



مركز حرمون  
للدراسات المعاصرة  
**HARMOON**  
Arařtırmalar Merkezi  
For Contemporary Studies

# The PYD's Separatist Project in the Syrian Euphrates Region



**Abdullah Al-Najjar**

Political research

## **Hermon Center for Contemporary Studies**

is a non-profit organization, focused mainly on producing studies and research on the Syrian situation, implementing and managing projects, activities and initiatives to rebuild Syria on the foundations of democracy, freedom, social justice, human rights, human dignity and equal citizenship values.

### **For Contacts:**

**Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies**

e-mail: [info@harmoon.org](mailto:info@harmoon.org)

Doha, Qatar      Tel. (+974) 44 885 996      PO.Box 22663

Istanbul, Turkey      Tel. +90 (212) 813 32 17      PO.Box 34055

Tel. +90 (212) 524 04 05

[www.harmoon.org](http://www.harmoon.org)



# **The PYD's Separatist Project in the Syrian Euphrates Region**

January 2020

**Abdullah Al-Najjar**

## **Authors**

This study was conducted by Abdullah Al-Najjar, with the help of former colleagues and acquaintances who assisted him in collecting and verifying the information. Three of them had submitted three background papers: two on education, and one on the oil issue. In light of the positions of these individuals where they live, we will not be disclosing their names, but would like to thank them very much.

Abdullah Al-Najjar is a former officer at the Political Security Directorate, with a degree in law. He worked in Hasakeh Province for 12 years, including nine and a half years in Qamishli district, as an assistant and head of the Qamishli police station, and head of the Amuda police station. He defected from the Political Security Directorate in 2012 with the rank of major. He currently works in the field of studies and research related to east of the Euphrates, and on issues related to security and the military.



## Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	5
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	15
Foreword .....	15
Background on the Kurdish issue in Syria: .....	15
Background on the relationship between the Assad regime and the PKK from the 1980's until 1998 and the transformation after 2010: .....	21
CHAPTER II: ALLIANCE BETWEEN SYRIAN REGIME AND PYD.....	23
On Syria's PYD and Turkey's PKK: .....	23
Impact of PKK's sectarian tendencies and the Alawite issue in Turkey .....	26
How the regime brought the PYD to Syria and used it to suppress the uprising: .....	33
PYD's role in the regime's strategy to suppress the uprising:.....	35
The regime's support for the PYD: .....	36
The so-called "July 19 Revolution": .....	37
The relationship between the regime and the PYD and their changing roles: .....	39
PYD's role in controlling Kurdish areas and preventing them from participating in the uprising: .....	43
The Kurds' ambiguous position on the uprising: .....	43
CHAPTER III: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE US-PYD RELATIONSHIP.....	46
US attempts with the FSA: .....	46
The US's reliance on the YPG: .....	48
Was the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle a conspiracy? .....	51
The evolution of US support after the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle: .....	53
The establishment of the SDF and the kickoff of limitless support: .....	54
Military cooperation only or was politics at play? .....	56
What happened after President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria? .....	61
Linking east and west of the Euphrates: .....	63
What does the PYD want? .....	64
The US's role in negotiations between the regime and the Kurdish self-administration: .....	65
Turkey's central position: .....	66
Why the US relied on the SDF: .....	67
Notes and outcomes: .....	69



CHAPTER IV: THE DEMOGRAPHIS STATUS OF EAST OF THE EUPHRATES.....	71
The national and religious distribution of the population of east of the Euphrates: .....	71
Hasakeh province: .....	72
East of the Euphrates population: .....	75
The real population of east of the Euphrates in 2010: .....	77
Displaced Syrians in the Kurdistan region: .....	78
Current population of east of the Euphrates: .....	78
The PYD's policies towards residents: Displacement, and preventing residents from returning to their areas: .....	80
The practice of displacement: .....	80
Preventing residents from returning: .....	83
CHAPTER V: THE MILITARY SITUATION .....	85
Composition of the so-called "Syrian Democratic Forces": .....	85
Estimated SDF number of members .....	86
Our approximate estimates of the actual numbers of the SDF troops.....	90
People's Protection Units: .....	91
YPG within urban areas: .....	92
The police force (Asayish) .....	93
Al-Sanadid Forces: .....	94
The Syriac Military Council forces:.....	94
Number of SDF troops in Deir ez-Zor Province:.....	95
Number SDF troops in Manbij, Raqqa and Ayn al-Arab: .....	95
Total number of SDF troops:.....	95
Arab affiliation with SDF:.....	95
YPG' death toll.....	96
SDF payroll: .....	97
Armament of SDF troops: .....	98
Foreign troops in the East of the Euphrates: .....	98
CHAPTER VI: INSTITUTIONS OF THE PYD "AUTONOMOUS ENTITY".....	102
Social Contract: .....	102
The judiciary in the intended entity: .....	104
Intelligence in the intended entity: .....	105
Municipalities in the intended entity:.....	105
Conscription in the intended entity: .....	106
Fees and taxes in the intended entity.....	107
Customs in the intended entity .....	109
Education in the intended entity: .....	109
The content of the PYD Kurdish curriculum: .....	113



Teaching staff: .....	117
Kurdization of Public Life: .....	117
Services provided by the entity .....	118
PYD and the property of absent persons .....	118
Attitudes of Arab communities regarding the establishment of an independent entity in the East of the Euphrates .....	120
PYD policies towards political, social and media activities: .....	121
<b>CHAPTER VII: ECONOMIC SITUATION IN SDF-CONTROLLED AREAS .....</b>	<b>124</b>
Agriculture: .....	124
Oil and Gas.....	124
<b>CHAPTER VIII: FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR EAST OF EUPHRATES .....</b>	<b>131</b>
Introduction: .....	131
PYD territory demands: .....	132
PYD Strengths and Weaknesses.....	133
Means of US pressure on the regime .....	136
Possible scenarios of solution: .....	136
Political agreement between SDF and the Syrian regime:.....	137
Involving Turkey in the solution: .....	138
Expelling Iran and its militias from Syria: .....	138
Discussion: .....	139
The Second Scenario: Returning to negotiations with continued US presence: .....	140
The Third Scenario: Negotiation failure with continued US presence .....	141
The Fourth Scenario: Withdrawal of the US forces .....	142
The Fifth Scenario: Unilateral agreement between the regime and PYD with continued US presence .....	143
Conclusion:.....	144
<b>References.....</b>	<b>146</b>



## Executive Summary

This study was divided into eight chapters, starting with the theoretical aspects, then moving on to the practical reality of the separatist entity established by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) east of the Euphrates, and ending with envisioning potential scenarios for resolution.

- **The first chapter** examines the background of the Kurdish issue that was born in Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire before moving to Syria, which was then under the French mandate. Much like they did with Assyrians and Armenians, The French encouraged the Kurds to settle in Syria's Jazira region, viewing it as a promising agricultural spot, and setting the stage for the emergence of the most important cities there, such as Hasakeh and Qamishli.
- Meanwhile, the French sponsored in 1927 the restructuring of the Kurdish Xoybun (Independence) movement, which had set its goal to liberate Turkish Kurdistan from the last Turkish soldier. This was before France decided to arrest some of the movement's leaders and place them under house arrest. Xoybun's goal later transformed into aiming to establish an ethnic entity in Jazira, which was rejected by the people of Jazira in all their ethnicities. These goals resurfaced after the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria in 1957, which was split into more than 13 parties, whose majority participated in the formation of the Kurdish National Council in 2011. The council's goal was to establish a federation in northeastern Syria, particularly in the Kurdish region. In the 1980s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) emerged in Syria and was handed over power by the regime to collect money, recruit fighters, oppress its competitors and abuse its opponents. The PKK abused Kurdish resources and manpower in its fight against Turkey, which Hafez al-Assad used as a tool to create balance with the neighboring country during the Cold War. After the signing of the Adana Agreement in 1998 though, Assad handed over Kurdish leader Ocalan, later expelling other PKK leaders and members. The party then entered a maze of splits, assassinations and liquidations amid economic, political and social siege and appeared to march towards



its inevitable end until the Syrian revolution came as a last thread of hope.

- The second chapter explores the alliance between the regime and the PYD, which was formed in 2003 in the Qandil Mountains and initially adopted the ‘democratic confederation’ mindset. This movement started off consisting of professional and union blocs before being given actual power by the regime to control Kurdish areas in Syria and ensure that Kurds don’t take part in the Syrian revolution. In January 2014, an interim self-administration was announced, and thanks to US support it later evolved into the ‘Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria’, which nothing can stop from becoming an independent entity.
- The sectarian tendency of the PKK’s relationship with the regime manifested itself after the revolution kicked off when Ocalan, who is Sunni, began accusing Kurdish tribal leaders of complicity to convert into Islam or join the Arab melting pot. He redefined the Kurdish identity by distancing it from the Sunni identity, saying Zoroastrians came first, Alawite Kurds second and Sunni Kurds third. He interpreted the conflict that occurred between Ali and Muawiyah as “a democratic class struggle in which Ali represented the democratic path while Muawiyah and Quraysh represented Sunni Islam that fought bloody wars of conquest, forcibly seizing Kurdish lands and destroying everything in its path,” in a clear falsification of history. The party’s leadership in Qandil followed this logic, which was also backed by Bese Hozat, co-chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union, who said the people of Dersim were killed because they were both Alawite and Kurdish. Hevi Mustafa, head of the executive council of the Afrin canton, called on Alawites to build a self-defense arm to protect themselves amid fears a repetition of what happened in Sinjar or Kobane would occur. This was also demonstrated in practice when the party opened a center for the Yazidi religion in the Amuda subdistrict and a center for the Alawites in the Maabatli subdistrict. Also, for the first time, people were able to celebrate the Ashura holiday in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo, raising Alawite and Shiite symbols alongside SDF banners. This was how the party imposed a sectarian mindset on to the Kurdish sphere, paving the way for the legalization of political Islam under alternative Sunni and Shiite slogans. In Iraq, Kurdistan Region MPs and officials have confirmed the PKK’s association with the Iranian Shiite axis, saying it was paid by the Popular Mobilization Forces to target the Kurdistan Democratic Par-





ty (KDP) and Turkey. An official from the Islamic Dawa Party later said that the Sinjar Resistance Units were established by the PKK based on a request from Nuri al-Maliki. Osman Ocalan, who defected from the PKK, said: The nationalist ideology of the party ended in 2004, and the leaders currently controlling the party are the product of leftist and sectarian thought.

- After the Syrian revolution erupted in March 2011, the alliance between the party and the regime was quickly restored with the latter providing the party with all the necessary material and moral bribes to help it resume its activity, regain its allies and supporters, and form an intelligence apparatus, whose first step was to ensure Syrian Kurds maintained a neutral position in the revolution in order for only one sectarian and nationalist group to appear active on the field.
- On July 19, 2012, as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) entered the city of Aleppo, the Syrian regime began handing over its security posts in the provinces of Hasakeh and Aleppo to the PYD forces, which had become known as the “People’s Protection Forces” (YPG). The regime completed its withdrawal from Hasakeh at the end of the year, pushing the YPG into a military confrontation against the rebels who liberated Ras al-Ayn. The confrontations then expanded to include all the fronts from Qamishli in the East to Afrin in the West. Despite all of the disagreements that occurred between the regime and the party later, and allegations that the relationship deteriorated, their coexistence was not affected; the regime institutions, banners and security apparatuses still stand alongside the party’s institutions and military bases, leaving no room for doubt about the existence of coordination between the two sides, as confirmed by defected party members in statements to foreign media.
- The ambiguous position in the revolution was represented in the Kurdish parties’ initial reluctance to adopt youth movements until they raised the ceiling of their demands from fairness, equal citizenship, and cultural and linguistic rights to demanding a federation, matching the goal of their opponent, the PYD, then neutralizing their Kurdish supporters by convincing them their demands were distinct from those of the rest of Syrians.



- **The third chapter** reviews the emergence and development of the party's relationship with the US since its inception during the fight against ISIS in Kobane, and although we don't believe in conspiracy theories, the latter has imposed itself in various locations taking advantage of divisions among rebel factions.
- Syrians' confidence in the US's position on their revolution has been shaken since 2013 when the latter found it sufficient to confiscate chemical weapons without punishing the regime. Thus, when the US asked FSA factions to abandon their fight against the regime and only fight ISIS, the latter did not agree. Regardless of whether the factions' decision was right or wrong, several incidents that prove the US's intention to have the FSA fail can be tracked. Among them was the adoption of a relatively weak program to train and arm the opposition in the spring of 2015. The program, after three months, only produced dozens of fighters who were then deployed without air cover to areas controlled by Islamist factions that viewed them a threat. They were arrested and had their weapons confiscated, and the project was deemed a failure. A similar failed attempt later saw tens of FSA fighters land in Hamdan (agricultural) Airport in Abu Kamal. Another proof could be seen in the US's rejection of a request made by Arab tribes and the Washington-backed Revolutionary Commando Army to participate in the battle to liberate Deir ez-Zor without the SDF's leadership.
- Any research on how the relationship between the PYD and the US emerged seems absurd after learning that it was kept secret for two years— meaning the formation of joint operation rooms between the YPG forces and some small factions affiliated with the FSA was planned and orchestrated. This also reinforces existing suspicions on the reality of the Kobane battle, which posed a disaster for the Syrian revolution, as it transformed the course of events from a people's revolution against the regime to an international battle against terrorism. This is also supported by how the international community, and the US in particular, turned a blind eye for many months to the terrible massacres that ISIS fighters carried out against the rebels and their clans in Deir ez-Zor after their victory there in the summer of 2014. Contrariwise, it rushed to the rescue of the PYD forces in what evolved later into a relationship of not just emergency rescue but where the YPG forces monopolize all of the US's support, and enjoy the only



military presence in east of the Euphrates.

- As Russia announced its intervention in Syria on September 30, 2019, the formation of the SDF coalition was also quickly announced. The SDF brought together factions that were already allied in a move to justify unlimited US support for the YPG forces, which were already being trained by American forces in Tal Baydar camp in Darabsiyah before the SDF was established. Meanwhile, the international coalition insisted on examining FSA officers and soldiers as well as military school graduates before sending them to train at camps in Arab countries as part of its “distraction” project that it launched to train and arm the opposition.
- Despite reaffirmations from the US and the PYD that their alliance was of military nature only, the latter took advantage of that alliance to consolidate its control over Syria’s northeast, and began implementing its political project of establishing a Kurdish canton, which later became the Rojava Federation that was announced in March 2016. The PYD’s position in its negotiations with the regime, whether it was up or down, was tied to the US’s presence in Syria.
- The Turkish position constitutes a central focal point in US policy on Syria; the interests of the strategic alliance remain considerable even if it appears as though they could be disregarded. From this standpoint, Turkey’s rejection of the PYD project has posed a major obstacle to its completion.
- The US was aware of the alliance between the YPG and the regime, and consequently that the latter wouldn’t attack the Kurdish forces, which saved it the burden of protection that would’ve been required in an alliance with the FSA. The YPG forces were also ready to meet US demands without any restrictions or conditions, in addition to having one military and political leadership to answer to. When it comes to talks of the group’s distinguished military capabilities though, it’s not true— if the FSA was granted the same resources and support, it would’ve done a better job; without US support ISIS would’ve reached Qamishli, said a fighter from the Sanadid militia that’s affiliated with the SDF coalition.



- **Chapter four explores** the demographic aspect of the east of the Euphrates region, which includes Hasakeh province, and parts of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo. The region’s residents mostly identify with the nationalist Arab mindset, and include Assyrians, Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians and Armenians. Generally speaking, the Kurds constitute 34.99% of the total population of Hasakeh, 0% of Deir ez-Zor’s, 2% of Raqqa’s, and 59% of Kobane in Aleppo. Thus, they currently constitute 18.3% of the total population of east of the Euphrates, or around 1,978,161 people, including residents of the “Peace Spring” area.
- At first, the PYD focused on persecuting Kurdish activists; killing, arresting and displacing many of them, before extending its oppression to other groups with a special focus on Arabs due to the group’s demographic predominance. Defected YPG members have admitted to burning down Arab villages and displacing dozens of Turkmen families and preventing them from returning while forcing Assyrians to sell their land.
- Until the launch of the “Peace Spring” operation last October, the party was preventing residents of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad districts from returning, and until now the party’s forces are holding more than 60,000 of the Deir ez-Zor residents— mostly women and children— in a desert camp in al-Hawl district, east of Hasakeh, under the pretext they sympathize with ISIS.
- **As for Chapter five**, it is devoted to the military side of the SDF, and explores what the entity consists of and its real numbers against the exaggerations made by the PKK and PYD’s media outlets for political, economic and propaganda purposes. The YPG forces didn’t exist at all before the revolution. When established in 2012, it consisted of 3,000-4,000 fighters, the Sanadid army (300 fighters), Army Revolutionaries (250 fighters), Luwa Thuwar al-Raqqa (200 fighters) and other smaller groups whose numbers were in the tens— together these groups later made up the SDF, consisted of about 5,000 fighters. Due to the conflicting numbers given by SDF officials, we resorted to estimates based on their areas of deployment today, in their real numbers at times and approximate numbers at others, coming to a result that’s closest to the truth. We’ve estimated that the SDF consists of 26,388-33,688 fighters, of whom Arabs make up more than



86%, and YPG forces 2000-3000 fighters.

- A significant jump in Arab enrollment in the SDF took place during the Deir ez-Zor battle because the US refused their independent participation.
- In the beginning, the YPG forces used light arms, before the regime provided them with artillery and tanks in their fight against the FSA in Ras al-Ayn at the end of 2012. The forces later received missiles, SUVs and warships after joining the international coalition to fight ISIS.
- The number of US bases east of the Euphrates had reached 22 before Operation Peace Spring, but has now shrunk to 13, which are spread out in Rmelan, Qamishli, Hasakeh and Deir ez-Zor. The 13 bases include Tel Baydar and al-Wazir, west of Hasakeh, the two main bases to block Russian expansion to the east.
- As for Russian bases, which didn't exist at all before Peace Spring, they've now reached 11, including three in Qamishli, one of which is located at the airport.
- As for the regime forces in Hasakeh, they mainly consist of members of the security and police services, estimated at 1,500 soldiers, in addition to two military groups totaling 300 personnel. After Peace Spring, the regime deployed some forces on the Turkish border in accordance with the Sochi Agreement.
- **Chapter six examines** the institutions established by the independent entity, starting with the two social contracts for self-administration in 2014 and the federation in 2016— both based on a distorted interpretation of the people's right to determine their fate, assume the existence of what's known as "Syrian Kurdistan," and aim to establish a separatist entity under the name of political decentralization, in an attempt to establish a quasi-state like Iraq's Kurdistan Region, and grant it broad sovereign defensive, external and internal powers.



