar Xelil and Mazloum Abdi, who fulfill prominent roles in the PYD and SDF respectively, are still members of the PKK leadership in Qandil. In fact, they use their PKK names. The real name of Aldar Xelil is Fahim Walid Xelil and the real name of Mazloum Abdi is Mustafa Abdi. It is moreover public knowledge that non-Syrian PKK advisers can be found throughout the SDF and SDC, but also that entire contingents of non-Syrian Kurdish PKK fighters are present in northeastern Syria. Such advisers often have an outsized influence. An Assyrian politician in Qamishli for example told us: 'Once we needed a decision on a sensitive matter and they let us meet with a Turkish Kurd, with a translator as he did not know Arabic, and he had to take the decision.'[175] As the Crisis Group recently noted: 'According to Kobani, thousands of PKK-trained Kurdish fighters, alongside volunteer fighters, descended into Syria to join the battle. Hundreds were killed in the fight, some left, others stayed, and many pursued a civilian life.'[176] As discussed in Section 1, PKK networks, funds and manpower have been a core ingredient of YPG/PYD growth in Syria.

Today, this relationship is increasingly controversial as it is considered a foreign imposition by many inhabitants of northeast Syria and a risk by the US, KNC and Turkey. In consequence, there is increasing pressure on the YPG/PYD to cut these ties. Within the YPG/PYD/PKK itself, there appear to be two strains of thought. One, led by Mazloum Kobani, seems to be willing to explore options for creating greater distance from the PKK if the benefits of doing so are more positive than the inevitable loss of manpower and control. Another, led by Cemil Bayik, seeks to maintain the current relationship to uphold YPG/PYD power to deter Turkey and use it as leverage in negotiations with the Syrian regime.

On the face of it, the relationship with the PKK has become a liability, mostly because of the risk of (a) new Turkish offensive(s) that the SDF is clearly not able to counter and which both Moscow and Washington have greenlighted on several occasions. Moreover, if the SDF/SDC are serious about their concept of democratic federalism, the PKK connection is also a liability in the sense that it prevents a democratic redesign of the Self-Administration in such a way that the KNC, Arabs / Arab tribes in SDF-held areas

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175 Interview with an Assyrian politician, 1 October 2019, Qamishli.
176 See also: ICG, *The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria*, Brussels: ICG, 2020, online.

and the Assyrian opposition want to engage with it.[177] But the long history of repression of Kurdish communities throughout the region, the ravages of the Syrian civil war and the uncertainties of the future also suggest that it could be useful to retain close ties with an armed organisation connected by ideology and a shared identity.

In addition, while non-Syrian PKK fighters can withdraw from Syria if the YPG and PKK agree on such a move, it is not clear how the immaterial dimension of the relationship (ideology, identity) can be severed. Even though Mazloum Kobani has signalled his willingness to negotiate with Turkey on several occasions, it is not clear that Turkey is interested.[178] If Ankara continues to see the YPG as a PKK franchise even after non-Syrian PKK forces have left Syria, a significant benefit of such a move for the YPG/PYD would be lost. Hence, the question of PKK withdrawal from Syria is closely tied to the prospects of some kind of deal with Turkey that is currently unlikely as its offensives against the PKK in Iraq intensify. The US is currently seeking to resolve this dilemma via intra-Kurdish negotiations but the KNC has the same requirement of PKK withdrawal as Turkey. While the KNC can increase YPG/PYD's legitimacy, it has little influence over Turkey's policy. In brief, intra-Kurdish negotiations, PKK withdrawal, and a deal with Turkey are only likely to progress in tandem, if at all.

Intra Syrian Kurdish unity talks

An agreement between the YPG/PYD and the KNC on some form of joint governance of Syria's northeast would have advantages that include achieving a greater degree of limited local legitimacy (mostly among Kurds and some Assyrian groups), mitigating Turkey's threat perception of the YPG/PYD as a PKK franchise, and opening the door to the possibility of Western support. The major disadvantage is that such an approach does not include the Arab populations of the northeast, which are the majority, even though the US intends such accommodation as a next step. Even negotiating a durable intra-Kurdish agreement that could actually be implemented has so far proven to be elusive. There are at least three core issues that have so far been impossible to surmount: a) implementing a functional power sharing formula for governance, b) agreeing functional yet jointly run military structures (including e.g. command and control), and c) the future of YPG/PYD relations with the PKK and regime.

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177 On the other hand, if this concept is more like window dressing, the KNC and Arabs / Arab tribes are probably much less relevant in YPG/PYD deliberations as long as the cost of not accommodating them remains manageable. These costs consist of the risk of US departure (low until the new US administration has recalibrated its Syria policy), another Turkish offensive (currently low–medium due to US presence) and growing armed tribal resistance (currently low due to fragmentation).