- The most significant common factor between the two contracts is that neither enjoyed recognition from any entity outside of the geographic location that the party controlled militarily.
- The de facto authority tries to prove its existence as a viable administration in the judiciary, intelligence, municipalities, compulsory conscription, and customs, but all of its activities, including those related to the judiciary, face constant criticism from the population and international organizations.
- Immediately after taking power, the party forced schools under its control to teach the Kurdish language, quickly changing the curricula after announcing its self-administration in 2014. The party introduced corrective curricula, imposing them on all groups and shutting schools that rejected them. Teachers boycotted the party's schools based on warnings from the regime's education ministry, which continued to pay their salaries. This forced the party to rely on outside teachers, some of whom didn't hold any educational certificates, and state schools became overwhelmed as students sought recognized degrees to complete their university studies. This resulted in the dropout of thousands of students, the spread of illiteracy and the Kurdification of non-Kurds who were forced to learn the language to be able to pursue their interests in the party's circles.
- **Chapter seven explains the economic reality** of the east of the Euphrates area, which relies on oil and agriculture. The SDF's investment in the light crude oil wells in Deir ez-Zor comes at 80%, in addition to 5% in the heavy crude oil in Rmelan— together, the two investments produce some 80,000-90,000 barrels per day, of which the SDF sells 5,000 per day to opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo and Idlib, hands 30,000 to the regime, and exports around 20,000 to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Gas imports, on the other hand, cannot be estimated with precision, but it produces a total of 11,500 domestic gas cylinders per day. Oil workers and staff in Rmelan receive their salaries from the state as Deir ez-Zor's oil market reeks of corruption.



- The final chapter examines scenarios for the development of the situation east of the Euphrates. Operation Peace Spring revealed a **scenario to solve the Syrian crisis** that included assigning Russia with alleviating Turkish concerns and protecting the SDF in light of an agreement with it and the Syrian regime. This scenario included the involvement of Turkey as Iran and its militias exited Syria. With the help of the US, Russia succeeded in accomplishing the first item on the list, but failed at all of the other stages in light of their belief in a military solution in which the restoration of the east of the Euphrates area, which included Idlib, the countryside of Aleppo and the rest of the liberated areas, was a given. Russia's assumption was based on a belief that the US would withdraw its forces before US elections. Failure of this scenario, which has become apparent at this point, will push for **the second scenario** to come into play, which would include returning to the negotiations table via the Constitutional Committee or Geneva paths as the SDF prepares to join from Cairo. The regime's intransigence will lead the negotiations to a dead end, which is what the party hopes would happen for a continued US presence to consolidate its separatist project and expand its control over remaining factions that are being accused of affiliation with ISIS, especially in light of the deteriorating economic situation that's a result of the siege imposed on them by the regime and the Iranians south of the Euphrates and the PYD to the east— **this takes us to the third scenario**, which supporters of the secession project hope would include coexistence and self-sufficiency between the Kurds who are confined in the Qamishli district and Arabs who are spread out in the south to Deir ez-Zor. This scenario hopes that within a few years mutual interests would push for an acceptance of the status quo and residents would begin to defend and protect it amid a disconnection from other Syrian provinces and districts where this idea of a “divided federation” would be backed in practice. But if the US forces withdrew, the SDF would run to the embrace of the regime, and be more than happy with what it offers it from cultural and administrative formalities in exchange for fighting alongside it— **this is the fourth scenario**, and what is feared to lead to the leaving of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa residents at the mercy of the regime. Nevertheless, US presence wouldn't necessarily stop an agreement between the regime and PYD from taking place. This **takes us to the fifth scenario**, which would see the regime and PYD co-opted, separately from the representatives of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, ahead of the withdrawal of US forces, leaving the Arabs in these areas to their fate.



- Demography stands as a stumbling block in front of the PYD's project in light of the predominance of Arab presence and the overlapping of Arab and Kurdish neighborhoods, even in the party's most key strongholds. This prompted the party to lower the ceiling of its ambitions from demanding a federation to returning to the negotiation table to demand a self-administration. It's also in this regard that the northern Syrian federation, according to the law of administrative divisions, no longer stands as it was divided into two parts 100 km apart, extending from the borders of Kobane to Tal Refaat.
- The US's presence represents the most significant of the PYD's strengths. Moreover, failure to find a resolution to the Syrian crisis will push Arabs to hold onto hopes the US would stay in light of not being allowed to form their own independent military, which comes in the interest of the party's existence and continuation. This is where Arabs' fears meet with the party's ambitions and interests. Other strengths are led by Israeli support for the "maintenance of the eastern pocket of Syria," but also include the exclusion of the regime's use of force. As for the most important weakness, they are represented in Turkey's historical position in rejecting the establishment of the entity alongside the majority of the population.

\*\*\*\*\*





## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Foreword

This study focuses on the separatist entity that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) established east of the Euphrates river, taking advantage of the Syrian revolution and using ideology and interest, such as fighting terrorism, or its relationship with interfering countries, all in cooperation with the Assad regime, which handed it control over Kurdish communities and neighborhoods in northern Syria.

This entity went on to establish independent semi-government bodies, an army, security and police stations, confiscating government facilities and even changing school curriculums, leaving no room to doubt its separatist tendency.

### Background on the Kurdish issue in Syria:

The Kurdish issue began in Syria after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during WWI, which saw the establishment of a number of nation states amid no such option for the Kurds. The 12th principle in Wilson's Fourteen Points speech during WWI, the former US president said: "The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.<sup>(1)</sup>" However, pre-UN international law simply did not recognize peoples' and communities' right to self determination, and so this remained a mere political gesture<sup>(2)</sup>.

In 1920, the Treaty of Sevres recognized Kurds' political rights, but it was never ratified, and in 1923, it was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne which recognized the new Turkish state, but not the Kurdish community at all.

In the following years, Kurdish leaders and clergymen led many revolution attempts that were suppressed by Turkish authorities. This led to many Kurds



fleeing Turkey to neighboring countries, including Syria<sup>(3)</sup>, where they settled in territories close to the Turkish border. This kickstarted the Kurdish problem in Syria. Until then Kurds' presence in that region had been very limited, with some communities living in villages on the border strip and some nomadic clans here and there. The Syrian state had just been established; after Arab and British forces entered Damascus in 1918, Syria was named a state in 1919, but was shortly occupied by France in July, 1920.

Xoybun or Khoyboun, meaning independence, was the first modern Kurdish national political movement established by exiled Kurds in the Lebanese city of Bhandoun in 1927 with the goal of liberating Turkish Kurds from Turkish rule<sup>(4)</sup>.

Late US diplomat William L. Eagleton said Kurdish intellectuals began to be active in an organized manner in 1908 when the sons of Badrakhhan founded the "Kurdish Cooperation Association". Xoybun, the first Kurdish movement with cross-border influence, was established under the auspices of the French Mandate and developed political ties with Armenian parties abroad. It also formed a military arm supervised by Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a former Kurdish officer for the Ottoman army who fought in battles against Turkish forces in Mount Agri, "Ararat", until 1930 when he fled to Iran.

In June, 1929, French Mandate authorities arrested a number of Xoybun leaders, temporarily deporting them to Damascus and the coast and placing them under house arrest, implying they never saw the movement as more than a tool to pressure Turkey in ongoing negotiations over the demarcation of the Syrian-Turkish border at the time.

The Kurds' issue in Syria is an extension of the Kurdish problem in Turkey just as Syrian Kurds are an extension of Turkish Kurds, both living in areas close to the border. While there was some Kurdish presence in Syria before though, especially in Damascus, and dating back to many centuries, Kurdish national political activity did not begin until Turkish Kurds fled to Syria.

The French encouraged settlement in Syria's Jazira region, which was dominat-

---

(3) A Modern History of the Kurds by David McDowall (Lebanon, I.B. Tauris; Revised edition, 2004) page 35.

(4) The Making of Modern Syria by Mohammed Jamal Barout (Doha, ACRPS, 2013) page 381.



ed by nomadic bedouin tribes, viewing it as a promising spot for the agriculture of cotton, and wheat in particular. They encouraged Assyrians, Kurds and Armenians to settle in the region, and develop cities and villages. It was during this period that Jazira saw some of its most impressive cities built, including Hasakeh and Qamishli, which were both built in the 20th century. The development of cotton production in the region eventually played a big role in attracting a large number of Kurdish workers from across the border, escaping tension caused by Kurdish revolutionaries challenging the Turkish regime between 1925 and 1939.

According to census surveys run by Syrian authorities the number of refugees in border regions jumped by proportions far exceeding the size of natural population increases, doubling between 1952 and 1962 from 162,145 to about 309,279<sup>(5)</sup> as immigration continued after the independence. To this day many Kurdish Syrian communities are named after villages where they originated from in Turkey before they fled to Syria. This is all to say the Kurdish issue in Syria is a political extension of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and affects it and is affected by it.

Between 1920 and 1932, French Mandate authorities established three semi-independent administrative entities in Qardaha, Jarabulus and Jazira, to separate between Syria and Turkey on one hand, and absorb Armenian, Kurdish and Assyrian refugees on the other, amid calls for independence<sup>(6)</sup>.

On the other hand, the French Mandate sponsored the restructure of Xoybun<sup>(7)</sup> in Bhandoun in October 1927, which included the joining of a number of Turkish Kurdish political and tribal leaders who had settled in Syria, including poets Cigerxwin and Osman Sabri<sup>(8)</sup>, who would go on to take part in the establishing of the first Kurdish party in Syria in 1957. The restructure also included Hago Agha who supported the separatist project until his death in 1940, and Celadet Bedir

---

(5) Ibid, page 695.

(6) Barout, page 376, 382.

(7) Ibid, page 382.

(8) Ibid, page 386.





Khan who wished to revive the Badrakhani emirate in Botan<sup>(9)</sup>.

After revolution attempts in Ararat failed and despair grew as liberating Turkish Kurds seemed unlikely, some Xoybun members made establishing an ethnic entity in Jazira a priority, hoping to revive the Badrakhani emirate in Ibn Umar and form a community mostly made up of immigrants.

Incited by the French, a famous insurrection calling for an independent entity from Syria took place on the island in 1936-1937. The insurrection, in which Christians participated, was led by Kurdish politician Hago Agha and saw Xoybun play a key role in inciting Kurds in Afrin and Amuda to push for a separatist entity.

It was then that Xoybun saw its goal go from liberating Turkish Kurds to establishing a Kurdish entity in Syria's Jazira region, a plan that didn't succeed due to protests by Kurdish, Assyrian, and Arab residents. Some Xoybun members were also resistant to the idea<sup>(10)</sup>.

In the years that followed, several Kurdish cultural associations and networks were formed, alongside clubs and communities dedicated to perpetuating Kurdish culture in Syrian society. These communities did not last, but led to political development that helped form the democratic Kurdish party in Syria in June 1957 with the aim of liberating and uniting Kurdistan and granting its people cultural rights.

Osman Sabri's leadership of the new party alongside the involvement of poet Cigerxwin reflected a continuation of Xoybun's vision to liberate and unite Kurdistan, a historic goal unrelated to the injustices suffered in Accra. When the party was established, Syria was experiencing what was considered one of the most nationalist and democratic phases in its history under late President Shukri al-Quwatli's rule, during which many Kurds held powerful positions, including head of state.

In 1960, after the party's leadership was arrested, investigations with the mil-

---

(9) Ibid, page 396

(10) Ibid, page 394



itary court in Damascus showed there was a split in leadership; Osman Sabri led the side that held onto the core goals of the party: liberating and uniting Kurdistan, while the other side, led by Nuraldin Zaza, was more concerned with aspects pertaining the cultural and political rights of Kurdish Syrians.

This split deepened after the leadership's release from prison in 1961, seeing the party break up into two; right and left. These parties have since then split again and again, reaching 13 parties at the wake of the Syrian revolution. There were also blocs that never made it to parties or others that broke up and later joined the National Kurdish Council, which was established in October 2011. These blocs later represented Syrian revolutionaries and opposition in the council and at Geneva conferences as well as the Riyadh and Constitutional Committee conferences.

Until the establishment of the National Kurdish Council, Kurdish parties had four demands: the abolition of exceptional census, the recognition of the Kurdish identity as the second largest in the country, national and political rights and an end to discrimination against the group. These goals quickly changed after the revolution erupted though, and Kurdish parties started calling for a federal system following the end of the census problem that broke out in May 2011 concerning the naturalization of non-citizen Kurds.

Since the 1980's, Kurdish parties in Syria have competed against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey in 1979 with the goal of liberating Turkish Kurdistan. A year after he established the PKK, the leftist politician fled to Syria and began leading the party in fights against Turkey .

Öcalan had complete control over the Syrian Kurdish scene; he collected donations, recruited fighters and terrorized and abused his opponents, until his party became the strongest and most widespread. He abused Syrian human and material resources in his battles against Turkey.

On February 15, 1999, Öcalan was arrested by Turkish intelligence in Kenya where he had been seeking asylum to no avail for four months. The arrest took place shortly after the Adana Agreement in 1998, which saw Kurdish workers' influence gradually plummet until summer of 2002 when Öcalan and his party were permanently expelled from Syria and their Damascus assets were confiscated.



The party in the following years faced a bundle of organizational, ideological and economic crises that led to more splits and exits from it. This eventually resulted in the party being divided up into four main blocs that each led their unique fight on their own. The establishment of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), focused on Syrian Kurdistan, was established in the Qandil Mountains in 2003 without one Syrian Kurdish civilian representative. Then Fawzi Shanali led the party before Fouad Omar took over, followed by Salih Muslim, Shahuz Hassan in 2017, and finally Anwar Muslim in 2020.

The Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) claimed to adopt a democratic, self-administration nation state ideology, but their demands soon evolved to include calling for a federal system— a Rojava federation to be more specific than a Northern Syria federation— as the parties expanded after Islamic State fighters were expelled with the help of the international coalition. Today most of the known Kurdish parties in Syria agree on the demand of establishing a federation.

### **Background on the relationship between the Assad regime and the PKK from the 1980's until 1998 and the transformation after 2010:**

During the 80's and until the end of the 90's, Bashar Al-Assad used the PKK to put pressure on Turkey, especially when it came to Syria's water share in the Euphrates, and to regulate his relationship with the neighboring country during the cold war. Internally, the party worked on curbing nationalistic tendency amongst Syrian Kurds by rejecting the idea of establishing a "Syrian Kurdistan", slogans for the return to the north or concerns with events across the border. At the time, thousands of youths were transferred to Qandil Mountains to fight Turkish forces.

On the Kurdish front, the party while at peak strength was able to marginalize all competing parties, restraining them and slowing down their activities. They all seemed small in the face of the propaganda of the Kurdish party. But Bashar Al Assad's plan did not succeed as a result of Turkish intimidations in 1998, which led to the signing of the Adana agreement and the expulsion of Öcalan from Syria. Öcalan's arrest in Kenya in 1999 served the party though, as it inspired thousands of Syrian Kurds to join the movement thanks to his charisma and leadership.



Despite the signing of the Adana agreement, the regime continued to overlook PKK's activities, whether ideological, organizational or financial, keeping their camps and headquarters safe, even after Bashar Al Assad came to power, out of fear relations with the Turks would deteriorate otherwise. After the Justice and Development Party came to power, allowing for closer relations between Turkey and Syria and deeper security cooperation followed by economic and political as well, the PKK's influence had to end in Syria and the party was finally expelled altogether in 2002.

The regime restored its relationship with the party at the wake of the Syrian revolution though amid Turkish support for Syrian protesters. The Syrian regime granted the party power over the border strip with Turkey in an effort to intimidate its neighbor with its original enemy, and confronting the party soon after became Turkey's main priority in its policy with Syria.





## CHAPTER II: ALLIANCE BETWEEN SYRIAN REGIME AND PYD

### On Syria's PYD and Turkey's PKK:

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a national Turkish Kurdish party that was established on 26-27 November in 1978 at a time when the Turkish left had reached peak influence in the 1970's. The party, which was founded by a group of non influential Kurdish youths who elected Abdullah Öcalan as secretary, adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology under the slogan of liberating and uniting Kurdistan. After his arrest, Öcalan's position changed, taking on a more "democratic confederation" nature before finally settling on calling for a "democratic nation" to solve the Kurdish problem.

In the summer of 1979, a year after the party's establishment, Öcalan took refuge in Syria where he became connected to Jamil Al-Assad, Hafez Al-Assad's older brother, through leftist Turkish opponents in Syria and through building strong ties with Syrian security institutions. (Thanks to these connections), Öcalan was later able to train some of his party members at camps belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (George Habash) and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Nayef Hawatmeh) before being given camps and headquarters in Damascus and the countryside by the regime.

In the 80's and 90's, the party led many battles against the Turkish army, eventually leading to Turkey threatening to wage war on Syria and the Adana Agreement in 1998. Öcalan was later expelled from Syria and arrested in the Kenyan capital in 1999 where he was handed over by Turkish intelligence. He is now serving a life-sentence in Imrali Island in Turkey.

After Öcalan's arrest, the PKK continued its activities in Syria until the fall of 2002 when Syrian security institutions asked it to leave in accordance with the Adana Agreement, which saw Turkish intelligence help its Syrian counterpart capture party members as relations improved between the two neighbors.



The establishment of the PYD came a few months after the expulsion of the PKK from Syria in an attempt to avoid the organizational and economic collapse of the entity, as it became apparent Syria was in large part supporting it organizationally and financially.

After his detention, Öcalan led four local parties affiliated with the PKK, each focused on one side of Kurdistan, as a way to avoid the ban and prosecution after being placed on a terrorist list. Established in 2003 in Qandil Mountains, the PYD was to focus on activities in Syria as an entity independent of the PKK, but it soon turned into a branch of the PKK whose members decided all organizational matters big and small on the ground. The role played by Syrians in the PYD became mostly limited to merely following the instructions of the Qandil-based leadership that monitored structural formations, received daily, weekly and monthly reports from local councils which it coordinated with, and was mostly made up of non Syrians

In this regard, Syrian leaders whose names came to light during the Syrian revolution were nothing more but facades behind which Turkish leaders running the PKK since its establishment were hiding.

Seen as an extension of the PKK, the PYD had reached rock bottom by the time the Syrian revolution broke out amid a long history of violence against Syrian Kurds as well as the prosecution and arrest of its members, which ultimately led to its end, organizationally, political and economically.

The PYD found an opportunity to come back to life at the wake of the revolution, restoring itself organizationally and economically and rebuilding its relationship with the Syrian regime and supporting its fight against the people's revolution.

The PYD initially adopted a “democratic confederation” ideology, but soon began calling for a “democratic nation” as a solution to the Kurdish issue. With Öcalan watching this evolution unfold from his prison cell<sup>(11)</sup>, the party's ideology later evolved into “democratic self-rule”, which he considered a mere political front for the “democratic nation” approach. Coinciding with the Arab Spring, the PDY's approach later saw other dimensions become part of its fabric, includ-

---

(11) This is claimed by the Qandil leadership, but there is no proof



ing economic, cultural, social, security, defense and diplomatic, in an attempt to re-market itself and clear its name from unattractive nationalist features— an evolution captured in the following quote by Öcalan: “Nothing prevails better in the Middle East than repetition; donkeys are painted and resold to their owners.”<sup>(12)</sup>”

Following Öcalan’s arrest, the PYD declared itself a self-administrated democracy in 2014 in Jazira, then Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, and then Afrin, before being united under what became known as the “Democratic Self-Administration.”

As it became involved in efforts by the international coalition to combat terrorism and under a US umbrella, the federation project that was announced in 2016 began being studied under the name the “Rojava Federation” then the “North and Northeastern Syria Federation” as the range of opportunities expanded amid support from the US to fight Islamic State that saw the party become armed.

The “Democratic Self-Administration” operates as a “local administration” in accordance with Syrian law and based on the interpretation of the party itself. In a statement released on October 15, 2010, to mark the end of its fourth conference, shortly before the Syrian revolution erupted, the party presented itself as a federation, contrary to the initial vision for resolution. But after the main goal evolved from uniting Kurdistan to establishing a democratic confederation, the party operated more like a coalition of union groups that included the four sides of Kurdistan headed by Öcalan as (a spiritual/an honorary) leader.

Amid endless ambitions, not all of the PKK’s pledges can be trusted; the local administration has turned into a separatist entity with geographical borders, protected by military and security forces, which soon turned into a federation that could declare itself independent when the opportunity arises, under any ideology or pledges— a reality shown in Öcalan’s mockery in the face of questions about when the movement would stop fighting for a democratic nation, which he dismisses as naive or irrelevant as he ultimately sees the fight as continuing until the end of time<sup>(13)</sup>.

---

(12) Abdullah Öcalan, *Defending the People: A plea to the European Court of Human Rights*

(13) *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* by Abdullah Öcalan, page 527.



## Impact of PKK's sectarian tendencies and the Alawite issue in Turkey

The fact that two-thirds of the PKK's founding group was Alawite was perhaps not enough to make the party sectarian<sup>(14)</sup>, as the secular, leftist national party supposedly overcame sectarian and religious rhetorics— even though Sunnis were pushed out of leadership positions in the years after the party was established, either by going to prison or being murdered or having committed suicide, leaving room for the sectarian Alawites to lead.

Öcalan's marriage to Kesire Yildirim<sup>(15)</sup>, an Alawite and founding member of the PKK, did not have an impact on the party's direction or ideology when it came to the principles on which it was founded, despite Öcalan's doubts about those principles and what he argues was their strong concentration characteristics, which paralyzed the influence of a large number of his comrades, leading him to accusing Yildirim of power grab attempts behind his back<sup>(16)</sup>.

After Öcalan and other party leaders' move to Syria in 1979, a year after the PKK was established<sup>(17)</sup> and in light of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Kurdish leader developed a relationship with Jamil Al Assad, head of the al-Murtada Association<sup>(18)</sup>. This relationship was followed by efforts by Öcalan to push the ideologies of the association onto Kurds in the 80's and even organize a number of festivals for the association in Afrin and Jazira, indicating the party was taking a more doctrinal direction than secular.

Just so this sectarian tendency isn't dismissed as a "pragmatic" or "mutual interest" move, it's important to note that Öcalan continued to hold onto this philosophy years after he was imprisoned, indicating it stemmed from a solid conviction about mixing nationalism and sectarianism.

---

(14) There were 22 founding members.

(15) Married to Ocalan from 1978 to 1987

(16) Ibid, page 315

(17) Some say Ocalan was invited as a guest by Jamil Al Assad when he arrived to Syria through a Turkish Alawite leftist organization whose members were refugees in Syria.

(18) The PYD: A Problematic Role and Blurry Future by Abdel Baset Seda, Al Araby, April 2019



Even though he began his life as a religious youth who led prayers, memorized 33 surahs of the Quran<sup>(19)</sup> and was raised by a Sunni family, Öcalan changed his position later, accusing Kurdish tribal leaders of collusion or attempting to melt into the Muslim or Arab identities to gain power. Zoroastrians, who never converted to Islam, and Alawites, whose beliefs contradict the most basic of Sunni Muslims and so aren't fully considered as part of the Islamic culture, on the other hand, represented, for Öcalan, the democratic position on the Islamic revolution.

This is because Yazidi Kurds were thought to come first as they were considered to have upheld their Kurdish identity in the purest form<sup>(20)</sup>, followed by Alwaite Kurds and finally Sunni Kurds. In other words, for Öcalan, Kurdish identity went into the opposite direction of Sunni Islam or Islam in general.

For Öcalan, the class-democratic struggle began in the early days of the Islamic revolution as tribal and hierarchical ideologies competed for power, leading to a split where one side, the Quraysh tribes, were led by Muawiyah, and the other adopted a more moderate democratic approach led by Imam Ali.

Authoritarian Sunni Islam, represented by Muawiyah, was the side that fought bloody wars resembling those of Alexander the Great, to take control over Kurdish land, and in the process killing many Kurds, and abusing their women and children<sup>(21)</sup>.

This narrative contradicts what has been documented by historians about the conversion of Kurds into Islam. In his book *History of the Kurds and Kurdistan*, scholar Muhammad Amin Zaki wrote: When Islam appeared, and Kurds came in contact with the first Muslims, they began thinking about the principles of this new religion and its tolerant teachings, find them useful in areas where they were lacking, so they embraced the religion completely. Similarly, English traveler Sir Mark Sykes had noted that Kurds quickly embraced Islam<sup>(22)</sup>.

---

(19) Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization by Abdullah Öcalan, page 15.

(20) Self-Defense is all forms of self administration: Öcalan to his lawyer, published by the HPG in February, 2011.

(21) Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization by Abdullah Öcalan, page 98.

(22) *A Short History of the Kurds and Kurdistan* by Muhammed Amin Zaki Bey, Baghdad, 2005, page 194.



After this ideological rooting, Öcalan set out to announce his project that was based on blending the identities of Alawite Hussein and Kurdish leader Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi<sup>(23)</sup> to produce a fair, free and democratic version of Islam, away from the existing Sunni and Shiite faiths, which are based on the worship of one God.

Qandil's harmonization with Öcalan's project wasn't delayed very long; after a few months, the Qandil leadership was talking about Alawites and Alawites in Turkey with or without occasion. Bese Hozat (also known as Hulya Oran), an Alawite and the co-chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union told Turkish newspaper *Ozgur Gundem* in November 2014, that Dersim residents in Turkey were killed between 1937 and 1938 for being Kurdish and Alawites at the same time.

Hozat said the only real apology she can accept for the Dersim genocide from the Justice and Development Party is by either solving the Kurdish problem, allowing self-rule for Kurds, recognizing Dersim as a self-administered region and recognizing Rojava-controlled areas in Syria<sup>(24)</sup>. Her remarks had come in response to an apology made by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2011 for the Dersim (Tunceli) campaign in the 40's.

Following Hozat's comment, Cemil Bayik, the other co-chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union, was quoted in February 2015 as linking the Alawite and Kurdish issues as part of a solution on the democratic path<sup>(25)</sup>.

The two issues then merged for the party and its leading councils who emphasized them in their statements, much like in a statement released by the KGK regarding Öcalan's call for demilitarization in March 2015 in which he linked the solution of the Kurdish issue and the Alawite issue in Turkey.

In Syria, there's no shame in expressing sectarianism in line with the Qandil leadership. Hevi Mustafa, a PYD leader in Arfin, had called on Alawites in September 2015 to build a self-defense system to protect themselves. She had said:

---

(23) Öcalan's message to the Democratic Islam conference, KJKONLINE, April, 2014.

(24) Co-Chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union Bese Hozat, *Welati News*, November, 2014.

(25) Co-Chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union, Cemil Beyik, *Yeni Ozgur Politika*, February, 2015.



As an Alawite, I call onto the Alawite sect to be more cautious at this time... to avoid a repetition of the massacres that took place in Sinjar and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, they have to be cautious and secure a self-defense system to protect themselves. We will not be fooled by the presence of Syrian forces to protect them. Her remarks had come in response to an announcement of self-administration in As-Suwayda<sup>(26)</sup>.

The Alawite issue soon became a topic of discussion among party members in Europe. In fact the issue was the focus of a speech delivered by a PKK leader at a sit-in held in November 2015 in the Austrian city of Bregenz to mark the International Day of Solidarity with Ayn al-Arab/Kobane. The PKK member began his speech by focusing on Islamic State, who in his opinion represented Sunni Arabs and applied Islam the way Muhammad intended. He then disregarded attempts to deny that as false and said “All Sunni Muslim Arabs are ISIS.”

In September 2017, the party opened a center for Alawites in Maabatli in Arfin and for the first time ever the Shiite community was able to celebrate Ashura, the day Imam Hussein was (martyred). The celebration took place at Refaat Hag Serri School in the eastern party of the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo and saw symbols of Alawite, Shiite and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) raised.



(26) Hevi Mustafa, PYD leader in Arfin, Welati News, September, 2015.



Picture of the celebration in Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo



Banner of SDF next to Imam Hussein banner to celebrate Ashura





The party also inaugurated the Yazidi House in (Saradeq) village in Amuda district, where the Yazidi minority lived by late 2011. The House later became active in organizing courses to teach the Yazidi faith to the community.

The party has maintained a quota for Alawites and another for Yazidis at its executive councils and offices, even though Kurds in Syria were far from sectarian. By doing so though, the party created a doctrinal atmosphere among the Kurds that didn't exist before by forcing them to identify as either Yazidis, Alawites or Kurds, despite claims of being secular, leaving room for the legitimization of political Islam under Sunni and Shitte banners.

The party has been trying for three years to push Friday preachers that are loyal to it to include in their sermons slogans and prayers used in Shitte Hawzas (sermons), amid silent resistance from Kurds whose majority in Syria are Sunni

And in Iraq, Sheikh Shamo, an MP in the Kurdish Parliament, pointed to US intervention to end PKK presence in Sinjar in light of its association with the Shitte axis and its attempts to implement Iranian agendas in the region where the Yazidi minority in Iraq lives<sup>(27)</sup>. Peshmerga Chief-of-Staff Lieutenant-General Jamal Emenki said the party and its affiliates are paid by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which enjoys close ties with Iran<sup>(28)</sup>, while an official from Iraq's Islamic Dawa Party said: The PKK established the Sinjar defense forces in response to a request by Nouri al-Maliki, and in coordination with Iran's Revolutionary Guard in Sinjar<sup>(29)</sup>.

Meanwhile, Kurdish writer and political analyst Kefah Mahmoud said, "Political entities with armed factions in the Popular Mobilization Forces support the PKK's presence in Sinjar to target the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and Turkey."<sup>(30)</sup>

Last September, PDK official Masoud Barzani revealed that there was a large

---

(27) Kurdish MP reveals US-Iraqi talks on PKK in Sinjar, BASNEWS, February, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2PEzdtP>

(28) Peshmerga leader, March, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3ksE7I5>

(29) Iranian Revolutionary Guard meets with People's Protection Units in Sinjar, March, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3iDtEYP>

(30) PKK in Sinjar "State in Iraq", Anadol Agency, September, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3ip4a10>



PKK training camp in Tuz Khurma , south of Kirkuk, which is controlled by Iranian-backed PMK militias<sup>(31)</sup>.

The PKK hasn't been a Kurdish national party since the dominance of the left-wing sectarian group led by Jamil Baik. Osman Öcalan<sup>(32)</sup>, the brother of the party's founder and former leader, said, "The Kurdish national wing was chased out (persecuted), we were weak leaders, and we were targeted by regional intelligence to liquidate us, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian intelligence. Syrian intelligence were looking to get rid of me, and so was Iranian intelligence, and they were able to end the national nature of the PKK, handing the party over to the leftists and Alawites and taking it over."<sup>(33)</sup>

He believes the party lost its national quality after he left it in 2004 and that the current leadership is a product of leftist and sectarian thought<sup>(34)</sup>.

This sectarian direction is no longer subtle among Syrian Kurds as the party's collusion with the regime enjoyed, according to a number of Kurdish activists<sup>(35)</sup>, a sectarian nature since the rise of the Alawite influence as the sect became part of the Shitte axis<sup>(36)</sup>.

This sectarian direction enjoyed strong ties with the party's alliance with the regime in confronting the revolution, a matter that was apparent in Öcalan's talks with his lawyer on May 2011, where he said "The revolts are continuing in Syria, and the Muslim Brotherhood is joining them as well... will the Kurds join too? and how? There could be ground for negotiation, there must be relations on the

---

(31) TRK News, September, 2019. <https://www.arknews.net/ar/node/13355>

(32) Osman Ocalan left the PKK in 2004.

(33) Osman Oclan: Hard to say the PKK is a Kurdish Party due to its Leftist and Sectarian Nature, Welat News, April, 2017. <http://welateme.info/erebi/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=22193#.Xx29f1KB2t8>

(34) Ibid as above.

(35) Leaked documents: PYD's collusion with Al-Assad against Kurds' interest, April, 2015. [https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/86905](https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/86905)

(36) Osman Ocalan, [niqash.org](http://niqash.org), May, 2015 .



front, we have to go to them and talk to them. They have to tell Assad the following: if the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they will carry out massacres against us, and for this reason, we will build our own self-defense units, they can negotiate and reach a solution with Assad on a democratic basis. Kurds must build their own self-defense units.”

Finally, it can be said that sectarianism stems from the heart of the democratic nation that Öcalan called for, of which the cultural side works on stimulating pre-national tensions, such as sectarianism, religious and ethnic, in an attempt to reestablish itself to solve the civilization struggle of the Middle East in what the party describes as WWIII<sup>(37)</sup>.

### **How the regime brought the PYD to Syria and used it to suppress the uprising:**

Following the expulsion of the PKK from Syria in 2002 and the arrest of its members and the handover of some of them to Turkey, the relationship between the regime and the party was severed amid an improvement of relations with Turkey. The party and its leader then became seen as terrorists by Syrian security apparatuses.

At the wake of the Syrian revolution, Qamishli and Amuda were among the first cities to revolt, followed by other cities later, a matter that confused authorities there, pushing them to hold off on dealing with the protesters there the same way as in the rest of the country.

And when it became time for the Kurds to be removed from the revolutionary scene, no one was more up to the task than the PKK, given its experience over the past century, and especially as it hadn't declared a particular position on the revolution.

Abdullah Öcalan had told his lawyer on April 13, 2011 that Bashar Al-Assad “should meet with the PYD as an official representative of Syrian Kurds, not with the clans ... Syrian officials should meet on the grounds of the self-administration

---

(37) PYD's political program, introduction, official website.



... support will be given to Assad if these demands were accepted ... but if the state did the opposite, the PYD will join the fight of the Arab opposition on the grounds of the self-administration.”

In response to Öcalan’s request, the regime immediately began sending letters to the PKK leadership in Qandil. Also, Salih Muslim arrived in Qamishli from the Qandil Mountains on May, 2011, and on the following day he joined protests organized by his party there. He also held a seminar to discuss his party’s position on the protests before traveling back to Damascus a few days later where he met with the head of the Political Security Division and they agreed that the party would support the regime in exchange for granting it self-rule in regions where Syrian Kurds live. The agreement was to be implemented gradually as shown later.

Some reports claim that the agreement between the regime and party was brokered by Iran, while others claim the party’s return happened as a result of a barter deal with Iran in exchange for the release of party leader Murat Karayilan following his arrest by Iranian intelligence. Others argue that the party’s return to Syria coincided with the return of relations between the party and Iran, after years of fighting between the latter and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Iranian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. We believe all these narratives are unlikely though, because communication between the regime and party leaders in Qandil did not need Iran as a third party— Syrian intelligence had the tools to communicate with organizations and parties.

What is important was that the goal was accomplished, and the agreement was reached sooner than expected, seeing party members who were detained released and allowed to become active again in Syria. The party’s first move after its return was establishing an information service supervised by PKK leaders (Khabat Dirki) and Bahoz Erdal, followed by reconnecting members and supporters and distributing work amongst them. After the Free Syrian Army entered Aleppo in July 2012, the handover of the border strip with Turkey to the party began.



## **PDY's role in the regime's strategy to suppress the uprising:**

The regime's strategy to suppress the revolution mainly focused on accusing it of terrorism. It did so by releasing hundreds of Islamic extremists from prison a few days after the revolution erupted to give the protests a fundamentalist nature "by highlighting sporadic violent events and exaggerating them and using them to claim it was an armed revolution or a revolution of Islamists<sup>(38)</sup>" to justify the use of all types of military force to suppress it. This included the withdrawal of regime forces from regions it viewed as a military burden, leaving them at the mercy of the divided Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, who were neither able to unite themselves under one military leadership nor grasp the size of security responsibilities and duties that had fallen upon them. These regions soon become fertile ground for extremists and terrorists that had been released as well as those coming from across the border.

The liberated areas became easily accessible, and saw regime intelligence penetrate many factions at a leadership level and direct them. In order to do that, the ground had to be set so someone can be accused of inciting terrorism, and the faction that was most suitable was that of Arab Sunnis who were then isolated from other factions that could clear them of the accusation, such as Christians, Alawites, Kurds, Druze and so on.

Within this scheme, the PYD's task was to neutralize Syrian Kurds and stop them from joining the revolution so that it could preserve its Arab Sunni nature. The party initially failed using their soft media tools though, but finally succeeded when they used armed force.

This was not the first time the PKK had used its (local) tools to stop Kurds from joining protests; through the PJAK, the party made sure in 2009 that Iranian Kurds wouldn't join the Iranian Green Movement, which had erupted to protest presidential election fraud by the Islamic regime there<sup>(39)</sup>.

---

(38) Scenarios of the Developing Events in Syria, Geiron, December, 2019. <https://bit.ly/33M9Kqi>

(39) The PKK and Iran, Yeketi Media, June, 2014. <https://bit.ly/3aaKZ8l>



Since the beginning of the Arab Spring protests in 2011, the PYD took the position of the observer, and after reaching an agreement with the regime, it began distorting the image of the revolution by accusing it of Islamism, being tied to the Muslim Brotherhood or receiving funding from abroad.

When soft force did not bear fruit though, the party began inciting fights and tension at the protests by sending young members out there with party banners and photos of its leader. The party later stepped up its effort, shooting at demonstrators<sup>(40)</sup>, which led to a new series of assassinations that began with Mashaal Tammo<sup>(41)</sup>, who was martyred in October 2011. The protests didn't stop though, with people taking to the streets even after the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battles between party forces, the Syrian Free Army and the Al-Nursa Front. Democratic Union Party media portrayed the battles as if it were a Kurdish-Arab war.

In June 2013, PYD forces opened fire on peaceful protesters in Amuda, killing six people and arresting tens others. With the rest fleeing to Turkey, the party was able to completely eliminate any revolts by the Kurds.

### **The regime's support for the PYD:**

The party's first material benefit came a few months after the revolution during which a fuel crisis had kicked off amid a bread shortage; as winter approached and demand on fuel increased as people needed it for heating and to water their crops, and the regime left the police in charge of distribution.

In October 2011, the PYD organized late-night armed protests in various areas, and on November 8 of the same year, a protest was reported in which PYD members carried RPG and PKC machine guns and six Kalashnikov machine guns on the outskirts of Amuda, in an effort to send a message to all parties and reminder of the party's blood history in the 80's and 90's, which the regime never held it accountable for. PKK members then began appearing publicly in the streets and at demonstrations, and without any fear or caution began interfering in the distri-

---

(40) On June 29, 2012, PYD militants open fire on peaceful protesters in Afrin

(41) Stefan Buchen, DW, August 2012.



bution of fuel and bread.