178 See Zaman, A., *SDF commander says Kurds ready for dialogue if Ankara is sincere*, Al-Monitor, 2020a, online; Zaman (2020b), *op.cit.*

Reaching a durable agreement has not been elusive for want of trying. Given that the YPG/PYD's early rise to dominance in northeast Syria put it in a fairly comfortable position, it has been chiefly Masoud Barzani (then president of Iraqi Kurdistan) who has led negotiation efforts to explore power-sharing formulas. The three separate pacts that the YPG/PYD and KNC have made to date – the 2012 Erbil 1 agreement (the original), the 2013 Erbil 2 agreement (a renewed bid to implement Erbil 1)[179] and the 2014 Duhok agreement[180] – were fairly successful in reducing hostile media campaigns, although some still occur, and in reducing incidental violence between Kurdish factions – but fell apart on the core issues indicated.[181] Apart from the skewed negotiation positions that made compromise unattractive to the YPG/PYD, mutually hostile perceptions in a context of regional power competition played a major role in the failure of these agreements. These perceptions include:

- The YPG/PYD, as well as a number of pro-YPG/PYD observers, frame the KNC as linked to Barzani and Barzani as linked to Turkey.[182] This is even though the KNC has condemned Turkish interventions and interference in northeast Syria on several occasions.[183]
- As Ankara has been the driving force behind dismantling the YPG/PYD's Rojava project through its various military incursions, and given existing ties between Turkey and the KDP, the YPG/PYD also fears greater Turkish influence via Barzani.[184]
- The KNC and KDP view YPG/PYD links with the PKK as problematic and demand severance of such ties.

On a final note, the PKK has regularly blocked or vetoed YPG/PYD – KNC negotiations without, however, directly participating itself. As one of our interviewees put it: 'In October 2014, I was in the hotel in Duhok. Sinam Mohamed was there, Salih Muslim,

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179 The Erbil 2 agreement also sought to enable a unified delegation to join the Geneva-II negotiations. Yet, the YPG/PYD appears to have manipulated the situation to its benefit by using the time between the agreement and Geneva-II to transport personnel, equipment and resources from Qandil via the Samalka crossing (linking Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan), rescinding it shortly after Geneva-II. Source: Omran (2018), *op.cit.*

180 It was arrived at due to a mix of negative pressure from IS and positive encouragement by the US, but never implemented. Instead, a number of senior KNC officials were expelled from northeastern Syria by the PYD shortly after its conclusion. Many were detained (like Mohamed Ismail (2016), Abdulla Kaddo (2016), Nash'at Zaza (2016), Nafi' Abdulla (2016), Abdel Kareem Haji (2016), Ne'mut Daoud (2018), and Faisal Yusuf (2018); others were killed by YPG/PKK gunmen (such as Mahmoud Wali Abu Jandi and Walaat Hissi), according to the KNC. At least five of the seven KNC negotiators of the current round of US-sponsored negotiations in 2020 spent time in YPG/PYD prisons in 2016–2018. See: Netjes and Hauch (2020), *op.cit.*

181 Kajjo (2020), *op.cit.*; Mulla Rashid in Omran Center for Strategic Studies (2018), *op.cit*

182 See also, for instance Allsop (2014), *op.cit.*

183 See, for example Kurdistan24, 2016, online (accessed 2 December 2020).

184 For instance: Yildiz, G., *The US pushes for Kurdish unity in Syria with Turkish hostility and future Syria talks in mind*, Middle East Institute, 2020, online; Wahab (2017), *op.cit.*

Along the border with Turkey
between Amouda and Ras al-Ain

Brett McGurk and Aldar Xelil. The negotiations lasted for hours, and every time they came out of the room, they had to report back to Cemil Bayik (PKK in Qandil). Several of the attendees there told me this was happening all the time.'[185] The KDP seems to have given up on these unity talks after several attempts to unite the Syrian Kurdish parties.

In other words, the positive resolution of disunity among Syria's Kurds requires a broader geopolitical agreement that also brings Turkey and the KDP to the table in some form of guarantor role and which takes account of some PKK interests to prevent it from acting as a spoiler. In this context, it is encouraging that one point from the Erbil 1 agreement (2012) has mostly held. The YPG/PYD has not used northern Syria as a launchpad for direct attacks on Turkey, despite Ankara's claims to the contrary (rather, the PKK uses northeast Syria as a resource of funds and recruitment).[186]

This did not, however, stop Turkey from initiating Operation Peace Spring in 2019, which not only seized control of area strip of land along the Turkish-Syrian frontier, including the Arab town of Tel Abyad and the Arab/Kurdish town of Ra's al-Ain, but also forced YPG forces away from the border (although Asayish forces have remained active). Ankara's incursion demonstrated once again that the YPG/SDF have no hope of stopping the Turkish military and the Syrian brigades on Ankara's payroll by itself without US support. It is therefore no surprise that Mazloum Abdi launched an initiative to unite Syria's Kurds shortly after the offensive. Under such pressure, some speculated that the YPG/PYD might be more inclined to make the necessary compromises that it was not willing to consider during previous informal talks in Paris and The Hague.[187]

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185 Interview with a Syrian journalist in the US via a WhatsApp call in April 2020.

186 Kajjo (2020), *op.cit.*; Van Veen, Yüksel and Tekines (2020), *op.cit.*

187 Interview with an Assyrian politician from Qamishli in Istanbul, 14 November 2020.

From November 2019 onwards, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi and KNC representative Mohamed Ismail, and from April 2020 their delegations, met a few times in a hotel just outside Hasaka in Tel Baidar under the auspices of a US representative (the US has a military base near the Hasaka Dam). On 16 June 2020, SDF commander Abdi tweeted: 'We are proud of the joint work of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Kurdish National Unity parties, as their work to reach an initial agreement is a source of joy.'[188] A day later, however, a key KNC negotiator told one of the authors of this report that there was no agreement yet. In his words: 'These are understandings, but there's not an agreement. One understanding is that we accomplished a political vision in a binding way, and we got to an understanding that the Duhok Agreement is the base we can build upon for a dialogue in the future.'[189]

In other words, appreciable differences remain. Interviews with KNC leaders indicate the following sticking points (parallel inquiries with PYD/SDF spokespersons went unanswered):

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188 See: https://twitter.com/vvanwilgenburg/status/1272926536350433280?s=08 (accessed 14 December 2020).
189 The 'joint understanding' can be seen here: https://www.r-enks.net/?p=24904 (accessed 22 November 2020).

Table 4   Differences in political outlook and methods between the KNC and YPG/PYD

Issue	KNC	YPG/ PYD
Attitude towards Syrian regime	Part of the revolution against Assad	Informal arrangement with the regime, repressing the revolution and trading with the regime
Attitude towards methods to bring about political change	Looking for a political solution without repression	A political solution can be negotiated from a position of coercive dominance[190]
Broader alliances	Part of the national opposition; creation 'Peace and Freedom Front'[191]	Not part of the national opposition; recent MoU with the 'People's Will Party'[192]
Local rootedness	A Syrian Kurdish political party and civic movement	Strategically linked with the PKK
Attitude towards pluralism	Tolerant of political pluralism, transparent about its agenda	Intolerant of political pluralism, secretive about its agenda, represses political competition

Note: When considering these points, it should be born in mind that they reflect the KNC perspective and that the YPG/PYD has a substantial territory to govern in times of war.

In a sense, the following exchange is illustrative of the different wavelengths on which the YPG/PYD and KNC speak to each other. On Syria TV, PYD leader Aldar Xelil stated: 'We are on the ground, they're outside Syria [about the KNC and the Syrian opposition].' KNC leader Ibrahim Biro (based in Erbil) responded by saying: 'They [the YPG] arrested and expelled me from northeast Syria and threatened to kill me if I returned.'[193] Aldar Xelil went on to state that 'the PYD advocates for a third way neither with the regime nor with the opposition. Its democratic project is for the whole of Syria.' The KNC responded that 'the Syrian opposition also has a democracy project for the whole of Syria, we don't need a new PYD plan. While both focus on Kurdish areas and interests, the PYD ridicules the opposition while the KNC works with it, since they see the Assad regime as the biggest problem. Aldar Xelil says in the same TV interview that his Kurdish identity comes first before his Syrian identity. Some KNC members told us that for them it is the other way round, they are Syrian first and then Kurdish.

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190 In times of war, an obvious sticking point is the control over armed forces. The YPG/PYD only agrees to let the 3–4,000 strong Rosh Peshmerga (an armed group under KNC control) into northeast Syria under its direct command or as individual fighters. Yet, alternatives could be considered, such as a mixed command structure or mixed units.

191 Netjes and Hauch (2020), *op.cit*.

192 See: https://kassioun.org/en/statements-documents/item/65540-memorandum-of-understanding-between-syrian-democratic-council-and-people-s-will-party (accessed 2 December 2020).

193 The entire broadcast can be watched here: الصالون المنتظر | الجزيرة السورية والمصير السياسي, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqtRuUF-Ovs&feature=youtu.be (accessed 22 November 2020).

Differences such as those highlighted in Table 4 do not yet include the views of the Arab populations that populate much of the Euphrates river valley and parts of northern Syria such as Tel Abyad and Rumeilan. For example, tribal leaders from the Baggara and Ogeidat have expressed frustration at being excluded from 'Kurdish unity talks', even though these two tribal confederations alone cover roughly 90 per cent of the province of Deir Ezzor. Some tribal sheikhs in Raqqa and Hasaka province have raised the same objection, although these areas are more mixed.[194]

In any case, the current round of KNC – PYD talks were halted at the time of writing even though they had been set to resume in February 2021.[195] Key reasons for the current pause are the mix of PYD delegation leader Aldar Xelil's negative public statement on the Rosh Peshmerga, a series of recent arrests of teachers and a journalist in Debersiya, Amouda and Rumeilan (some of whom have been released), and the burning of a number of KNC offices.[196] According to KNC leader Abdel Hakim al-Bashar, Aldar Xelil is the leader of the PYD/YPG, not Mazloum. A colleague of his framed it as follows: "They [PYD] are not with the intra-Syrian Kurdish talks, they want to get legitimacy from the KNC, legitimacy via Syrian Kurdish coordination. I think this was the proposal of the Americans. In order to realize their policy in Eastern Euphrates, they have to work with other Kurdish parties". Abdolaziz Tammo, head of the Association for Independent Kurds, added: "But the PKK's policy [Authors' note: on dissent] in Turkey is well known and if you have a different opinion, they will kill you. Therefore it is not possible to have a different opinion from that of the PKK".[197]

Recent developments suggest that Mazloum Abdi is in favour of pursuing intra-Syrian Kurdish talks and finding a form of compromise, while PYD-leader Aldar Xelil appears to be opposed to such a course of action. Either way, the KNC indicated that the issues flagged above need to be resolved to produce a more conducive climate in which negotiations can resume. While they hang by a thread,[198] as long as negotiations can be said to take place they offer some protection from a new Turkish operation.[199]

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194 Arab tribal representative from Gaziantep on Syria TV, 16 June 2019.