The fuel crisis was an opportunity for the PKK to flex its muscles and show off its ability to control the public at a time when the police had failed to organize the distribution process. The party began competing with the police, which people didn't fear half as much as they did the PKK. In fact one unknown PKK member was capable of more than a whole police unit due to the fear and terror the party had previously planted into people's hearts. The party took advantage of the diesel distribution process to buy loyalties and restore its (influence) to appear as a segment that's able to serve the people and control their livelihoods. The party also took advantage of the distribution process to smuggle large quantities of fuel outside of schedule, selling them at high prices to farmers through contractors and using the profit to finance personal activities.

By early June of 2012, the PKK had begun placing unarmed youths at the entrances of cities and neighborhoods, a few hundred meters from the regime's own checkpoints, patrols and security headquarters. The PKK checkpoints started off by searching passersby and vehicles on the pretext of preventing militants from entering Kurdish cities and neighborhoods, but soon, after a few weeks, they turned into armed barriers that operated in harmony with the regime.

### **The so-called "July 19 Revolution":**

On July 19, 2012, Azaz, Al Bab and Jarablus were liberated from the control of the regime, whose forces withdrew without a fight in Manbij, Afrin, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and Dayr Hafir, as FSA forces entered Salaheddine neighborhood in the southwestern part of Aleppo. At the time, regime forces witnessed some major splits, which included tens of officers, as hundreds (of civilians) announced they would join the revolution in a scene in which the city seemed close to collapse.

The PKK moved to control the Achrafieh and Sheikh Maqsood neighborhoods in Aleppo without fighting after regime forces withdrew from them. They also took control over Afrin and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane the same way, declaring their neutral position between the regime and the opposition so the Free Syrian Army didn't view them as enemies. On Friday, July 20, 2012, dozens of PKK militants cordoned the general intelligence headquarters in Amuda and al-Malikiyah, de-



manding that they be handed over to them to protect them from protesters affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. A few hours later, the regime granted the PKK its wishes and gave it control over the headquarters after the removal of documents from them. The handover was followed by another order to give the PKK control over all border checkpoints with Turkey with all they included of arms, ammunition and vehicles. Soon after, the PKK hung party banners and photographs of Öcalan at these spots facing Turkish border guards. In the following months, regime forces withdrew from all other areas and regions, handing them over to the PKK, limiting its presence to just Qamishli and Hasakeh.

The party took control over these areas, which included grain silos at the capacity of millions of tons, cotton warehouses at hundreds of thousands of tons, and thousands of hectares of state-owned agriculture land whose seasonal output was estimated at millions of dollars, including thousands of livestock. The party then named the events the “July 19 Revolution” before changing its name to the “Rojava Revolution”, claiming it used force to liberate these areas, contrary to how it was portrayed by Western media, which dubbed it the “Silent Revolution” arguing not even one bullet had been fired<sup>(42)</sup>.

The regime justified its handover by arguing it was unable to protect all of Syria’s territories and thus it was natural to hand over parts to friends and allies, (temporarily), until events calmed down. Bashar Al-Assad was at the time reported to have said in a private meeting that he would soon give autonomy to the Kurds.

At the beginning of 2012, the regime began handing over SUVs with machine guns installed to PKK militants to carry out patrols on public roads to prevent FSA fighters from entering these areas. The handover would happen late at night at Qamishli checkpoint and be reversed in the morning in an attempt to hide it from the public<sup>(43)</sup>.

After the FSA entered Ras al-Aun (Sari Kani) in November 2012, and regime forces failed to stop them, the PKK rushed to fight it in agreement with the regime. The regime provided the party with all types of weapons, including tanks, a matter admitted by former PKK member Mohar, who told American journalist

---

(42) “Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava” KNK, May, 2014, page 9.

(43) PYD’s Violations in Syria, Democratic Republic Studies Center, November, 2014.





Roy Gutman that “The Syrian regime routinely supplied the People’s Protection Units (YPG) with heavy weapons. I remember going to Hasakeh one time and receiving two tanks, and some leaders regularly visited the military bases in Hasakeh and Qamishli, two of the province’s biggest cities, to obtain weapons and ammunition from regime forces.<sup>(44)</sup>”

Qamishli Airport and the border guard headquarters (Hajjanah Regiment) in Hasakeh turned into weaponry distribution points open to the party. Party militants were also able to receive medical care at government hospitals.

These supply processes continued until 2016 when the party no longer needed them as US aid came into the picture after the establishment of the SDF. The regime’s security committee then signed an agreement with the party, represented in Ibrahim Ibrahim Aslan from Afrin, at the end of 2012 to have it protect oil enterprises in Rmelan. The agreement entailed that 35% of the oil production would go to the party, leaving the rest to the regime.

This also happened on a more general level, which included regions that contained oil enterprises in Deir ez-Zor. After the regime failed to protect the fields there, agreements were signed with local groups who also failed to protect them, unlike the PKK, which succeeded at protecting the oil fields in Rmelan and has maintained control over it to this day. The regime has also provided party leaders with passports to travel with as well as intelligence.

### **The relationship between the regime and the PYD and their changing roles:**

By early November of 2012 regime forces had completed their withdrawal from all neighborhoods and cities along the border with Turkey, starting with Al-Darbasiyah, located 50 kilometers west of Qamishli, until the Al-Malikiyah area on the Iraq-Turkey border. Following its withdrawal, the regime handed control over security and police headquarters in these areas to PKK forces. On November 1, 2012, the FSA raided the city of Ras al-Ayn (Sari Kani), taking control over it within hours. The regime responded by launching airstrikes followed by sending tens of its forces from (Tartab) Mountain near Qamishli and Kawkab east of Hasakeh.

---

(44) “Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?” by Roy Gutman, The Nation, February, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3gOKoeY>



The forces were unable to enter due to the mines in these areas though, and withdrew and returned to Qamishli only three days later. During their escape to Qamishli, the forces were stopped by PKK checkpoints concerned they would be chased after by the Free Syrian Army, and so they took the Aleppo-Baghdad International Road to Qamishli instead.

We mention this to shed light on the extent of the fear that the FSA inflicted on other parties during the early days of the revolution. After that, the PKK had to face the FSA in Ras al-Ayn, and when it refused to engage in what it saw as a battle bigger than it, the regime threatened it would leave the province at the mercy of the latter. This coincided with irresponsible comments made by some faction leaders and others who were planted by the regime, and propaganda broadcasted by the PKK, which led a portion of the Kurds to stand against the progress of the FSA into the other parts of the province. The party then took advantage of this outcome and started recruiting fighters and pushing them to fight the FSA, a situation that led to confrontations between essentially the same people.

The regime began supporting PKK militants, providing them with weapons and equipment, which included tanks, artillery, mortars, RPG launchers, Russian Kalashnikov, pistols and ammunition. A Kurdish official would receive the necessary supplies from the Hajjanah Regiment, often behind the Palace of Justice in Hasakeh, before they are transferred to one of the warehouses of the Kurdish militias, in the grain silos, near the Sabbagh roundabout at the western entrance to Hasakeh, or in warehouses in the Al-Nursra neighborhood. The supplies would then be transferred to Ras al-Ayn, where the party achieved its first victory against the FSA, and thus felt confident.

It was during this time that the FSA took control over Al-Shaddadi district, located 60 kilometers south of Hasakeh, followed by Al-Hawl, located 25 kilometers east of Hasakeh, Tel Hamis, located 35 kilometers southeast of Qamishli, and the road from Deir ez-Zor in the south to the northern part of the Qamishli border, along the Iraqi border. Free Syrian Army forces had reached the Qamishli border area from the east, while the PKK was the one to face all these battles as the regime's role was limited to supplying it with weaponry.

On February 27, 2014, ISIS took over Tel Hamis, including its northwestern countryside, as well as Al-Hawl and its northern countryside. By early May, 2014,



ISIS had extended its control over the entire northern and eastern countryside of Hasakeh, pushing other militia groups, including the FSA, towards Deir Ez-Zor.

This situation continued until the international coalition against ISIS was formed, leading to the liberation of Al-Hawl, Tel Brak and the southern countryside of Hasakeh on October 30, 2015. The regime's role then began diminishing as the party no longer needed its military support and expanded its influence in Hasakeh and Qamishli, eventually taking complete control over them, with the exception of two security squares there.

There was no indication then that the regime's relationship with the PYD was declining or deteriorating even though the latter chose to be included in the US-led international coalition against ISIS instead of the Russia-led alliance<sup>(45)</sup> with the Syrian regime and Kurds, which was established on September 30, 2015.

There was no room for talk about a deterioration in the relationship between the regime and the party because the issue essentially became about two forces competing to join the international coalition against ISIS. By joining, the Kurdish party had made it impossible for Al-Assad to join the coalition, as it acted as a representative for the Syrian regime before US forces, who were reluctant to begin fighting ISIS in either Iraq or Syria under Al-Assad.

Statues of Hafez Al-Assad still stand in the roundabouts of Sabaa Bahrat in the center of Qamishli and Hasakeh, and the ruling Ba'ath Party is still active there, organizing festivals and party meetings at the cultural center in downtown. The regime's administrative and service institutions are also still operating as usual and to some extent so are police and security units there, a matter that has exhausted citizens who at this point have to conduct civil transactions twice, once through the regime and another time through the PYD.



---

(45) Al Akhbar, October, 2015. <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/12102>



## Regime Forces in Qamishli<sup>(46)</sup>

So military cooperation and coordination between the two sides continued despite rumors that the alliance had ended; the party at that stage had cut off the supply lines of the opposition towards the northern countryside, opening up a crossing between the Sheikh Maksoud neighborhood, which it controlled, and areas under the regime's control<sup>(47)</sup>, despite an existing agreement with opposition factions, in which the party had pledged not to open such crossing. This military coordination continued until the armed opposition was expelled from Aleppo by the end of 2016 and the regime took over, a move in which the party played a decisive role by closing the strategic Castillo road, the only exit for opposition forces in the northern countryside, with support from regime forces and the Russian air force<sup>(48)</sup>. Russian President Vladimir Putin said in April, 2016: Russian soldiers are fighting alongside the Kurds (around) the strategic battlefield in Aleppo.”

Bloomberg had reported that the “People’s Protection Units” fought opposition groups west of the Euphrates, in coordination with Russian, Iranian and Syrian regime forces<sup>(49)</sup>. This was confirmed by British authorities, and reported in the Telegraph, which quoted former British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond as saying, “What we have seen over the last weeks is very disturbing evidence of coordination between Syrian Kurdish forces, the Syrian regime and the Russian air force which are making us distinctly uneasy about the Kurds’ role in all of this.<sup>(50)</sup>” Party forces later withdrew from the villages of Western Manbij on March 2, 2017, handing them over to regime forces in an attempt to prevent the FSA from entering them.

---

(46) Will the Americans Abandon Us? Noah Bonsey, International Crisis Group, June, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2F1QnyW>

(47) Al Akhbar, October, 2015. <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/12102>

(48) Castillo: Life Vein and Decisive Point for Aleppo, AlJazeera, July, 2016: <https://bit.ly/2PrDgcp>

(49) Obama Administration Argues Over Support for Syrian Kurds by Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, February, 2016 <https://bloom.bg/3kuFUfQ>

(50) Hammond: «Disturbing evidence» that Kurds are coordinating with Syrian regime and Russia, February, 2016. <https://bit.ly/30GDxP3>



The relationship between the regime and the party didn't break or deteriorate, it was strategic; particularly in describing the revolution as terrorism, even though tactics may have varied, a situation that left the British government feeling "uneasy."<sup>(51)</sup>

### **PYD's role in controlling Kurdish areas and preventing them from participating in the uprising:**

Kurds, unlike the majority of Syrians, didn't have to deal with regime security and army forces storming their revolting cities to confront protesters. The majority of Kurdish soldiers split up from regime forces, some eventually meeting their death in Damascus or elsewhere, while others managed to flee to northern Iraq, or the Kurdistan region.

By early 2013, the Kurdish military council was formed by Kurdish officers who had split up and declared their commitment to the revolution's demands, and fought alongside the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo. Dissident militants in northern Iraq also formed a military body, calling it "Peshmerga Rojava". Other Kurdish factions and battalions were also formed in Syria, including some that are still active today.

The PKK viewed Kurdish fighters in the FSA as enemies, going after them, killing some and kidnapping others. On April 2013, a few months after the Kurdish military council was established, eight of its officers were kidnapped, and even though what happened to them remains a mystery, the party is widely believed to be responsible.

### **The Kurds' ambiguous position on the uprising:**

Many had expected Kurdish parties to lead the organizing of spontaneous revolutionary movements in Syria, unifying them and leading them in the right direction, in theory and practically, since they were the only type of opposition allowed

---

(51) Elections in Kurdish-led areas will not divide Syria: Minister, August, 2017. <https://reut.rs/3fFIIEd>



to be politically active, and in light of their experience on that front. But what happened was the exact opposite; Kurdish parties and their leaders were absent from even leading their Kurdish youths who would join the protests on a weekly basis. It seemed as if the parties had initially hoped the system would make some reforms, because when they didn't, they asked it to speed up its pace<sup>(52)</sup>, considering it deficient and late when it cancelled the state of emergency and granted citizenship to non-citizen Kurds<sup>(53)</sup>.

In all of their statements, the Kurdish organizations stressed the Kurdish issue as their sole concern. In an initiative announced on May 15, 2011, the organizations said they wanted that “all factions understand that this is an issue of a people that share this nation because Syria is a multi-ethnic country.”<sup>(54)</sup> At the national Kurdish conference the parties held on October 26 and 27 of the same year, the parties insisted that banners calling for federalism would be raised at their protests<sup>(55)</sup>, despite disagreement among members over this demand<sup>(56)</sup>. This led to a split between independent protesters and others supporting the Kurdish military council and their federalism demand.

The new demand received criticism even from some of the conference participants who saw it as a mere effort to raise the ceiling of demands. Others however saw it as a golden opportunity that may not present itself again as Syria drowned in a sea of events that left both the regime and its opposition weakened.

The rest of the country meanwhile viewed this new demand as a threat to national unity, as Kurds had historically never brought it up, and instead focused on calling for an end to discrimination and persecution against them, and allowing them to learn their language.

---

(52) Statement by the Kurdish National Movement in Syria, April 14, 2011.

(53) Statement by the Kurdish National Movement in Syria, May 5, 2011.

(54) Kurdish Parties in Syria Launch Initiative to Solve the Syrian Crisis, Welat News, May, 2011. <https://bit.ly/2DFYaCd>

(55) Fouad Aliko, “The National Kurdish Conference - National Rights: An Internal Vision”, Welat News, November, 2011. <https://bit.ly/30IXVPC>

(56) Kurdish parties didn't adopt revolutionary efforts by Kurdish youths until the National Kurdish Conference on October 27, 2011.



In light of this demand, the council joined the national coalition, even though the latter didn't agree to it, and pushed for it as a main priority in changing the state's structure, or the only solution to the crisis.

The PYD and other Kurdish parties agreed on the federalism demand, as well as on the importance of preserving the administration that the former established in the Jazira, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and Afrin regions. They disagreed however on interests and power distribution; while the PYD believed the Kurdish National Council should answer to it, other parties hoped for a more real and effective participation of the council within the various existing authorities.

The council's persistence led to the exit of five parties, which went on to join the self-administration that was announced by the PYD in January of 2014. The Left Party and the Democratic Left Party joined immediately after the self-administration was established, followed by the Yekiti Party of Kurdistan, the Rekeftin Party, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, after splitting up from the Kurdish National Council at the end of 2014 over political ideology.



## CHAPTER III: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE US-PYD RELATIONSHIP

Until ISIS emerged and took control over eastern Syria, FSA factions in Ras al-Ayn and others stationed on the outskirts of Qamishli in Al-Hasakeh were forced to fight the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) on behalf of the regime. Countries that supported the Free Syrian Army forces were aware the weapons they supplied them with were used to fight the YPG, and never expressed any opposition because they knew the faction was allied with the regime. After ISIS emerged, and declared a state in Iraq and the Levant, taking over whole cities in both countries and threatening foreign interests, the international coalition against ISIS was formed, and the US began searching for ground forces to operate under its cover.

### **US attempts with the FSA:**

As the Popular Mobilization Forces were formed in Iraq as a counterpart to the Iraqi army, fighting with support from the coalition, Syria was divided between regime forces and FSA forces, in addition to some Islamist factions.

Because it was difficult to include the Syrian regime's army in the coalition or use it for ground forces to confront ISIS amid European objection, while Islamist factions had to be excluded because of their extremism, the US tried to convince the FSA to work with it. And while it didn't object, the FSA asked that it would fight the regime and ISIS simultaneously, a request the US turned down as it hoped to end the battle with the regime and only fight ISIS.

This preceded the shake in confidence in the United States as an initial supporter for the rights of the Syrian people, which happened after the world power stopped at confiscating the chemical weapons used by the Syrian regime in an attack on Ghouta in Damascus on August 21, 2013. It was then that it became obvious that toppling the regime and establishing democratic rule was no longer one of the US's goals and that taking away the chemical weapons was nothing more than a service to Israel.





Meanwhile, the battle of Ayn al-Arab began, and regardless of its causes or whether ISIS's attack led to it or not, the PYD used the battle to show off its ability to fight and defeat ISIS, leading to the US settling on its People's Protection Units (YPG) as its ground force to fight ISIS under the cover of the international coalition.

This hypothesis explains why no action was ever taken to unify the support provided to the FSA, as well as attempts that appeared to intend to show its failure and lack of reliability, which included at least three following examples, in which US negligence and unwillingness were evident:

The first example could be seen in the relatively weak training and arming program of the opposition that began in the spring of 2015, which only produced tens of fighters within three months before it ended in October. These fighters were then deployed as ground forces in Syria without air force cover, which intimidated Islamist fighters who responded by arresting some of them<sup>(57)</sup> and forcing others to surrender their weapons<sup>(58)</sup>, in what made the US seem as if it were looking for an excuse to suspend the program.

The second example could be seen in the deployment of tens of US-backed New Syrian Army forces at Al-Hamdan Airport near Abu Kamal neighborhood in Deir ez-Zor on June 29, 2016, and leaving them to confront ISIS, again, without air force support. In what was described as a failed attempt, tens of army fighters were left in the middle of a region controlled by ISIS, leading to the death of a large portion of them or the kidnap of others who were executed later. The New Syrian Army project then came to an end due to American negligence, and that's according to comments made by the army chief to the Washington Post.

The third example took place during preparations to liberate Deir ez-Zor from ISIS, which saw Arab tribes object to YPG's participation in the battle due to the scale of the violations and destruction it had caused in a previous battle to liberate Raqqa.

---

(57) After entering from Bab Al-Salam crossing in Azaz in July 2015, Division "30" took refuge in the headquarters of the revolutionary army east of Afrin, as the latter was allied with the YPG, and stationed in its area of control. Days later the Nusra Front managed to kidnap the commander of the division, Colonel Nadeem Hassan, and three guerrilla fighters.

(58) Tens were deployed in Daraa, but due to lack of protection from the coalition, they surrendered their weapons.



Meetings conducted in August 2017 between the international coalition and the Pentagon-backed Revolutionary Commando Army (an extension to the New Syrian Army), which fought ISIS in Al-Badia and the countryside of Deir ez-Zor, were not successful due to the persistence of the latter to operate independently from the FSA amid an objection from the former.