195 Besides the ongoing negotiation process, the KNC and PYD recently undertook additional unity initiatives. The KNC co-founded the 'Peace and Freedom Front' in late July, which includes Syria's Tomorrow Movement, the Arab Council of the Euphrates and the Jazira, and the Assyrian Democratic Organization, while the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Council signed a memorandum in Moscow with a Russian-backed Syrian party close to Damascus. See: Netjes and Hauch (2020), *op.cit.*

196 See: https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/1349351975809331201?s=09 (accessed 14 February 2021); Interview with a representative of the Association of Independent Kurds, 22 January 2021, Istanbul.

197 Interviews on 22 January 2021, Istanbul.

198 See: https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/1361259787078483968?s=09 (accessed 16 February 2021).

199 Bedir Mulla, a Syrian Kurdish analyst, on Syria TV on 1 November 2020.

The US presence in northeastern Syria

Today, northeast Syria is a patchwork of armed forces in addition to YPG/SDF forces. While the US presence dominates, especially in the eastern part near the Iraqi border at the oilfields of Rumeilan and Deir Ezzor, the Russians are strung out along parts of the Syrian/Turkish border[200], as are the Turks. There even seems to be a minor Iranian presence at Qamishli airport. The regime remains present in Qamishli, Hasaka, and at Qamishli Airport, and is back on the border in other places. According to many interviewees, its intelligence services have never left much of the northeast but work from home. Regime, Iranians and IS cells try to infiltrate the eastern part of Deir Ezzor where relations between the SDF and Arab inhabitants are frayed. Moreover, IS and regime cells remain a constant low-level threat throughout the area, tapping into growing frustrations among its population, even though IS is mostly reconstituting further west in the Badia desert which is under regime control.[201]

This mosaic has been further expanded by the combination of the October 2019 Turkish incursion that the US greenlighted and America's own abrupt withdrawals in December 2018 and October 2019. The first executive withdrawal order of December 2018 led to the resignation of former Defence Secretary Jim Mattis. It also catapulted James Jeffrey, then Trump's special envoy for Syria, into the role of special envoy in the fight against IS when his predecessor, Brett McGurk, also resigned in protest. The second executive withdrawal order of October 2019 was as divisive and disputed as the first, but also left a residual US force in Syria. In a straight-talking interview, former envoy Jeffrey even suggested that 'We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there. The actual number of troops in northeast Syria is "a lot more than" the 200 troops Trump agreed to leave there in 2019.'[202]

Whatever the truth of the matter, US troops still operate in Syria today in support of the SDF, chiefly to deny Russian and Syrian forces further territorial gains, to help prevent IS reconstituting, and to block Iranian land routes. The 2018 and 2019 American semi-retreats have, however, made the situation in the northern part of northeast Syria more volatile by increasing both risk and likelihood of another Turkish incursion, eviscerating the YPG/SDF's ability to control its northern frontier with Turkey and protect the Kurdish communities straddled alongside it (in Debersiya for instance), encouraging regime-linked forces to intensify their efforts to win over Arab tribes east of the Euphrates,

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200 See: https://twitter.com/leventkemal/status/1366351054028369921?s=1002 (accessed 9 March 2021).

201 Koontz, K. and G. Waters, *Between the coalition, ISIS and Assad: Courting the tribes of Deir ez-Zor*, Washington: Middle East Institute, 2020.

202 See: https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/11/outgoing-syria-envoy-admits-hiding-us-troop-numbers-praises-trumps-mideast-record/170012/ (accessed 23 November 2020).

and distracting the YPG/SDF from working with the Arab tribes in keeping IS down.[203] In short, whatever coherence and order existed, both US withdrawals dented it – despite protestations by envoy Jeffrey along the lines of 'What Syria withdrawal? There was never a Syria withdrawal.'[204] The US was seen to withdraw and that was what mattered.

This explains in part why until recently there was heavy US pressure on the YPG/PYD and the KNC to reach an agreement in the intra-Syrian Kurdish talks discussed previously. In Washington's view, such an agreement could stabilise the situation in three ways: a) by creating a more inclusive Syrian Kurdish platform as a stepping stone towards greater Arab and minority inclusion; b) by shifting the SDC/PYD towards the Syrian opposition (Etilaf) and c) by reducing the risk of another Turkish offensive, although this also requires the additional step of cutting ties between the PKK and YPG/PYD. [205]

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203 But not out. A full IS defeat could, after all, trigger a complete US withdrawal. The continuous occurrence of low-level IS activity is therefore in the SDF's interest. Suspicions that the SDF might have a hand in enabling such activity are not without merit. For example, the BBC documented the complicity of SDF forces in enabling thousands of IS fighters (including foreign ones), women and children, as well as warfighting supplies, to leave Raqqa by convoy in 2017 just before it fell, as part of a secret deal. See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret (accessed 6 February 2021); for more recent SDF releases of IS prisoners, including a lively trade based on large ransoms: Al-Monitor (2020), online (AR).

204 *Ibid.*

205 Derived in part from an interview with an Assyrian political representative in Istanbul on 14 November 2020; see also: Netjes and Hauch (2020), *op.cit.*

Arab populations

At present, roughly 70 per cent of the population under YPG-led SDF control are Syrian Arabs. As one Assyrian representative put it, 'Everything under the M4 [motorway]'.. This population is partly organised along tribal lines of varying intensity (stronger in rural areas, less so or absent in urban areas – with the exception of Deir Ezzor).[206] Unsurprisingly, there are also political activists, intelligentsia and urban populations with only nominal tribal links, or none at all. Some tribal/clan leaders and other prominent individuals have been included in the PYD/YPG-run SDC civil and SDF military councils, while an appreciable number of Arab fighters have been recruited into the SDF in part for lack of other job opportunities). In essence, the YPG/PYD uses a model of indirect rule via the co-optation of tribal figures that helps to legitimise its governance and mediate disputes. Not everyone is willing to join, however. The Deir Ezzor area, especially, features notable exceptions.