### **The US's reliance on the YPG:**

The first public confrontation between the PKK and the US army took place in August, 2014, when three USAID helicopters landed in Sinjar Mountain in Iraq to deliver aid to civilians who were trapped at the top of the mountain following an ISIS attack on the area.

At the time, PKK fighters had formed the Sinjar Resistance Units<sup>(59)</sup>, of which a group had been present with the civilians in the mountains, and approached the aid workers, providing them with protection and assistance<sup>(60)</sup>, including translation. This relationship developed faster than expected, and in a few days, it became clear that PKK fighters had begun fighting alongside US forces in northern Iraq, a matter that prompted a report in the Financial Times in August 2014 that questioned how this took place when the party was still listed as a terrorist organization by the US.

This coincided with an announcement made by the PKK and the PYD on their various media outlets and statements by their leaders on their willingness to participate with full force and effectiveness in any international alliance to fight ISIS, which included a statement by YPG Media Spokesman Polat Can on his Facebook on August 28, 2014<sup>(61)</sup>.

---

(59) The Sinjar Resistance Units was a faction formed by the PKK after ISIS's attack on Sinjar in August, 2014. It included a group Yazidi youths who were enthusiastic to fight ISIS.

(60) A statement by the leadership of the joint forces in Sinjar that was being led by the PKK, August 14, 2014.

(61) Polat Can wrote: "We're ready to participate with full force and effectiveness in any international coalition to fight the terrorist ISIS. We, in the People's Protection Units, have great experience in fighting terrorism and defeating it."



In an interview on September 1, 2014, with German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Cemil Bayik, Chairman of the PKK's executive committee, asked the west, Germany and the US in particular, to offer military support to the party to fight ISIS and protect minorities.

Until then, the party had denied it was in touch with YPG units or the west<sup>(62)</sup>, but hoped for cooperation with the US and Europeans in the war against ISIS in either Iraq or Syria.

The party read the military situation well at the time, and realized that the US was searching for ground forces to fight ISIS, regardless of their ideology— but that they had to be legitimate, at least in theory. To gain legitimacy, the YPG formed the “Euphrates Volcano” joint operations coalition on September 11, 2014.

The coalition included some Arab factions beside the YPG units, raised the flags of the revolution, and claimed to be affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, which never recognized it. It included the Northern Sun Battalion, which fought ISIS and coordinated with the YPG even before the coalition was formed. The Battalion, founded by PKK leader Shorsh and the Kurdish Front brigade, which included some YPG militias, Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade, which had less than a hundred fighters, and other insignificant factions.

The YPG's goal in all of this was to distance itself from the PKK, and obtain a Syrian cover to be seen as legitimate to gain US support. The announcement was all over the party's media.

ISIS's attack on Ayn al-Arab/Kobane on September 15, 2014, coincided with the west's decision to fight the terrorist group in Syria and Iraq. Many believe the attack, during which YPG units withdrew handing over villages to ISIS<sup>(63)</sup>, was either a trap<sup>(64)</sup> or orchestrated to draw international support like happened in Sinjar.

---

(62) Official Spokesperson of the People's Protection Units Redur Khalil told Reuters on September 9, 2014.

(63) “Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?” by Roy Gutman, *The Nation*, February, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3gKPbOr>

(64) “US report: PYD committed war crimes in Syria and cooperated with the Assad regime and ISIS.” *Al Souria*, February, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2PCVxU3>



After eight days, on September 23, 2014, the international coalition began targeting ISIS sites in Syria, a matter that was welcomed by Salih Muslim, who expressed his party's aspiration to coordinate with the coalition to fight terrorism. The party then began providing US air force with updates through its operations room in Erbil. Massoud Barzani said airstrikes on ISIS in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane had taken place after talks he conducted with coalition forces<sup>(65)</sup>.

The Democratic Self-Administration<sup>(66)</sup> also called on the coalition forces to cooperate and coordinate with it in fighting ISIS in Syria and the region to completely drain the sources of terrorism. This coincided with a media campaign led by the party in Europe, which aimed to raise fears of an ISIS expansion to Europe<sup>(67)</sup>.

The US responded quickly to the party's calls, and on October 12, 2014, a meeting was held in Paris between US Special Envoy to Syria Daniel Rubinstein and PYD head Salih Muslim. In the meeting, the two sides discussed the importance of activating military coordination between the YPG and the international coalition to fight terrorism, in addition to providing Kurdish fighters with arms in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane. One week later, Muslim also met with former Deputy National Security Adviser Anthony Blinken and assured him that the party was ready to fight ISIS<sup>(68)</sup>. It then became apparent that coordination between the two sides wasn't new, and that they had begun two years ago, in 2012, but were kept secret to avoid upsetting Turkey. Former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford also took part in these talks<sup>(69)</sup>.

---

(65) Interview with Massoud Barzani with Sky News Arabia on October 13, 2014.

(66) Statement by the self-administration on September 24, 2014.

(67) Press release by Kurdish MPs on hunger strike for the fourth day in a row, in front of the UN headquarters in Geneva, on September 24, 2014.

(68) "The Kurdish Card is no longer in the Hands of Ankara", Al-Akhbar, October 28, 2014.

(69) Nazeer Reda, Asharq Al-Awsat, October 19, 2014.



## Was the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle a conspiracy?

This question seems logical, given the scale of the damage caused by ISIS to the Syrian revolution, as all factions became at risk of being accused of being affiliated with the terrorist group. In fact, ISIS's emergence created a situation where all Syrians became at risk of being accused of being part of the terrorist organization, even those who weren't armed, except for those the US said were innocent. The group's emergence did nothing but harm the revolution.

This question would also explain why the US, and the West in general, did not intervene before the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle, and just watched as ISIS carried out massacres against the revolutionaries, the worst being the Al-Shaitat massacre in Deir ez-Zor, which took place after the group defeated FSA and Islamist factions and expelled them from the eastern region.

In the spring of 2014, ISIS began its battle against the Free Syrian Army and Islamist factions, which had reached the outskirts of Qamishli in Tel Hahmees, and took control over areas along the Iraqi border until Deir ez-Zor.

Starting with the outskirts of Qamishli in the north, ISIS started fighting factions confronting the Syrian regime, including the YPG. To avoid bloodshed and keep its ties with the regime, these factions didn't initially plan to fight ISIS, and underestimated the group's strength as well as its goals and their potential consequences.

When ISIS arrived to Al-Shaddadi, south of Al-Hassakah, though, their motives became clearer as they expelled other factions from regions the latter had fought the regime for, taking control over them. By that time the factions had begun to stumble, but were able to fight back for several months and almost won against ISIS. But when it arrived in Mosul on June 10, 2014, ISIS seized large quantities of weapons, which helped it restore its military strength, enabling it to ultimately defeat the factions by the fall of 2014. After they defeated them, ISIS permanently expelled the factions from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Al-Hassakah after severe battles that the media barely covered but were probably similar in their atrocity to



Deir ez-Zor massacres<sup>(70)</sup>, or particularly Al-Shaitat massacre<sup>(71)</sup>, of their slaughter<sup>(72)</sup>, displacement<sup>(73)</sup> and collective punishment.

As the two sides fought for six months, the US and other Western countries neither expressed any support for the factions that were fighting ISIS in Deir ez-Zor nor took any steps to support them, in what could either be seen as treason or agreement with what was happening.

When comparing Deir ez-Zor to the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle, which had taken place only days after ISIS took control over the area, it can be argued that the West wasn't fair in its support for those fighting the terrorist organization, or that it favored the victory of one faction over the rest, despite how much blood they had lost in their fight.

For six months, ISIS fought thousands of Syrian fighters belonging to Islamist and FSA factions without US support, whereas 300 Kurdish YPG fighters had easily received support as the US military command in the middle east announced air strikes on ISIS sites in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane.

The US decision to provide YPG fighters with weapons came as a surprise to many parties, as US Secretary of State John Kerry had previously said that saving Ayn al-Arab/Kobane is not one of the coalition's motives led by his country<sup>(74)</sup>. Kerry quickly changed his mind though after the meeting between Rubinstein and Muslim, considering not supporting the Kurds in their fight against ISIS irresponsible or morally problematic<sup>(75)</sup>.

---

(70) ISIS committed 15 massacres in Deir ez-Zor

(71) It was considered a crime to merely belong to the Shaitat tribe.

(72) ISIS slaughtered more than 600 Shaitat youths, including 14-year-olds.

(73) ISIS expelled anyone with relation to the Syrian revolution as well as all armed persons who didn't wish to join it, taking over their land and homes.

(74) "Coalition Air Force Destroys Kurdish Military Extensions Amid Fear they would fall in the Hands of Terrorists", Al-Bernamea, October 22, 2014.

(75) Turkish official to Asharq Al-Awsat: American Guarantees on Arming Kurds, Asharq Al-Awsat, October 21, 2014.



On October 20, 35 days after the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle kicked off, the US military command in the middle east announced that it airdropped “huge quantities” of arms and ammunition for Kurdish fighters. The following day, former US State Department Spokeswoman Marie Harf said, “The Democratic Union Party (PDY) is not a terrorist organization,” despite her country’s awareness of the party’s ties with the PKK, which it considered a terrorist organization. The US draw a line between the two parties though without ever explaining why.

All Kurds, inside Syria and abroad, regardless of their political affiliations, supported the YPG, militarily and through their media outlets. They also participated in demonstrations that spread to European cities, drawing the west’s attention towards Ayn al-Arab/Kobane. Militarily, Masoud Berzani’s role was decisive in pushing the coalition to bomb ISIS sites in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane early, and later to send Special Forces from the Peshmerga to support the YPG. This was in addition to military aid, which included 24 tons of weapons and ammunition, provided by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan through Lahur Talabany “Sheikh Jangi”<sup>(76)</sup>, who enjoyed close ties with Iran. The architect behind the relationship between the US and the YPG units, according to Washington Post’s David Ignatius<sup>(77)</sup>.

Media coverage and Arab support, including Syrian, were two important factors missing in the fight between the Free Syrian Army and other Islamist factions against ISIS, but that were enjoyed by the YPG in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane where they played a major role in resolving the battle.

### **The evolution of US support after the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane battle:**

After the liberation of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane from ISIS, the YPG moved towards the eastern countryside in Hasakeh and liberated it quickly thanks to direct coordination without returning to the Erbil operations room<sup>(78)</sup>. The coalition also stepped up its air strikes to the point where ISIS appeared to be handing over re-

---

(76) YPG media and information officer in the Kurdistan region.

(77) Washington Post, Iraq, October 27, 2016.

(78) YPG Spokesman Rudor Khalil, Welat News, March 5, 2015.



gions without a fight, and in a short period of time, all the areas extended from Tel Hamis, south of Qamishli, until Al-Shaddadi, south of Hasakeh, were liberated.

Despite the US's denial of providing the Kurdish forces with weapons or equipment then, US arms entered as if they were coming from Iraqi Kurdistan through Faysh Khabur on the Tigris River. US officers also immediately began training Kurdish fighters in secret at Tall Baydar camp near Al-Darbasiyah on the M4 Highway, located 20 kilometers east of Tell Tamer, in February 2015. Months after assuming his position, former US Central Command Commander Lloyd Austin admitted in his testimony before a US Senate committee on September 15, 2015<sup>(79)</sup>, that a team of US special forces had been deployed on Syrian soil to assist the YPG in its fight against ISIS— even though when the airstrike operation against ISIS began, former US President Barack Obama said the US army did not take part in ground battles.

### **The establishment of the SDF and the kickoff of limitless support:**

Eleven days after Russia announced its military intervention in Syria to support the Assad regime, the formation of the SDF was announced on October 11, 2015. This coincided with the first round of airdrops provided by the international coalition to the YPG in Ain Issa, which included 50 tons of arms from a total of 120 tons there were sent eventually through Faysh Khabur with Iraqi Kurdistan.

The US pushed to present the SDF as a true representative of all Syrian factions, even though it was mostly nothing more than YPG units. Some Arab, Assyrian and Turkmen (which only included a few hundred fighters) factions were added to the SDF as a legitimate front so the US could provide the movement with support.

These factions really did work with the Kurdish forces, and were allied with them before the SDF's formation, which didn't see any new factions join the group. They were used for propaganda purposes by US funders, who were found later to have even come up with these factions' names<sup>(80)</sup>.

---

(79) "US Forces in Northern Syria... to support YPG against ISIS", Orient Net, NBC, September 16, 2015. <https://bit.ly/3gKyYcd>

(80) U.S. general told Syria's YPG: 'You have got to change your brand', Reuters, July 22, 2017. <https://reut.rs/30Ikzxx>





Despite US claims that it provided the Arab coalition with weapons, a report on US newspaper McClatchy<sup>(81)</sup> later revealed US lies with quotes from militia leader of Al-Sanadid Forces Bandar al-Humaydi and Raqqa Rebels (Thuwar al-Raqqa) leader Abu Issa that their forces never received any such assistance.

PYD leader Salih Muslim once admitted this in a comment to Firat News Agency before YPG spokesman Ridur Khalil asked him to not discuss areas outside of his authority as head of the party. A few days later, Jazira Canton Defense Minister Abdul Karim Saroukhan said the YPG and forces that were allied with it received arms from the international coalition. From that day forward, US aid didn't stop, reaching, according to Turkish statistics, more than 30,000 shipments<sup>(82)</sup> until Operation Peace Spring in October, 2019.

Four days after the SDF was formed, an American military delegation entered Syrian territories to study the possibility of establishing military bases, and a US operations room was indeed established in Tel Aads in Al-Malikiyah, but a month later it was moved to the Lahm Center in the oil-rich city of Rmelan.

After that, US military bases in Syria multiplied, reaching 22, including five in Hasakeh: in Rmelan, Alwazeer, Tell Beydar, Sabah Al-Khayr and Al-Shaddadi silos, four in Deir ez-Zor in al-Omar, Koniko, Al-Jafra and Al-Tank oil and gas fields, five in Al-Raqqa in Hawi Al-Hawa, Jazrah, Sugar Factory and Ayn Issa, five in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane in Aleppo in Ishq Ruins, Al-Sabt, Al-Jalabiya, Mashta Nour and Sarrin, and three in Manbij in Al-Saidiya, Al-Dadat and Al-Sawamea.

On December 8, 2015, the arrival of the first special forces team in Syria was announced. The team consisted of 50 fighters of local forces fighting ISIS<sup>(83)</sup>, and was said to have come to act as consultants and not actually engage in the fight. An additional 250 fighters were later added to the team in April, 2016, bringing the number of US soldiers in the area to 300 fighters.

---

(81) "Syrian Arab militias dispute they received U.S. airdrop of ammunition" by Roy Gutman, McClatchy, October 20, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2DPzarY>

(82) Erdogan: Turkey to launch military operation in northeastern Syria, DW, October 5, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-turkey-to-launch-military-operation-in-northeastern-syria/a-50709086>

(83) US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk, Face the Nation, CBS News, November 22, 2015.



It was also then that US forces began transforming the Abu Hajar (agricultural) airport, south of Rmelan, into a military airport. Construction continued at the airport until early 2016, and soon American hovercrafts began landing in it. It was there that unmanned spy planes were tested as US forces took over the airport, according to US Central Command Spokesman Colonel Patrick Ryder. During this period, the US also built a military base and airport in the Ishq Ruins village, located 50 kilometers south of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, which called for the purchase of tens of hectares of agricultural land. After that arms shipments flowed by air and land, and the number of American forces in Syria only went up.

### **Military cooperation only or was politics at play?**

Since the coalition was launched, the US insisted that its alliance with the YPG units was nothing more than a military cooperation, and not related to the political recognition of the autonomous regions, which were run by the PYD and its affiliated units. The YPG and the PYD repeated this same narrative, with the latter continuously stressing it was against dividing Syria, or establishing an independent Kurdish state.

In line with this, the US repeatedly refused to grant PYD head Salih Muslim a visa to enter its territories, or the party access to enter the Sinjar region in Iraq, again, considering the PYD a foreign terrorist organization<sup>(84)</sup>.

At a press conference on March 28, 2017, General Stephen Townsend, commander of the coalition forces in Iraq and Syria, told Salih Muslim, “I don’t expect the PYD to be able to build a Kurdish federal state in northern Syria.”<sup>(85)</sup> His comment came after Raqqa joined the Rojava federation following its liberation from ISIS. Townsend insisted that his mission was not to help establish a Kurdish federal state, and that his team was not liberating Raqqa as a favor to any one party<sup>(86)</sup>.

---

(84) Trump Administration Announces Attitude towards Presence of Kurdistan Workers in Sinjar, Rudaw Media Network, March 14, 2017.

(85) <https://bit.ly/3gLIIE7t>

(86) US commander sees no Kurdish federation in Syria’s future, Hurriyet Daily News, March 29, 2017 <https://bit.ly/2F1RL18>



Politics was at play though, as the PYD and the US's interests aligned; the former needing funding, arms, air cover and political support to escape Syrian and international isolation, and the latter needing ground forces to fight on its behalf. The party used this US support to consolidate its control from the northeastern region to Manbij, and began implementing its political agenda, which aimed to establish a Kurdish canton based on a geographical federal system that it argued was not nationalist.

“Democratic Self-Administration”, “Kurdistan Region”, and “Kurdish State” were all terms found in leaks and writings of which some were attributed to US leaders, confirming that politics were in fact at play between the two sides, or that it wasn't just a military cooperation.

Perhaps the oldest confirmation dates back to November 2014<sup>(87)</sup>, coming in the form of US thoughts about the “the Syrian crisis” over the last 30-40 years<sup>(88)</sup>. It included the need to safeguard US interests in the Middle Eastern country's oil, water and land resources, as well as the need for a stable and remote area away from terrorism— similar to areas controlled by the Kurdish units at the time.

This coincided with visits by western delegations to the Democratic Self-Administration, the most important of which was former French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's in November, 2014<sup>(89)</sup>, in which he expressed his admiration for the entity's fledgling self-management experience— and this was only a few months after it was established. Kouchner asked the Kurds to pledge to protect Christians in exchange for European support to establish an independent administration in Hasakeh, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor<sup>(90)</sup>, in what appeared to be an attempt to revive the separatist, self-rule project in Jazira<sup>(91)</sup>, which France had failed to achieve in the 1930's during its occupation of Syria.

---

(87) Information obtained by the author through private sources.

(88) These leaks were obtained before any US officials released any information on “the Syrian crisis.”

(89) Kouchner: Kurds have separated religion from politics, Rozana Radio, November 29, 2014. <https://bit.ly/31DHh3e>

(90) Kouchner visits Kurdish areas in Syria, Al-Mayadeen, December 1, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2CdiZUU>

(91) Barout, *The Making of Modern Syria*, page 451.



The Wall Street Journal published an article in November 2014 under the title: Kurds Fight Islamic State to Claim a Piece of Syria<sup>(92)</sup>.

Training moderate opposition groups was suspended in October 2015 and directed towards supporting Kurdish forces, represented in the SDF, amid suspicions that such a move implied the recognition of the Kurdish self-administration. Confirming these suspicions, PYD leader Salih Muslim had commented saying US support, which appeared to be of military nature, had a political twist to it, adding that the self-rule project is a nationalist Kurdish one<sup>(93)</sup>.