Moreover, as Dukhan, notes: 'The allegiance of tribal elders is mutable. The same tribal leaders in Raqqa who in October 2017 declared their support for the SDF had previously appeared in a 2013 video pledging allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Some had even pledged their allegiance to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011.'[207] To put it slightly differently, in the words of a tribal representative: 'They [SDF] have the weapons and the Samalka border crossing. The tribes do not. They [SDF] are very powerful. Tribes survive by bending towards the one who rules them – in a regime area the regime, in an SDF area the SDF, and those who fled to Turkey, Turkey.'[208] In other words, they are a mechanism for collective survival.

Despite the use of co-optation mechanisms, the YPG/PYD keeps crucial issues firmly in its own hands, including the level and allocation of oil revenues, military deployments, public law and order, and negotiations with both the US and KNC.[209] An Arab representative from the area now living in exile recently questioned the situation in the following manner: 'France and the US are pressuring Arabs, the Kurdish KNC, and others in the area to support the PYD. But now, we [Arab tribes] have no idea what happens with the oil revenues [Rumeilan and Deir Ezzor]. And we know how the PYD dealt with the revolution.'[210]

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206 For a short overview of the main Kurdish and Arab tribes in northeast Syria: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD1kYlF713Y&feature=youtu.be (accessed 26 February 2021) (AR).

207 Dukhan (2020), *op.cit.*

208 Interview with a representative of the Al-Baggara tribe, Sanliurfa, 8 August 2020.

209 See also: Koontz and Waters (2020), *op.cit.*

210 Syria TV, program: 'The Political Salon' on 20 June 2020.

In addition, existing consultation mechanisms do not necessarily strike the right tone or achieve the necessary consensus. For instance, in early November 2020, the SDC organised a third Dialogue, the 'National Conference of inhabitants of the Jazira and Euphrates', in the Deir Ezzor countryside. An SDC leader, Elham Ahmad, talked about reconciliation with the Assad regime. But participants appear to have rejected the notion because of their suffering at the hands of the regime and IS, persistent insecurity, and the regime's lack of recognition of the SDF. 'How can you get involved in a dialogue with a side that does not acknowledge us, but describes us as terrorists?'[211]

Unsurprisingly, YPG/SDF dominance has generated protests, especially in Deir Ezzor province among the key tribal confederations of the Ogeidat and the Baggara. According to a sheikh of the Ogeidat tribe, such protests are possible because the YPG/SDF rules with 'less of an iron fist' in Deir Ezzor than it does in Hasaka.[212] But the sense of exclusion underpinning such protests has nevertheless been further reinforced by the negative reception of forced conscription (see 'coercive strategies'), efforts to introduce the new curriculum (see 'identity strategies'), a range of security incidents involving respected sheikhs,[213] and the rough treatment of a number of tribal communities by SDF forces in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor.[214] Protests must be considered in a context of poor living conditions – 'there is now often no water and no electricity. Half of the schools are still closed'[215] – and deteriorating security due to greater IS activity and a limited ability or, at times, unwillingness on the part of the SDF to assure local safety. For example, according to a sheikh of the Ogeidat, Kurdish forces do not remain in Ogeidat tribal villages and lands at night but withdraw into their camps or bases. Instead of pushing for more engagement with Syria's eastern tribes on the basis of equality, akin to Iraq's 'Awakening' back in 2007–2010, the US has so far supported the YPG/PYD in its approach of nominal co-optation via the SDF/SDC while retaining real control for itself.[216]

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211 See: https://twitter.com/OALD24/status/1324017635324022785?s=08 (accessed 23 November 2020).

212 Interview with a sheikh of the Ogeidat tribe in April 2020, by WhatsApp voice messages.

213 In particular, the assassinations of Al-Sheikh Ali al-Weis of the Baggara tribe, Al-bu Rahma al-Diqla and Al-Sheikh Mutshir al-Hifl of the Ogeidat tribe and Al-Shuheil of Dhiban, according to a tribal sheikh of the Baggara tribe residing in Sanliurfa. These incidents could be related to the SDF but might also reflect IS activity (targeting local leaders allied with the SDF replicating its old tactics in Iraq of creating unrest by assassinating leaders of the tribal Awakening Councils. See: Dukhan (2020), *op.cit.* A number of our interviewees did, however, indicate that 'people are regularly shot at SDF checkpoints, but if these are ordinary civilians, you don't hear much about it.' One reason is that for some Kurds all Arabs are potential IS suspects and in an insecure environment this can lead to shots being fired before questions are asked. *Source*: Several interviews with tribal representatives of the Baggara and Ogeidat on 8 and 9 August 2020 in Sanliurfa; interview with Kurdish residents early October 2019 in Amouda.

214 Such as the villages of Basra, al-Shuhail, al-Zir, Abrieh and Ogeidat al-Jadeed.

215 Interview with a tribal source close to Hachem al-Bashir (tribal chief of the Baggara).

216 Dukhan, H. and A. Al-Hamad, *Fragmentation and perceived bias: The shortcomings of US policy towards tribes in Syria*, Atlantic Council, online, 2021.