As US support continued and relations between it and the party deepened, both militarily and politically, the party's goals evolved from aiming to establish a temporary, interim self-administration<sup>(94)</sup> to handle people's affairs and ongoing interests, to demanding a federal state. This federal state would be based on the party's self-administration, in a step that would change the Middle East map through a plot woven by international powers who are working seriously on it in cooperation with ISIS, which eliminated the borders that were drawn in the era of Sykes-Picot. This (appears to be) what motivated the Kurds to take part in the new project<sup>(95)</sup> despite US officials repeating from the beginning that the war against ISIS would »not be an open campaign to build states or restructure the Middle East<sup>(96)</sup>.

In May 2015, senior party leaders said they obtained a recognition from European countries for the Self-Administration<sup>(97)</sup>, and less than two years they said they obtained the same from the US, or a “political recognition” as referred to by Aldar Khalil, leader in the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), in an

---

(92) Kurds Fight Islamic State to Claim a Piece of Syria, Wall Street Journal, November, 2014. <https://on.wsj.com/3isquqE>

(93) “Salih Muslim Explains Nature of Relationship with Americans and PYD”, Kurdistan 24, May 13, 2017. <https://bit.ly/31BsOF1>

(94) On January 14, 2014, the PYD announced the formation of the self-administration in Syria's Jazira region, and days later two similar entities were announced in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and Afrin.

(95) Salih Muslim: The Federation is the Future of the Middle East, As-Safir, March 5, 2015.

(96) Hard Truths in Syria by Brett McCurk, Foreign Affairs, May and June, 2019. <https://fam.ag/3f1tWz>

(97) PYD Representative Abdel Salam Mustafa, Zaman Al Wasl, May 7, 2015.



interview with Buyer Press. In the interview, Khalil confirmed the Kurds were seeking a recognition for the federal state<sup>(98)</sup> as an advance, but three months later he denied that the US had recognized the self-administration<sup>(99)</sup>.

Statements by Kurdish officials in the de facto authority interpreted US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk's visit to Ayn al-Arab/Kobane on January 29-30, 2016, as a political recognition of the Kurdish self-administration<sup>(100)</sup>, especially as the visit saw discussions on developing the entity in the three provinces. Similarly, late American Senator John McCain's visit to Ayn al-Arab/Kobane in February 2017 was interpreted as a Western openness to the federation project.

When opportunities seemed wide before the Kurdistan region, the SDF prepared itself, and on March 17, 2016, the Rojava Federation was announced. Commenting on the announcement, former President of the Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani said, "The Turkish government should be well aware it will witness another Kurdish region nearby."<sup>(101)</sup>

As preparations for the battle to liberate Raqqa from ISIS ensued, leaks began emerging about another version of a federal region that would extend from the east of the Euphrates on the Turkish-Iraqi border to the Jordanian border, and the importance of the oil and gas resources in Deir ez-Zor, which the international coalition didn't want to give up<sup>(102)</sup>. The leaks pushed the SDF to respond quickly to the new developments by eliminating the word "Rojava" from the feder-

---

(98) "Aldar Khalil: What's happening is dangerous ... We don't want escalation to this extent or in this form", Buyer Press, issue 61, March 15, 2017.

(99) "Kurdish leader: US didn't recognize the self Administration and Ford is a failure", Elaph, June 19, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2PBEVw2>

(100) Sihanouk Dibo: US Envoy's visit to west Kurdistan is tantamount to recognition of Self-Administration, Welat News, February 3, 2016.

(101) Reuters, June 22, 2016.

(102) The international coalition is about to form a "unified region" in Syria, that extends from the Turkish-Iraqi border to the Jordanian border, Basnews, June 4, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3irMx0s>



ation's name based on instructions from the Qandil leadership<sup>(103)</sup>, replacing it with “North and Northeast Syria” and finally “Northern Syria”.

These previous adjustments imply there were informal pledges or agreements, and confirm what has been leaked, which is also in line with a Washington Post report that revealed plans by the US government to establish a local administration in northern Syria to avoid regime forces retrieving regions that had been under PYD control after withdrawing its forces<sup>(104)</sup>.

Regardless of how accurate the interpretations or misleading statements made by Kurdish officials were, they at least reveal their ambitions, or the real goal they were working towards.

The prospect of a Kurdish state was indeed present. Perhaps the only US official who was reported to have shown support for the PYD and YPG's political project was Brett McGurk. In February 2016, the US official was reported to have told members of the self-administration in Jazira and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane that it's their right to establish a self-administration<sup>(105)</sup>. He was also reported in June 2017 to have expressed US support for the federal state solution<sup>(106)</sup>.

McGurk's statements were neither one of a kind nor irresponsible though, and the interpretations of Kurdish leaders weren't exactly wrong; they did receive such promises— in the case of the failure of the Geneva negotiations where the option of a small Kurdish state in northeastern Syria was also on the table alongside the other option, which included the partial return of the services of the Syrian regime to the regions controlled by the SDF through an agreement between the two sides,

---

(103) PYD Foreign Minister: Turkey's coup will reoccur and the term “Rojava Federation” is wrong, As Safir, July 26, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3kye566>

(104) “Reports say it will not withdraw its forces and plan to establish a local administration for the Kurds ... contrary to its claims ... the US says it has 2,000 soldiers in Syria”, Al Watan, November 26, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3krNDey>

(105) “Obama's representative visits Kurdish areas in northern Syria, Russia Today, February 2, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2DNjeqc>

(106) “US Envoy to Syria Brett McCurk: We support a federal solution in northern Syria,” Rojava News, June 24, 2017. <https://bit.ly/31zGgt2>



in an alternative scenario where the US would negotiate directly with Russia<sup>(107)</sup>.

The possibility of the PYD establishing a Kurdish state in northern Syria was also mentioned in a study by James Jeffrey<sup>(108)</sup>, who later became the US special envoy to Syria, that was published in the Washington Post in May, 2015.

## What happened after President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria?

US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria in December, 2018, came as a surprise, disappointing the PYD and the SDF. This coincided with James Jeffrey taking his position as the new envoy and reestablishing his country's original position on Syria, which included seeing the SDF as a military partner only, and disregarding any joint political agendas, especially that of the SDF<sup>(109)</sup>. A few days later, a reaffirmation of the US's official position came represented in ending its military operations in Syria without making any changes to the country's borders, pointing to links between the YPG and the PKK<sup>(110)</sup>, and citing Turkish concerns<sup>(111)</sup>.

This prompted comment from Hussein Omar, prominent media personality and Future Syria Party<sup>(112)</sup> representative that there weren't going to be new maps for the region, and that there weren't any intention amongst world powers, starting with the US, to make changes for the people's interest. "Maps will not be dismantled for the Kurds, Amazighs or Palestinians, they will remain the same; because

---

(107) "Brett McCurk: After the US's withdrawal... how will Washington protect its allies and achieve its goals?" Foreign Affairs, NLKA, April 17, 2019. <https://bit.ly/31Ao961>

(108) Report on all4syria.info on May 12, 2015.

(109) "The US: We didn't offer the Kurds in Syria in political future", Russia Today, May 22, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3isqXsU>

(110) "Envoy: Washington Knows PKK-YPG ties", Hurriyet Daily News, May 23, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2XLeeTk>

(111) "The US vows only political solution in Syria", Hurriyet Daily News, June 6, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3fGO80F>

(112) The PYD established the Future Syria Party in March 2018 under an Arab cover but with many of its members.



the formation of nation states, in the era of globalization and vicious capitalism, is history.”<sup>(113)</sup>

Then came the visit of US foreign and defense delegations to Deir ez-Zor in July 2019, in which James Jeffrey said forces would remain until the elimination of ISIS, the exit of all foreign forces from Syria, and the guarantee of a political solution that satisfies all parties in Syria. The visit coincided with the return of US foreign representatives to Syria after having withdrawn following Trump’s decision<sup>(114)</sup>. All of this revived hopes amongst the PYD to install the pillars of its aspired to self-administration and establish a strong infrastructure whilst deterring any aggression on the entity from the south or north. Omar had commented that this was the most important part about the delegations’ visit because it showed the US’s position on staying in Syria has been decided, and that it would never withdraw its forces at this point.

In spite of the promises that the US gave to the self-administration that it would keep its forces in Syria— which were confirmed by Ilham Ehmed<sup>(115)</sup>, head of the executive board to the Syrian Democratic Council, and SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazoum Abdi<sup>(116)</sup>— the US did withdraw two days before Operation Peace Spring on October 9, west of the eastern side of the Euphrates to the western borders of the city of Qamishli, leaving the region at the mercy of Turkish-Russian negotiations. After a Russian-Turkish agreement though on October 22, the US re-deployed its forces east of the Euphrates, around the oil wells extending from Rmelan in Hasakeh to the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor, in a move that Abdi described as betrayal or stab in the back and Ehmed described as a failure to keep promises.

---

(113) “New East Maps and Old West Intentions” by Hussein Omar, Future Syria Party website, July, 2019. <http://fs-party.com/?p=10562>

(114) “Today’s talk: US delegation meets self-administration and civilian officials in Deir ez-Zor ... what are the visit’s details and goals?” Al Yaum TV, July 11, 2019.

(115) “Ilham Ehmed: We are seeking an official recognition of the Self-Administration”, PYD official website, November 11, 2019. <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/56113>

(116) “Mazloum Abdi: We have 110,000 fighters ... and we will hold onto the structure of our forces in the future Syrian army”, Asharq Al-Awsat, December 17, 2019. <https://bit.ly/31vxVWY>





The SDF's new role then evolved to preventing ISIS from returning and protecting the oil fields in light of new American pledges that included staying in the region indefinitely<sup>(117)</sup> and protecting their forces from any potential attacks<sup>(118)</sup>.

Given the economic entanglements relating to the US's share in Syrian oil, as well as those of the SDF and the regime, and what's being reported on the US's intention to maintain oil wells with the help of foreign companies, it can be said that the world power's stay in the region is long-term and that it's not going anywhere until it receives some concessions from Syria and Russia, including the legitimization of American bases in northern and eastern Syria.

### **Linking east and west of the Euphrates:**

With the announcement of the formation of the SDF, which was backed by the international coalition east of the Euphrates and Russian air force in the west, the YPG units moved to control the area extended from Jarablus to Azaz, aiming to link its areas of control in the east to its areas of control in Afrin in the west. It did so in order to put almost the entire border strip with Turkey under its rule, a matter that Turkey had warned of at the time, considering the launch from the Iraqi border towards coastal areas overlooking the Mediterranean a serious mistake<sup>(119)</sup>.

With support from US air force and other international coalition countries, the attempt to link the two areas was repeated by Kurdish units in their efforts to remove ISIS fighters from Kurdish communities near the borders with Turkey, the region in which they hoped to establish a canton or a Kurdish state<sup>(120)</sup>. The US was silent when Pentagon-backed Kurdish forces attacked CIA-backed opposi-

---

(117) "Ilham Ehmed: We are seeking an official recognition of the Self-Administration", PYD official website, November 11, 2019. <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/56113>

(118) "Mazloum Abdi: We have 110,000 fighters ... and we will hold onto the structure of our forces in the future Syrian army", Asharq Al-Awsat, December 17, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2PEOFFR>

(119) "Turkey warns Russians and Americans ... Kurds crossover towards the Mediterranean is something serious", Zaman Al Wael, October 13, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2DNyhjF>

(120) "British newspaper reveals details of the Kurds 'betrayal of Syrian revolutionaries'", Islamstory, February 24, 2016.



tion forces in an attempt to seize control over new territories in Marea and Tall Rifat to reach Afrin.

In light of this, the SDF also entered Manbij, west of the Euphrates, in July 2016, in spite of US warnings, threats it would suspend its support, and demands to withdraw from east of the Euphrates, which have not been answered to this day.

### **What does the PYD want?**

With the absence of a pure Kurdish region, and in light of the demographic nature of Syrians who are spread and intertwined in Kurdish, Arab and Christian neighborhoods in the northern part of the country, which makes it impossible to establish a Kurdish region, the PYD's goal has been to preserve its authority. It does so by demanding autonomy or self-administration as it continues to push for its political agenda, which it argues the 2017 referendum results showed support for<sup>(121)</sup>. The formation of the Rojava Federation or the Northern Syria Federation, however, was only an attempt to raise the ceiling of negotiations to achieve the greatest gain possible.

Likewise, the willingness<sup>(122)</sup> shown by the Northern Syria Federation's executive committee to negotiate with the regime confirms this direction, as it came following statements made by the Syrian Foreign Minister who spoke of the possibility of discussing the Kurdish demand to form some kind of self-administration<sup>(123)</sup>, a move PYD leader Shahuz Hassan described as positive<sup>(124)</sup>.

Related to this is the position of the Syrian Representative to the UN Bashar Jaafari in which he refused to recognize any part of the self-administration at the Astana 2014 talks as shown in the concluding statement of the conference. His

---

(121) "After 93% results: SDF confirms Kurdistan referendum 'supports self-administration of Kurdish Syrians,'" Al7I, September 27, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3acYgXh>

(122) <https://bit.ly/3aolIPn>

(123) <https://bit.ly/3isrrPK>

(124) <https://bit.ly/2XP8Wx4>



position was in line with the objection of Turkey, Russia and Iran to what they described as attempts to establish new facts on the ground including illegal self-governments under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

Ilham Ehmed, head of the Syrian Democratic Council's executive board, had said the Kurds were hoping to extract an official recognition of a self-administration that's backed by the constitution, in addition to joining the Geneva negotiations<sup>(125)</sup>. SDF leader Mazloum Abdi had reiterated this position by saying the region is in need for a political administration, with "political" being the key part of the demand<sup>(126)</sup>.

### **The US's role in negotiations between the regime and the Kurdish self-administration:**

The status of negotiations between the regime and the PYD was linked to the US's presence in Syria. In July 2018, the party conducted two rounds of negotiations under the possibility of a US withdrawal. The negotiations were suspended in light of leaks that suggested the US would likely remain in the region, which included a statement by US Defense Secretary James Mattis from June 2018, in which he said: "As the operations ultimately draw to a close, we must avoid leaving a vacuum in Syria that can be exploited by the Assad regime or its supporters."<sup>(127)</sup>

Another leak from the Helsinki summit saw Trump confirming to his Russian counterpart that the US would remain in Syria until Iran pulled out its forces, according to a report on The Times from July 27, 2018<sup>(128)</sup>. The Times quoted US National Security Adviser John Bolton as telling ABC News that American forc-

---

(125) "Ilham Ehmed: We are seeking an official recognition of the Self-Administration", PYD official website, November 11, 2019. <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/56113>

(126) "Mazloum Abdi: We have 110,000 fighters ... and we will hold onto the structure of our forces in the future Syrian army", Asharq Al-Awsat, December 17, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3ag5HUq>

(127) "The Future of Eastern Syria and the Israeli Interest", The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, August 13, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3kuqzMf>

(128) Ibid as above.



es will remain “as long as the Iranian menace continues throughout the Middle East.”<sup>(129)</sup>

Another leak revealed the US’s intention to establish a no-fly zone in Syria through the deployment of three advanced radar systems in Tell Beydar, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and Sarrin, and 13 portable and stationary radar systems for surveillance<sup>(130)</sup> in what appears to be a long-term vision in Syria. A self-administration official summarized the matter by saying, “The US’s dedication to staying in northeastern Syria will force the Syrian government to seriously negotiate with the Kurds, and take steps in this direction.”<sup>(131)</sup> Syrian newspaper Al Watan described this as using the US occupation to empower itself<sup>(132)</sup>; negotiations returned after the US’s withdrawal in October and stopped as soon as the Americans came back.

### **Turkey’s central position:**

From the start, Turkey was opposed to the idea of the YPG joining the fight with the international coalition, preferring that the FSA fight ISIS and the Assad regime simultaneously, a move the US objected to, leading to the exclusion of both Turkey and the FSA from the coalition. When ISIS withdrew, however, from areas previously seized by the FSA, leaving the border strip with Turkey to the Kurdish forces they had been fighting, Turkey decided to join the fight against terrorism. On July 14, 2015, Turkey agreed that the international coalition use its Incirlik military base to launch air strikes on ISIS and sent tanks across the border to chase down PKK fighters who were using their Washington-based support to gain territory ahead of declaring an independent state to achieve the Kurdish

---

(129) Ibid as above.

(130) “Turkish newspaper: Washington establishes a no-fly zone in Syria,” PYD official website, August 29, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2XLccli>

(131) “Abdel Salam Ahmed: The US’s stay will force the regime to make concessions and seriously negotiate,” Kurdistan 24, August 26, 2018.

(132) “PYD is using the US occupation to empower itself: Its stay is a pressure tool on the regime,” Al Watan, August 28.



ream<sup>(133)</sup>— which is what ended up happening with an American green light according to PYD leader Salih Muslim.

In April 2017, Turkey launched air bombs on PYD militants in Sinjar in Iraq and Al-Malikiyah in northern Syria, a few days after President Donald Trump pledged cooperation with the Turks to fight the Kurdish party. Trump's pledge came as he congratulated the Turkish president for his victory in a referendum for constitutional amendments<sup>(134)</sup>, which the international coalition took no position on. The PYD deemed Trump's vow disappointing.

Meanwhile, the US turned a blind eye to the handover of the SDF's Manbij military council, located in villages west of Manbij, to the Syrian regime in March 2017, calling on all parties to focus on the war against ISIS. Also, despite Turkish attempts to prevent the US from relying on the SDF in liberating Raqqa in 2017, the group was chosen as the only party to carry out the task.

More than that, the US prevented Turkey from storming Manbij, deploying forces alongside the separation line between the regime and Turkish forces as a payback for its fight against ISIS, and to quench its fears, it granted it safe spots in Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abyad.

### **Why the US relied on the SDF:**

The first reason the US suspended its support for the Syrian opposition, directing it towards the YPG units, is because it wished to avoid a proxy war with Russia for protecting the Syrian opposition<sup>(135)</sup>. This implies the US was fully aware of the YPG's alliance with the Syrian regime, which meant Russia wouldn't bomb the Kurdish forces.

---

(133) "The Guardian: In Syria's Struggle, every party is fighting its own battle." Martin Chulov, The Guardian, BBC, September 3, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2XLeCii>

(134) "Trump vows cooperation to Erdogan to fight the PYD", AlJazeera, April 18, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2XLeCii>

(135) "US studying offering new support to Syrian opposition fighters against ISIS", Reuters, October 3, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2XLeCii>



The YPG units weren't at all the best fighters amongst the opposition factions who would've done a better job if they had received the support the former did, as argued by former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford<sup>(136)</sup>— if it wasn't for the international coalition forces, the Kurdish fighters wouldn't have been able to expel ISIS. “Without the international coalition, ISIS would've reached Qamishli,”<sup>(137)</sup> one fighter in the Sanadid militia that's affiliated with the SDF was quoted as saying.

The US was looking for an ally on the ground that's ready to only fight ISIS, without any restrictions or conditions, while the PYD was looking to escape the political isolation it had fallen into years before the Syrian revolution erupted, and so was willing to serve American interests or any other interests; Russian, Iranian or those of the Syrian regime, to achieve that. The party aligned with the US despite PYD literature and writings by party leader Öcalan laying out every negative aspect about the western country, including accusing it of aiding Turkey to detain him.