Concluding reflections and scenarios

The evolution of the YPG/PYD during the Syrian civil war has been a convoluted process. It features both wartime tactics and pages from the authoritarian playbook, including deals with the-devil-you-know (the Syrian regime and Russia), repression of political opposition and civil society, the silencing of media, mobilizing support from external parties (PKK and US), conquest, and running a thriving informal/illicit economy. YPG/PYD evolution also brought about the establishment of Kurdish self-rule after decades of oppression, an effort to make community-level governance a bit more inclusive for parties linked with the YPG/PYD, the restoration of some basic services and the provision of reasonable security, although limited by wartime conditions. In the process, the YPG/PYD – along with the many Arab fighters who joined the ranks of the SDC/SDF, and with support from the US military – also rid Syria of IS, suffering thousands of casualties in the process.

What emerges from the analysis is an organisation that has ruthlessly pursued its objective of establishing and controlling its own autonomous territory and sphere of action. To achieve this, the YPG/PYD have fought in support of the regime in, for example, Aleppo and Tel Rifaat as well as against it in a number of skirmishes; battled with IS in Kobani and Deir Ezzor, for instance, as well as allowed it to withdraw in Raqqa; partnered with the US and yet worked with the regime in protecting oil assets and selling oil to it. Under conditions of war, it is not surprising that the YPG/PYD has achieved its current position through a mix of coercion and authoritarianism. The use of these means does, however, stand in stark contrast with the YPG/PYD's self-professed values of democracy, gender equality and respect for human rights, all of which the organisation has liberally violated (in some cases likely to the point of committing war crimes). The rise of the YPG/PYD has also produced the paradoxical result that it established self-rule in parts of northeastern Syria by repressing other groups, especially Syrian Arab populations living east of the Euphrates river.

The YPG/PYD's record is further muddled by the sway that an organisation external to Syria[217] – namely the PKK – holds over it. The nature of the links between them means

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217 The use of the term 'external to Syria' is based on the internationally recognised boundaries of the Syrian state. From a PKK perspective, these boundaries are less relevant due to its focus on the Kurdish transnational community as primary political entity. Hence, it would not necessarily consider itself 'external' to Kurdish-inhabited parts of Syria's northeast.

that the YPG/PYD is not strategically autonomous, which is made clear, for example, through its continuous refusal to disavow the PKK publicly and expel both its cadres and fighters to advance its negotiations with the KNC. As it happens, the PKK pursues a regional agenda that includes conflict with several other entities – such as Turkey and the KDP. The YPG/PYD's link with the PKK makes the support it seeks from external parties such as EU member states neither feasible nor appropriate. Moreover, PKK influence also amounts to a non-Syrian party exercising control over both Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas of Syria, which is problematic and creates resentment. This situation is by no means unique if one considers the present position of Hezbollah or other Iran-linked forces, but, as is the case with them, it makes conflict resolution more difficult.

Nevertheless, one could view the YPG/PYD instrumentally as a way to prevent a full return of the Assad regime, at least for as long as the US supports it, since the group withholds significant territories from Damascus. It should nevertheless be clear that Washington also pursues other objectives, such as keeping IS down and Iran out.[218] But the YPG/PYD can only maintain control over much of the areas it governs through repression. In the long term, this will create accumulating grievances and make the YPG/PYD more vulnerable to pressure from the regime and its allies.[219] In other words, it is an unstable situation that can play out in the form of three scenarios.

- *Scenario 1*: Unconditional support from the US at similar levels to the present, and an abiding US military presence, will likely provide the YPG/PYD with a security umbrella against both regime forces and Turkey under the current US administration. This is likely to continue the status quo of the YPG/PYD ruling northeast Syria in authoritarian fashion, make the civil war more ethno-sectarian in nature and prolong the conflict. While such a scenario is arguably more attractive for northeast Syria than a return of the regime – if the aftermath of cease fire agreements elsewhere in Syria is anything to go by[220] – it is also unlikely to improve the area's current underdevelopment. It will keep other external actors, like the EU, away and allow the PKK to continue to take its share of the area's revenues. Should the US upgrade its military support to include economic/financial assistance, it will further strengthen

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218 See : Szuba, J., *Outgoing Syria envoy reflects on Turkey, the Kurds and what everyone got wrong*, Al-Monitor, online, 2020.

219 See, for example: Dukhan and Al-Hamad (2021), *op.cit.*

220 For example: Sosnowski, M., 'Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 31, Issue 7-8, 2020.

the YPG/PYD's dominating position and entrench exclusive governance practices, risking that the PKK will siphon off some of the resources involved.[221]

- *Scenario 2:* A halt of US support to the YPG/PYD is bound to result in a return of the Assad regime as well as Russia.[222] If a US withdrawal is conditioned on a negotiated deal between the YPG/PYD and the Syrian regime that assures a significant measure of autonomy for northeast Syria, it could be a step towards the *de facto* reunification of Syria without prolonging the conflict or triggering another wave of regime repression. But while Damascus might do a deal with the YPG/PYD and tolerate a PKK presence in the Kurdish-inhabited areas of northeast Syria due to its longstanding relations with these groups, it would leave other 'opponents' of the Assad regime across northeast Syria to its mercy. There is also a near certainty of the regime reneging on any of its promises once US forces have fully departed. A rapid and unilateral US withdrawal would likely result in a collapse of YPG/PYD governance at best and another phase of civil war at worst.[223]

- *Scenario 3:* Greater long-term support from the EU and the US for a reconfigured political mechanism for running northeast Syria could have a positive effect on the quality of governance and the developmental prospects of northeast Syria if it can be carefully sequenced. It could also serve as counter to the Syrian regime. But it would have to be heavily conditioned. Support would require at least the following conditions to be met: a) the YPG/PYD cuts its link with the PKK, both publicly and practically; b) governance of AANES is reconfigured to include the PYD, the KNC opposition and Arab populations as equal parties; c) repressive practices, forced recruitment and disappearances come to an end; d) greater transparency of revenues[224] is established. The US sought to initiate this scenario through recent KNC – PYD talks but so far there is no indication that these conditions will be met

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221 Consider for example the recent deal between the SDF and Delta Crescent Energy on oil exploration in northeast Syria. The contradictory public statements from, respectively, Cemil Bayik (against, PKK) and Mazloum Abdi (in favor, SDF leadership) on its merits remain somewhat puzzling. See: https://syriadirect. org/news/will-oil-spark-conflict-between-%E2%80%98qandil%E2%80%99-and-the-sdf-in-northeast-syria/ (accessed 17 December 2020).

222 See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-oil-russia-idUSKBN1YL0VK (accessed 7 February 2021); Lund, A., *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations*, Stockholm: Swedish Institute for International Affairs, 2019, online.

223 This scenario is elaborated in greater detail in: Ford, R., *U.S. Strategy in Syria Has Failed: Washington Must Acknowledge That It Can't Build a State*, Foreign Affairs, January 2021, online.

224 Some estimate the budget of AANES at around USD 2,5 billion per year. See: Al-Ghadhawi (2020), *op.cit.*

in the near future.[225] This scenario also risks partition of Syria and it is not clear whether the majority of the northeast's inhabitants are in favour.[226] Finally, it requires a radical policy change on the part of the EU, away from its demand for an elusive political transition.[227]

While scenario 2 – a conditioned US withdrawal – might be preferable for the future of Syria as a whole, the preceding analysis suggests that scenario 1 – muddling through – is more likely to characterise the near future. The only actor that can put pressure on the YPG/PYD to make the concessions that could allow for a shift towards scenario 3 is the US. But the extent to which it can do so credibly depends on its own priorities – in particular, the importance it attaches to preventing Russia and Iran from expanding their position in Syria, as well as its desire to 'defeat' the Syrian regime by economic means. As long as these objectives remain in play, Washington will continue to suffer from a principle-agent problem and the YPG/PYD will continue to capitalise on the situation.

Longer-term positive socio-political change requires scenario 3, which needs the YPG/PYD to become 'more Syrian' by engaging in an uncertain and risky transformation away from the PKK and towards the opposition KNC and Arab populations/tribes of northeastern Syria as key partners. While there is at present little chance of such a transformation being seriously considered within the organisation, it can be nudged in that direction by exploring what assurances of external protection against both the Assad regime and Turkey might be developed as enticement, as well as what arrangements could be put in place to enable greater access to Turkish markets. Reaching such quid pro quo's require backroom negotiations between the US, EU, Turkey, KDP and YPG. Given noted US limitations, a key task for the EU going forward is to create the space in which these conversations can take place.

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225 While the YPG/PYD and SDF have become more circumspect with regard to any PKK linkages since about 2018 by putting Syrian Kurdish commanders forward, removing some posters of Öcalan and emphasizing their 'local-ness' more than before, such 'changes' appear to be mainly of an optical nature. An exception, if it happens, could be the recent suggestion by Mazloum Abdi that PKK cadres should start leaving. See: ICG (2020), *op.cit.*

226 In the first scenario partition might be temporary. The current *de facto* partition is unsettled, i.e. between the four areas controlled by Turkey/the opposition, the YPG/US-held northeast and the regime-held rest of the country.

227 Van Veen, E. and O. Macharis, *Hope springs eternal: EU options for dealing with the Assad regime*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020; Asseburg, M., *The EU needs a new Syria strategy*, International Politics and Society, 2020, online; Barnes-Dacey, J., *Society max: How Europe can help Syrians survive Assad and coronavirus*, ECFR, 2020, online. Some have argued that the EU's ability to fund the reconstruction of Syria constitutes leverage over the Syrian regime, but this seems based on faulty logic since such funding is premised on the occurrence of a 'meaningful political transition' in line with UNSC resolution 2254. Such a transition would likely lead to the sidelining – or even disappearance – of the very same regime over which reconstruction funds are supposed to have leverage.

Methodology

This report is based on a review of existing (grey) literature on the Syrian civil war and the YPG/PYD (referenced), official documents that are publicly available (referenced), leaked (but verified) documents from the Syrian government (see Annex 1); a review of Kurdish, Arab and international media (referenced); and 85 interviews conducted during field research in Istanbul, northeast Syria, Erbil, Şanlıurfa and Brussels (details below) between mid-2019 and early 2021.

Our interviewees included representatives of local authorities, members of opposition parties, journalists, members of armed forces, think tank members, lawyers, tribal leaders, intellectuals, ordinary citizens from all walks of life, and representatives of Western governments.