On the other hand, the US preferred not to coordinate with the FSA in its war against ISIS because the latter insisted on fighting the Assad regime simultaneously considering them two sides of the same coin of terrorism, whereas the PYD had its own project and didn't see toppling the Assad regime as one of its priorities, which was in line with US policy.

Unlike the FSA factions, the Kurdish forces had one leadership that could direct them and that was listened to. Also, the PYD, which represented these political forces, presented itself as a secular party whereas FSA factions were seen as Islamist, a matter the US didn't find favorable.

---

(136) Robert Ford's interview with Asharq Al-Awsat on November.

(137) “Kurds Can't Be Syria's Saviors,” by Hassan Hassan and Bassam Barabandi, *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2015. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/18/kurds-cant-be-syrias-saviors/>



## Notes and outcomes:

Observers of US-PYD relations will see paradoxes that must be noted, lessons that can be learned from, and situations that must be studied carefully:

Firstly: These relations didn't erupt spontaneously, or weren't brought about arbitrarily in light of the circumstances of the war against ISIS, they rather dated back many years, starting in 2003 at least during the occupation of Iraq. The relationship was likely not direct either, but took place through the Israeli Mossad, which enjoyed presence in the Qandil Mountains from at least that date— this isn't an analysis, it's based on information that's a result of monitoring done by security services in Syria before the revolution.

Secondly: The FSA's exclusion from the international coalition to fight terrorism was inevitable even if it had agreed to US conditions, and the opposition training program and its failure weren't more than an excuse to justify this exclusion later, and here's why:

- . The international coalition against ISIS included the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Peshmerga Syrians living in the Kurdistan region, and the YPG units, all without training, but required the FSA to undergo a long-term moderate opposition training program.

- . The training of specialists from YPG units took place at camps in Syria's Jazira region, including in Tall Baydar as mentioned earlier, whereas the moderate opposition training program took place outside of Syria.

- . The training of YPG units in Tall Baydar was launched in secret in parallel with the moderate opposition training program in February 2015, or possibly earlier.

- . The number of people that attended the moderate opposition training program was too small and insignificant in the short to medium term to form an army to confront the threats of ISIS; it only produced tens of fighters within three months and its three-year duration was relatively long.



. The coalition could've taken in former Syrian army fighters, who are professional officers and soldiers that graduated from military colleges and schools and didn't need new training, but chose not to.

. The US agreed later that Arab factions from the FSA join the SDF without any training programs.

. The practical joining of the Syrian army forces to the international coalition against ISIS under Russian leadership based on the Akershi Agreement that was signed between the SDF and the regime on June 20, 2017, in the Akershi village, south of Raqqa.

Thirdly: The divisions in the FSA and the lack of a single field command allowed factions, which were seen as affiliated with it if just in theory, to form a joint operations room with YPG units, a move that granted them cover that justified their joining of the international coalition.

Fourthly: The joining of smaller factions such as Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa and Liwa al-Tahrir in unequal agreements with a faction that outnumbered them in terms of number and size like the YPG units was a fatal mistake. The latter swallowed these factions, getting rid of their leaders later and integrating them into its forces, disregarding their unique characteristics if just on paper. The YPG basically used these smaller factions to gain legitimacy and dumped them later when it no longer found them useful.

Fifthly: The US's claims that there isn't any politics involved in its relationship with the YPG units and the PYD weren't far off, as it's now asking the Syrian regime for a political agreement with the YPG, who is demanding a central political administration in exchange for allowing the regime back in SDF-controlled areas. This implies the US liberated these areas in favor of the PYD, putting all of the region's political, economic and administrative keys in its hands.

Sixthly: Talks about an independent administration in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hasakeh, east of the Euphrates, took place in November 2014, or two months only after ISIS seized control over Deir ez-Zor, expelling FSA factions from it, and 11 months before the formation of the SDF— before it was known who would liberate the area from ISIS, another proof that the exclusion of the FSA, and dividing Syria, was a single integrated plan prepared a long time ago.





## CHAPTER IV: THE DEMOGRAPHIS STATUS OF EAST OF THE EUPHRATES

### **The national and religious distribution of the population of east of the Euphrates:**

This study focuses on the east of the Euphrates region, which is currently under SDF-control, and includes all of the Hasakeh province<sup>(138)</sup>, as well as the northern part of the Euphrates River from the Deir ez-Zor province, and north of the river from the Raqqa province<sup>(139)</sup>, in addition to the Tabqah area, south of the river, and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, east of the river from Aleppo.

Deir ez-Zor's population belongs fully to the Arab nationalist mentality, whether they live outside or inside the east of the Euphrates area. Raqqa's population is similar, except for the small minority of Kurds living in either the city or the Tell Abyad area that accounts for 2% maximum of the total population.

Hasakeh is more mixed, nationally and religiously, as it includes Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, and in terms of sects, the Sunni doctrine prevails between Arabs and Kurds.

The Kurds are mainly spread out on the border strip, which runs from the Iraqi border along the Turkish border, while the Arabs are spread out throughout the province from north to south. The Christians, however, are mostly concentrated in four areas, which are Hasakeh, Qamishli, Al-Malikiyah and Tall Tamr, but I'll come back to that in more detail later.

---

(138) In October 2019, the SDF seized control over Ras al-Ayn district with the help of the Turkish army.

(139) In October 2019, the SDF seized control over Tell Abyad district with the help of the Turkish army.



## Hasakeh province:

I mainly relied in our population estimates on a study conducted in June 2012 by the Syrian National Assembly of Arab Youth's Studies and Research Center. Arab, Kurdish and Assyrian youths worked on the study. I believe this study's results are the closest to reality, based on my long service in the province, but also there aren't any other field studies on the topic that I could've used.

With regard to estimating the population of the regions and districts in 2010, I will rely on the results of a 2004 field survey, in addition to population increase estimates based on the annual population growth rate in the Hasakeh province<sup>(140)</sup> defined by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

### 1. Hasakeh district:

Hasakeh district center: Includes the center of the Hasakeh province whose city and countryside populations combined were estimated in 2010 at 294,591 people, of whom 13.5% were Kurdish. This estimate includes:

Al-Hawl district: Located 25 kilometers southeast of Hasakeh, close to the Iraqi border, and operates under the Hasakeh center administration. Its population was estimated in 2010 at 17,237 people, of whom none were Kurdish.

Tal Barak district "Bir al-Helou al-Wardiya": Located midway between Qamishli and Hasakeh, and belongs to the latter administratively. Its population was estimated in 2010 at 46,883 people, of whom Kurds made up 4.4%.

### 2. Al-Malikiyah district:

Al-Malikiyah district center: Al-Malikiyah is located on the Tigris River, at the meeting point between the Syrian and the Iraqi borders, in what is known as the "duckbill". Al-Malikiyah district center's population was estimated in 2010 at 127,645 people, of whom Kurds made up 72%.

---

(140) The Central Bureau for Statistics determined the the annual population increase rate in Hasakeh from 2000 to 2010 at 24.6 per 1,000.



Al-Jawadiya subdistrict: Located in the western part of Al-Malikiyah on the Turkish border, and belongs to it administratively. Its population, in the city and countryside combined, was estimated in 2010 at 46,685 people, of whom Kurds made up the majority of approximately 59%.

Al-Ya'rubiyah subdistrict: Belongs administratively to the Al-Malikiyah district, and is located in its south along the Iraqi border. Its population was estimated in 2010 at 45,069 people, of whom Kurds made up 5%.

### 3. Qamishli district:

Qamishli district center: Located on the border directly, facing the Turkish city of Nusaybin, and includes the Qamishli district center whose population, in the city and the countryside, was estimated in 2010 at 268,717 people, of whom Kurds made up 39%, living in the western and southern neighborhoods.

Al-Qahtaniyah subdistrict: Located 25 kilometers east of Qamishli on the Turkish border, and its population was estimated in 2010 at 75,995 people, of whom Kurds made up 31%.

Amuda subdistrict: Located west of the Turkish border, 25 kilometers of Qamishli, and its population was estimated in 2012 at 64,796 people, of whom Kurds made up 90%.

Yarmouk "Jazzah"<sup>(141)</sup> and Tel Hamis subdistricts: Located 35 kilometers southeast of Qamishli on the Iraqi border to the south of the Al-Ya'rubiyah subdistrict. Their population was estimated in 2010 at 69,419, of whom Kurds made up 8%.

### 4. Ras Al-Ayn district:

Ras Al-Ayn district center: Located on the Turkish border, and includes the region's command center. Its population, in the city and countryside combined, was estimated in 2010 at 121,708 people, of whom Kurds made up 8.4%.

---

(141) Yarmouk subdistrict was created in 2010. Before that it was part of the Tel Hamees subdistrict— this is why its population was accounted for in the total population of Tel Hamees.



Tall Tamr subdistrict: Located at the entrance of the Hasakeh province from the west, on the M4 Aleppo-Baghdad road, and its population was estimated in 2012 at 58,679 people, of whom 3.6% were Kurdish.

Al-Darabasiyah subdistrict: Located on the Turkish border, 40 kilometers east of Ras Al-Ayn, and its population was estimated in 2012 at 64,145 people, of whom Kurds made up 65%.

#### 5. Al-Shaddadi district:

Al-Shaddadi district center: Located on the Deir ez-Zor road, 50 kilometers south of Hasakeh, and extends to the Iraqi border. Its population was estimated in 2010 at 68,163 people, of whom none were Kurdish.

Markada subdistrict: Located south of Al-Shaddadi district on the Iraqi border before Deir ez-Zor, and its population was estimated in 2010 at 40,198, of whom none were Kurds.

Al-Aresha subdistrict: Located northwest of Al-Shaddadi, and its population was estimated in 2010 at 35,338 people, of whom none were Kurds.

#### 6. Non-citizen Kurds:

On April 7, 2011, a legislative decree was issued to grant non-citizen Kurds in Hasakeh citizenship. On March 20, 2012, Deputy Interior Minister for Civil Affairs Brigadier Hassan Jalali, announced that the number of those who have made requests for citizenship stood at 105,631 people<sup>(142)</sup>, meaning the number of Kurds in the province had increased by that number.

#### Yazidis:

The Yazidi community, which speaks Kurdish, is spread out in the countryside of Hasakeh, Ras Al-Ayn, Al-Qahtaniyah, Amuda and Al-Darabasiyah. Its population was estimated in 2010 at 10,000 people, according to local sources. Today there are only about 1,000 Yazidis in Syria as the rest have migrated to Europe.

---

(142) "Interior Ministry: Individual restrictions will continue to be granted to those who wish to run for the People's Assembly every day until 6:00 pm," The People's Assembly website, March 20, 2012. <https://bit.ly/2XLcEli>



The number of Kurds in Hasakeh was estimated in 2010 at 410,621 people, but comes to 516,252 when the non-citizen Kurds mentioned above are included, out of the province's total population of 1,475,269 people, or 34.99%, regardless of the ongoing migration to Europe from 2005 to 2010.

Aleppo province:

Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district: It's the only district in Aleppo that falls east of the Euphrates River, and includes the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district center and the subdistricts of Sarrin and Shuyukh. The district is under the control of the SDF.

Ayn al-Arab/Kobane city center: Residents refer to it as "Kobani", and it's located on the Turkish border and includes the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district center and 69 villages. Its population was estimated in 2004 at 78,130 people, and thus could be estimated in 2010 at 91,565 people, the majority of whom are Kurds, who make up 95%.

Shuyukh subdistrict: Located to the southwest of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and includes 19 villages. Its population was estimated in 2004 at 43,861 people, and thus could be estimated in 2010 at 51,403 people, of whom Kurds make up 47%, according to IDENTICAL local estimates. The YPG have forced Arabs out of Shuyukh for four years under the excuse they sympathize with ISIS.

Sarrin district: Located to the south of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and includes 111 villages. Its population was estimated in 2004 at 70,522 people, and thus could be estimated in 2010 at 82,649 people, of whom Kurds make up 27%, according to boycotted local sources.

Thus, the size of the Kurdish community in the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district could be estimated at 59%, or 133,489 people in 2010.

### **East of the Euphrates population:**

East of the Euphrates population according to official estimates from the Central Bureau of Statistics:



Syria's population, according to the last census conducted in 2004 by the Central Bureau of Statistics, was 17,920,844 people. The same census estimated Hasakeh's population at 1,275,118 people, Deir ez-Zor's at 1,004,747, Raqqa's at 793,514 and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district's in Aleppo at 192,000<sup>(143)</sup>.

According to civil status registry<sup>(144)</sup>, Syria's population was estimated in 2010 at 23,695,000 people, whereas Hasakeh's was estimated at 1,540,000, Deir ez-Zor's at 1,623,000 and Raqqa's at 966,000.

It's important to note here to non-specialists the difference between a statistic or an estimate of a population that is actually present in a certain area and an estimate of the population according to civil status records. The former includes residents who are actually present in Syria at a certain time, whether they hold Syrian nationality, other nationalities or none at all, while the latter (according to the civil status records) reflects the number of those who hold Syrian citizenship only, whether they reside in Syria or not.

According to estimates of the Central Bureau of Statistics<sup>(145)</sup>, the number of residents in Syria in 2010 was 20,866,000 people, while 1,477,000 people resided in Hasakeh, 1,202,000 in Deir ez-Zor, and 921,000 in Raqqa.

Taking into account the annual population growth rate of Aleppo<sup>(146)</sup>, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane's population could be estimated in 2010 at 225,000 people— which is the number I will rely on in this study due to the lack of official statistical estimates.

Since almost half of Deir ez-Zor province falls north of the Euphrates River, and includes the districts of Al-Busayrah, Al-Kasrah, Kusham, Sour, Hajin, Al-Susah

---

(143) Population and housing census results of 2004 in provinces, the Central Bureau of Statistics <http://cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-moh.pdf>

(144) The Central Bureau of Statistics on January 1, 2010 <http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2010/Data-Chapter2/TAB-1-2-2010.htm>

(145) Estimation of the present population in Syria by province on December 31, 2010, the Central Bureau of Statistics <http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2010/Data-Chapter2/TAB-1-2-2010.htm>

(146) The Central Bureau of Statistics estimates Aleppo's annual population increase rate at 26,8 per 1,000 <http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2010/Data-Chapter2/TAB-6-2-2010.htm>



and Diban, whose population added up to in 2004 an estimate of 378,667 people<sup>(147)</sup>, it could be estimated that by 2010, the collective population of these districts was at 458,506<sup>(148)</sup>, making up 45.85% of the total Deir ez-Zor population.

The province of Raqqa includes Raqqa city and Tell Abyad district north of the Euphrates, while Al-Tabqa district, despite its location south of the river, is under the control of the SDF, whereas the districts of Maadan<sup>(149)</sup> and Sabkhat al-Jabbul<sup>(150)</sup>, south of the Euphrates River, are under the control of regime forces. Thus, we can argue that the population of Raqqa to the north of the Euphrates (under the SDF) is 823,125 people, according to estimates by the Central Bureau for Statistics from 2010, and make up 89.37% of Raqqa's total population.

Since all of the Hasakeh province is located east of the Euphrates, we can argue that the total population of east of the Euphrates can be calculated using the total population of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, and a portion of the populations of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, located north of the Euphrates, according to 2010 estimates from the Central Bureau for Statistics.

### **The real population of east of the Euphrates in 2010:**

A study conducted by Jamal Karsli and Talal Jasem<sup>(151)</sup>, based on several economic and population indicators, indicates that the number of Syrians who were actually residing in the country in 2010 was 20,590,000 people, with 820,000

---

(147) According to the 2004 census.

(148) The annual population increase rate is 32,4 per 1,000 in Deir ez-Zor, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics.

(149) Estimation of the population of the Maadan district at 42,652 in 2004, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics <http://cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf>

(150) Estimation of the population of the Sabkhat al-Jabbul district at 48,106 in 2004, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics <http://cbssyr.sy/General%20census/census%202004/pop-man.pdf>

(151) Syria Between War and Painful Peace by Jamal Karsli and Talal Jasem, page 51.



people in Hasakeh, 820,000 in Deir ez-Zor<sup>(152)</sup>, and 615,000 in Raqqa<sup>(153)</sup>, due to internal and external migration—Arabs migrate to the Gulf, Lebanon, and Libya for work, and Kurds to Germany and Sweden, and Christians mostly to the US, Sweden, Canada and Australia.

Based on the previous figures, we can argue that the real number of residents in east of the Euphrates in 2010 was 1,970,595<sup>(154)</sup>. Furthermore, based on the previous figures and annual population growth rates, and regardless of the circumstances of war and immigration, we can argue that 696,720 of them reside in Raqqa, 285,466 in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, 610,909 in Deir ez-Zor, and 1,020,476 in Hasakeh.

### **Displaced Syrians in the Kurdistan region:**

Latest UN statistics indicate that the number of Syrian refugees in Iraq was 245,810 at the end of 2019<sup>(155)</sup>, mostly residing in Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and we believe that 184,000 refugees, or 75% of the total number at least, are displaced Kurds from Hasakeh and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane east of the Euphrates, in light of the national ties and geographic ease compared to the Turkish border, which was shut after the announcement of the PYD's self-administration in January, 2014.

### **Current population of east of the Euphrates:**

The current population of north of the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor is estimated at 400,000 people, according to verifiable local sources, making up 65% of the

---

(152) 45.85% are present in east of the Euphrates.

(153) 89.37% are present in the east of the Euphrates.

(154) Due to the absence of estimates of the number of residents actually residing in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, we have taken into account the total number of people residing in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane in 2010.

(155) <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5>





theoretical population figure mentioned above, while the rest is distributed between internal displacement, external migration and losses due to the war and ISIS. Some are also detained by the SDF in Al-Hawl camp or others.

In Raqqa province, the current population currently present in east of the Euphrates is estimated at 557,376 people, making up approximately 80% of the assumed population, while 20% fled or has been displaced because of ISIS, or later the PYD-affiliated YPG units, who are still detaining thousands in Al-Hawl camp and others.

Estimates of Hasakeh province, on the other hand, vary between cities and regions, based on the communities that reside in it; in Qamishli, Amuda, Al-Darbasiyah and Al-Malikiyah, the size of Kurdish immigrants was estimated at 33%, which is a big ratio, as tens of villages have been evacuated and the percentage of youths slid dramatically<sup>(156)</sup>. Thus, the number of Kurdish immigrants from Hasakeh could be estimated at 118,902, while the number of those who still reside there is 238,162, making up 67% of the supposed total population of Kurds.

As for the migration of Arabs, it was only clear in three areas: Geweran neighborhood in Hasakeh because of the regime, the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district, and the southeastern countryside of Qamishli, especially the Tel Hamis and Yarmouk subdistricts because of ISIS and the YPG, who set ablaze tens of villages, displacing thousands of residents of whom some have returned later while others fled to Turkey or European countries. In general, the number of immigrants has been estimated at 66,341 people, of whom 10% are Arabs.

Thus, the number of immigrants from Hasakeh could be estimated at 185,243, making up 18.2% of the supposed total population of the province in 2019, while the real population is estimated at 835,233, making up 81.8%.

As for Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, most of its residents were displaced during ISIS's attack in 2014, but half of them returned later, according to local sources. After expelling ISIS, the YPG units also expelled all the residents of the Shuyukh subdistrict center who were mostly Arab. The number of displaced persons and immigrants is estimated at 99,913, making up 35% of the district population. 60% among them were.