Table 5   A breakdown of interviews conducted

Category	No. of interviews	Organisations/affiliations
Local authorities and representatives	9	SDC, PYD
Kurdish opposition parties	13	KNC, PDK-S, The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria, The Kurdish Reform Movement, The Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria, Association of Independent Kurds
Journalists	6	Syria TV, Zenan Radio, Al Araby, independents
Armed forces	6	Defectors, former Syrian regime intelligence, YPG
Individuals affiliated with tribes	7	Sheikhs, ordinary tribesmen and researchers focused on tribal affairs
Arab/Assyrian opposition	11	Politicians
Experts	18	Lawyers, intellectuals, analysts and researchers of various Middle Eastern origins, and some of Dutch origin
Activists & local residents	12	Syrian Kurdish
Western government representatives	3	Former and serving diplomats from the US and the Netherlands
Total	**85**	**Interviews between August 2019 and February 2021**

Interviews were conducted on a confidential basis to protect the safety of our interviewees. They are referenced in the analysis mostly as source of direct quotations that have been edited for clarity, indicating only the organisation/affiliation, place and date of interview. The interviews varied in duration and method. Most were semi-structured conversations based on an interview protocol lasting from one to several

hours. Others were improvised on the spot and lasted up to 30 minutes. Yet others took place in several instalments by WhatsApp or other means. We also spoke with some interviewees more than once to keep track of developments (not included in the 85 interviews listed). This was done mostly by WhatsApp voice messages.

Annex 1: Synopsis of leaked documents linking the Syrian regime with the PKK/YPG

The table below summarises nine documents we obtained via defectors from the Syrian regime who worked in positions central to the repressive violence undertaken by the Syrian state security apparatus at the start of the conflict. The documents cover the period 2011–2012. We had the documents translated (certified) and verified by a security expert of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul. Copies of these documents are in the possession of the authors and can be made available on request.

Category	No.	To/from	Date	Content synopsis
Leaked from the Central Crisis Management Cell of the Presidential palace in Damascus[228]	1	From: Regional Command of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party To: The Regional Assistant Secretary	26 May 2011, Damascus	This document contains a proposal about what to do on the ground in response to demonstrations in different areas and cities. Part of the proposal (point 12) is to put the Kurdish area under supervision of the PKK, and to act in coordination with it.[229]
	2	From: The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, Regional Command, Central Crisis Management Cell	July 2011, Damascus	This document details point 12 of the above proposal and suggests keeping the Kurdish areas and neighbourhoods under supervision, coordinating secretly with the PKK to counter demonstrators, avoiding intervention in the security of the Kurdish areas, and arresting those who seek to conduct sabotage and bear arms.

228 The Crisis Cell consisted out of Syria's most important generals: Ali Mamlouk, Asef Shawkat, Deeb Zeytoun, Abdelfatah Qadsiye, Jameel Hasan, Daoud Rachha, Hasan Turkmani, Hisham Bahtiyar, as well as Interior Minister Mohammad al-Sha'ar.

229 Authors' note: PKK and YPG are used synonymously in a number of documents.

Category	No.	To/from	Date	Content synopsis
Leaked from sources from Hasaka province (on a single issue: oil)	3	From: Mohammad Ibrahim Mohammad To: The General Manager of the Syrian Petroleum Company	27 January 2012, Rumeilan	This document refers to the request for exemption for the YPG to tender for contracts pertaining to the protection of petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka fields (areas: Kratchouk – Suwaidiyyat – Saida – Zaria – Alyan and Babasi)
	4	From: Representative of the YPG, Mohammad Ibrahim Ibrahim To: The General Manager of the Syrian Petroleum Company Damascus	30 January 2021, Rumeilan	This document requests an exemption for the YPG to have to tender for contracts to protect petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka fields, i.e. to enable single-sourcing. It also provides the names of the contracting persons with whom contracts will be concluded by mutual consent.
	5	From: Dr. Ghassan Hassan, Commercial Affairs Director at the Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals To: The Director General of the same Ministry	Referring to letters of 29 January and 27 February 2012	Referring to the submission of Mohammad Ibrahim Ibrahim regarding his request to exempt YPG representatives from having to follow regular procurement procedure (e.g. paying bid bonds). He forwards the correspondence to the Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources.
	6	From: Engineer Saeed Hunei-di, Minister of Petroleum and Minerals To: The Prime Minister	12 December 2012, Damascus	Request to the Prime Minister to agree to direct contracting by mutual consent with re-presentatives of the PKK to ensure the protection of petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka Fields in the areas referred to under document number 4.
	7	From: Secretary General of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers Taissir al-Zoghbi To: The Minister of Oil and Mine-ral Resources	24 December 2012	Request for approval of the proposal concerning the coordination with the governor of Hasaka and the Head of the Political Security Branch in Hasaka to directly contract by mutual consent with representatives of the PKK to protect petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka fields.
	8	From: Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources To: The Minister of Oil and Mine-ral Resources	Not readable referencing a 31 December 2012 letter	Referring to the approval of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers regarding the direct contracting by mutual consent with representatives of the YPG to ensure the protection of petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka fields in the areas Kratchouk – Suwaidiyyat – Saida, Zaria, Alyan and Babasi.
	9	From: Ghassan Hassan To: The Ministry of Oil and Mine-rals Resources	Not readable, referencing a 27 February 2012 letter	Referring to the letter to representatives of the YPG registered in the General Bureau of the Syrian Petroleum Company regarding the request of exempting them from regular procurement steps (i.e. paying bid bonds) regarding contracts enabling the YPG to protect the petroleum installations belonging to the Directorate of Hasaka fields (Krat-chouk – Suwaidyiyyat – Saida, Zaria, , Alyan and Babasi).

Annex 2: References on rebel governance

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