---

(156) An elder in one of the villages said: "We can't find enough youths to bury the dead, only elders are left."



The estimated total population of displaced Kurds and migrants from Hasakeh and Ayn al-Arab/Kobane is 177,850 people, slightly less than the estimated number of Kurdish refugees in Kurdistan region<sup>(157)</sup>. The number of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region had previously reached 300,000 people, but has since gone down due to the ongoing immigration to Europe without return to Syria.

The population of east of the Euphrates can hence be estimated at the present time at 1,978,161 people, of whom the Kurds constitute 358,784 people, or 18.13% of the total population, which is a much higher number than that announced by Commander Stephen Townsend on March 28, 2017. Townsend then said Kurds only made up 10% of the northern Syria population,<sup>(158)</sup> implying the US has accurate statistics of the communities living east of the Euphrates, including those who are detained in camps, that it bases its interactions with residents there on. It is good to note here that we did not take into account the numbers of residents of other provinces who migrated to the province, especially from Deir ez-Zor, who reside there or in camps, due to the inability to determine their numbers. We also did not take into account citizens who have migrated from the Ayn al-Arab/Kobane district from 2004 until 2010 due to the lack of estimates of the real population in 2010—this is why we relied on the population estimates prepared by the Central Bureau of Statistics as the real population.

### **The PYD's policies towards residents: Displacement, and preventing residents from returning to their areas:**

#### **The practice of displacement:**

Since the emergence of its military forces on the ground in Hasakeh, the PYD began hunting down activists and displacing them, and Kurds were among the first victims, leading them to fleeing the country. The Amuda massacre carried out

---

(157) We previously estimated at 184,000 people, or 75% of the number of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region, according to UN statistics.

(158) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-commander-sees-no-kurdish-federation-in-syrias-future.aspx?page-ID=517&nID=111358&NewsCatID=352>



by the party on June 26, 2016, forced tens of youths to flee to Turkey.

Displacement practices escalated after PYD forces seized control of Ras Al-Ayn beginning of 2014. While it focused in particular on the Arab community, it affected also hundreds of families of all communities in the city and the countryside on the pretext of their support for terrorism, including Arabs, Kurds, Christians and Turkmen. Some of the cases were documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights<sup>(159)</sup>.

This was repeated in August and September of 2014 in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane and Tell Abyad where the party's forces deported the Arab population from the eastern villages of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane (Bandarakhan, Al-Hurriyah, Al-Hroub, Qurtat Thanatani, Bir Habash, Darb Hassan)<sup>(160)</sup>, leaving the residents no option other than to flee to the villages of Tell Abyad and Raqqa that were under ISIS control.

In conjunction with this, the party's forces burned down and bulldozed dozens of villages, entirely or partly, in Tel Hamis southeast of Qamishli, in the western countryside of Ras Al-Ayn, the countryside of Tall Tamr, 20 kilometers west of Hasakeh city. These incidents were also documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights<sup>(161)</sup> and Amnesty International<sup>(162)</sup>. The burning down of villages continued in the Shuyukh subdistrict and the countryside of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane until last summer. Assyrians from the town of Tall Tamr also accused the YPG units of facilitating the entry of ISIS to their villages<sup>(163)</sup>, the matter which led to

---

(159) "The worst violations of the PYD and the self-administration forces," report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 18, 2016.

(160) "Activists: Displacement of Kurds in Kobane, false rumors and accusations being made, some Arab villages were evacuated then ignored," Al Quds, September 20, 2014. <https://2u.pw/ZrGas>

(161) "The worst violations of the PYD and the self-administration forces," report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 18, 2016. [http://sn4hr.org/public\\_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Violations\\_by\\_the\\_Kurdish\\_Self\\_Management\\_Forces.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Violations_by_the_Kurdish_Self_Management_Forces.pdf)

(162) "We had nowhere else to go, forced displacement and demolitions in northern Syria," Amnesty International report, October, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2425032015ARABIC.PDF>

(163) Assyrians released by ISIS in Hasakeh: Kurds facilitated ISIS's entry to our villages," Lebanese Forces Official Website, November 3, 2015. <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2015/11/03/isis-221/>



their displacement and eventual immigration outside of the country.

A US investigative report<sup>(164)</sup> documented the party's forces' expulsion of the Arab population from their homes at gunpoint before burning down their villages and destroying them. The frequency of displacement has jumped after the US began carrying out joint attacks on ISIS in Syria in 2015, as US air force was used as a tool to intimidate the residents of the Beir Mahali village in Shuyukh subdistrict in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, forcing them to flee<sup>(165)</sup>. The report included a testimony from "Mohar", a former PKK member and fighter with the YPG units in Syria, that he himself in August and September of 2014 carried out attacks on Akersha and Sefana, two villages northeast of Syria. He said after Kurdish units expelled ISIS from these villages, they burned down and bulldozed 13 villages in the area, but not before forcing the residents to leave their homes.

Mohar recounted how his fellow fighters poured gasoline on the homes of the villages, burning them down and leading to horrific scenes that he could never forget, adding that it was one of the reasons he defected from the YPG.

According to the report, tens of Turkmen families that were expelled by the YPG from the Hammam Turkman village, had to travel dozens of miles at night on foot until they reached Raqqa or the Turkish border.

In a lengthy research titled "Thousands of Arabs driven out by Kurds' ethnic cleansing,"<sup>(166)</sup> the Times reported on the displacement of Sunni Arabs from their homes after their villages were set ablaze, in what appeared to be an ethnic cleansing carried out by the armed YPG militias against them. Human rights NGOs working in the region have confirmed this narrative.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented in a report it released in January 2016 many cases of systematic displacement, which began shortly after the establishment of the Kurds' self administration in 2014, continuing in 2015

---

(164) "Roy Gutman: Did Syrian Kurdish groups commit war crimes?" New Syrian, February 13, 2017.

(165) "Additional evidence confirming the International Coalition Forces' involvement in the Bir Mahali village massacre," Syrian Network for Human Rights, May 17, 2015. <http://sn4hr.org/arabic/2015/05/19/4153/>

(166) "Thousands of Arabs driven out by Kurds' ethnic cleansing," Hannah Lucinda Smith, June 1, 2015. <https://www.the-times.co.uk/article/thousands-of-arabs-driven-out-by-kurds-ethnic-cleansing-00jw0crrghn>



and 2016. The network documented cases of villages being entirely burned down and destroyed, and cases of the partial burning down and destruction that took place in tens of other villages in the countryside of Hasakeh in 2015 alone. It also documented the bulldozing of homes, looting and the names of 55 villages in the country of Hasakeh that saw the displacement of their residents<sup>(167)</sup>.

The documented violations included setting fire to and looting wheat and barely crops spread out over large agricultural plots extended 60 kilometers in length and 35 km in width from the south of Alya subdistrict in the countryside of Ras Al-Ayn to the villages of the Tall Tamr subdistrict and the vicinity of Jabal Abdel Aziz west of Hasakeh, whose residents were displaced. The Party's forces harvested the crops with the help of armed forces.

An Amnesty International report released in October 2015<sup>(168)</sup> documented cases of the demolition of several villages in Suluk subdistrict in the countryside of Tell Abyad in the province of Raqqa in June 2015, and the displacement of the residents of eight of its villages by YPG units. The residents were threatened into giving the forces updates on targets to bomb, and were prevented from returning to their villages. On the other hand, the YPG would give residents the choice to either join them or leave.

### **Preventing residents from returning:**

For many years, the self-administration and the YPG— and later the SDF that's led and controlled by the YPG units— prevented displaced persons from returning to their homes, and to this day thousands of residents are banned from return, including some who currently reside in other Syrian areas, and others who have immigrated to other countries. Several human rights organizations have documented that the party's forces have prevented residents from returning to their

---

(167) "The worst violations of the PYD and the self-administration forces," report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 18, 2016. [http://sn4hr.org/public\\_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Violations\\_by\\_the\\_Kurdish\\_Self\\_Management\\_Forces.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Violations_by_the_Kurdish_Self_Management_Forces.pdf)

(168) "We had nowhere else to go, forced displacement and demolitions in northern Syria," Amnesty International report, October, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2425032015ARABIC.PDF>



homes. The YPG has also prevented the Assyrians<sup>(169)</sup> from returning home, and forced them to sell their land and assets<sup>(170)</sup>.

The party's forces also for two years prevented Arabs in Tel Hamis from returning home, and until the Operation Peace Spring campaign the YPG was preventing Arabs in Ras Al-Ayn and Tell Abyad from returning.

SDF forces are still detaining more than 60,000 Deir ez-Zor residents in Al-Hawl camp, 25 kilometers east of Hasakeh, preventing them from returning to their homes in the northern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, in light of claims they sympathize with ISIS. From time to time, the forces release some detainees under the sponsorship of their clan elders, mostly recently being in January 2020.

SDF forces are holding tens of thousands of Syrians in camps similar to detention camps in Qana, Al-Sad, Al-Mabrouka, and Al-Hawl. In a report released in May, 2019, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria<sup>(171)</sup> called for their release saying they don't pose a security threat, but to no avail.

---

(169) "The Assyrian Network: For immediate action to save the children and women of Madaya," Ankwawa News, January 9, 2016.

(170) "Hasakeh the country of Assyrians ... PYD's organization continues Hafez Al-Assad's project," Orient, November 16, 2016.

(171) UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights must not be undermined for political expediency or sacrificed for security considerations, May 9, 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24585&LangID=A>



## CHAPTER V: THE MILITARY SITUATION

### Composition of the so-called “Syrian Democratic Forces”:

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established on September 11, 2015 from the following groups:

#### 1- People’s Protection Units:

The People’s Protection Units (YPG), an affiliate with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), was formed on July 19, 2012, from tens of youth groups supporting the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), led by PKK cadres, which had been initially called the Kurdish People’s Protection Committees.

Therefore, the YPG had not been existent before that date and the PKK’s consistent allegation that the YPG nucleus dates back to the riots of 12 March 2004 is totally untrue<sup>(172)</sup>; no presence of pro-PKK local armed groups was observed before the revolution, neither secretly nor publicly. PKK was highly infiltrated by the regime intelligence departments, and it was going through an intellectual, organizational and economic crisis with which this claim did not stand. Moreover, it had no role in the 2004 riots. The number of YPG members - including the PYD’s Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) - was between 3,000 and 4,000, including those coming from Qandil, the foreign members and the females.

**2- Al-Sanadid [the brave] Forces:** Led by Humaydi Daham al-Hadi (leader the Arab tribe of Shammar), these forces had approximately 300 members, and operate in the countryside of Al-Ya’rubiyah, a border subdistrict with Iraq.

**3- Army of Revolutionaries:** It was established of no more than 250 members on May 3, 2015 in Afrin area, from ex-combatants of the dissolved Jabhat Thowar Suriya [Syrian Revolutionaries Front].

**4- Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa [Raqqqa Revolutionaries’ Brigade]:** The RRB consisted of around 200 combatants and was led by Ahmed Alloush Othman, nicknamed “Abu Issa”. It operated in the northern countryside of Raqqqa after ISIS had occupied the city. The YPG dismantled the RRB at the end of 2015,

---

(172) On March 12 [2004], riots started during a chaotic football match in Qamishli due to a row between the fans of al-Futuwa [soccer] team from Deir Ezzor and those of the jihad team from Qamishli. A number of people were killed or wounded.



when Abu Issa attempted to establish a larger armed group from the Raqqa tribes, under the name Raqqa Revolutionaries Front. Abu Issa disappeared ever since and he is said to be under house arrest in Qamishli.

**5- Other groups** such as the Syriac Military Council, which had around 200 fighters, and other small Arab groups (a total of 150 fighters), including the Liberation Brigade led by Abdul Karim al-Obeid, AKA Abu Muhammad Kafr Zita <sup>(173)</sup> (about 60 fighters), which was removed by the YPG in August 2016, Farhan al-Askar (Abu Wael) Group (20 fighters), and Al-Jazira Brigades Gathering (25 fighters).

The YPG is now operating mainly in Hasakeh and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) with military councils in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Minbej, all operating under the SDF umbrella, which is totally controlled by the YPG.

### **Estimated SDF number of members**

There are no accurate statistics about YPG or SDF. Statements by the YPG/SDF officials or even by the Coalition forces about their the number of personnel are so different that none is reliable.

In a report by the Washington Institute<sup>(174)</sup>, published on October 9, 2015, YPG leaders said they had 23,650 fighters, while the YPJ has 19,350 women fighters, which means the total number of YPG combatants is 43,000, 15% of whom are Arabs. Upon establishment in 2012, this number was 3,000 men and 700 women only. Alongside these forces, there are an additional 1500 Arabs from Al-Sanadid Brigade (basically comprised members of the Shammar Tribe), as well as several hundred Syriac Christians from the Suturu Brigade and about 300 foreigners.

On November 15, 2015, that is 1.5 month after SDF formation, a US official told Reuters that the number of fighters in the Syrian Arab Alliance Forces (which he says “consist of Arabs, Kurds and other minorities, fighting to regain ISIS-controlled territory), is about 5,000”. He mentioned that while talking about the second batch of ammunition that Washington delivered to the Syrian opposition

---

(173) He was also SDF Public Relations Officer.

(174) Barak Barfi, Kurds Are Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria, Washington Institute, 9 October 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/curds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria>





troops fighting against ISIS.<sup>(175)</sup>

According to SDF's Statement No. 1<sup>(176)</sup>, the Syrian Arab Alliance consists<sup>(177)</sup> of four groups: Army of Revolutionaries, al-Sanadid forces, Al-Jazira Brigades and Euphrates Volcano Operations Room. While the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room, when it was formed on September 10, 2014, included YPG, YPJ and Arab factions that consider themselves to be part of the Free Army.

On December 31, 2015, the Army of Revolutionaries leader<sup>(178)</sup> said SDF (his umbrella organization) had more than 50,000 fighters, with the Kurds representing no more than 15% (around 7,500), while his army had 6,200 fighters<sup>(179)</sup>.

However, in an interview with all4syria.info on February 19, 2016, Alaa al-Sheikh, Head of the Revolutionary Army Politburo, claimed, after defecting, that the Army had around 1,000 fighters, including the Kurdish Front, the Seljuq Brigade and the Division 30<sup>(180)</sup>, while other sources said that the Army of Revolu-

---

(175) "Washington Provides Syrian opposition fighters with a new batch of ammunition," Russia Today website, November 15, 2015, <https://2u.pw/TZ6fu>

(176) Statement No. 1 by the Syrian Democratic Forces was issued on Sunday, October 11, 2015.

(177) A joint operations room called Euphrates Volcano to fight ISIS, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 10 September 2014 <http://www.syriaahr.com/?p=32926> - "The Euphrates Volcano unites Arabs and Kurds against ISIS, DW, 11 September 2014. <https://2u.pw/SntE7>

(178) According to its founding declaration, issued in May 2015, the Army of Revolutionaries included the following factions:

- Gathering of Homs Revolutionaries, led by Lt. Col. Abdul-Ilah Al-Ahmad
- Shams al-Shamal [sun of north] Brigades, led by Raizan Abu Mahmoud
- Special Tasks Brigade, led by Abu Ali Barad
- The Kurdish Front, led by Salah Jabbo
- Regiment 777, led by Abu Arab
- 99th Infantry Brigade, led by Ahmed Mahmoud Sultan
- Sultan Selim Brigade, led by Abdel-Aziz Mirza

Later, Brigade 313 joined on July 31, 2015, and the Turkmen Seljuq Brigade joined on August 15, 2015.

(179) Interview with Arabi21 on the disputes with the factions and al-Nusra, and on coordination with the regime and the Kurdish domination, Arabi21, 31 December 2015. <https://2u.pw/k4v1j>

(180) Ammar Bakkour, Army of Revolutionaries, from establishment till rebellion.. Facts told by a founding leader, seen on all4syria, February 19, 2016; and on another website: Army of Revolutionaries, from establishment till rebellion.. Facts told by a founding leader, 20 February 2016 <https://syrianoor.net/article/11454>



tionaries had only 200 fighters at its foundation<sup>(181)</sup>.

In April 2016, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter estimated the number of SDF forces at 30,000, including 6,000 Arabs (20%)<sup>(182)</sup>.

In December 2016, the spokesman for the US-led Global Coalition, Colonel John Dorian stated that the SDF had 45,000 combatants, including about 13,000 Arabs<sup>(183)</sup>, which means that the Kurds were around 32,000. However, only five months later, he claimed in a TV briefing to Pentagon journalists that the number was 50,000, half of whom were Kurds and the other half are Arabs and Christians<sup>(184)</sup>, meaning that the number of Kurdish fighters decreased by almost one fifth, while that of other components doubled.

Rudaw, a Kurdish newspaper in Erbil, reported in February 2017 that the number was around 30,000, a third of whom were Arabs, and that the SDF-affiliated Deir ez-Zor Council had around 1,700 fighters<sup>(185)</sup>.

Three months later, Basnews Agency stated that the YPG failed to deploy 15,000 fighters for the battle of Raqqa<sup>(186)</sup>, which was confirmed by the Al-Akershi Agreement<sup>(187)</sup> signed on June 20, 2017 between the regime forces and SDF. The Agreement stipulated that the regime forces represented by the tribal fighters led by Turki Al-Buhamad would be allowed to move into the southern and eastern

---

(181) "Jamal Maarouf is back to fight but from Afrin and under a new name!", orient-news, June 26, 2015. <https://2u.pw/M70zD>

(182) Carter acknowledges the relationship between PYD and the terrorist PKK, Anadolu Agency, April 28, 2016.

(183) "Syrian Democratic Forces: The nucleus of the future Syrian national army (composition and challenges in the regional context), PYD website, March 10, 2017 <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/19427>

(184) - "U.S. military spokesman in trouble after admitting that his country supports a terrorist organization," Daily Sabah, May 4, 2017 <https://www.dailysabah.com/arabic/world/2017/05/04/us-military-official-suffers-slip-of-the-tongue-and-says-pkk-is-part-of-the-sdf-1493882855>

(185) "Turkish Defense Minister: The U.S. position with regard to the YPG role in the Raqqa operations has changed, Rudaw website, July 22, 2017. <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/syria/220220171>

(186) "A Syrian academic talks about a Russian-American understanding regarding the battle of Raqqa," Basnews, May 25, 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/kurdistan/352811>

(187) "Al-Akershi Agreement": SDF handed Raqqa's southern countryside over to the regime, Al-Modon, July 22, 2017. <https://2u.pw/mw0xe>



countryside of Raqqa, in what looked like cooperation between the two parties to fight ISIS.

In July 2017, the SDF media office reported on the PYD website that the number of the SDF Arab fighters was 25,000, without mentioning the total number of SDF forces<sup>(188)</sup>.

A YPG media source estimated the number of YPG fighters at 50,000, including 15,000 women, as cited in a study by Omran<sup>(189)</sup> for Strategic Studies, in October 2017, which means that the number of SDF troops at that time was twice this number, if not more.

In April 2018, SDF commander Mazloun Abdi claimed that the number of his forces was 60,000, including 30,000 guards on the borders with Turkey and Iraq, and that Arabs constitute 50% of the SDF troops, while Deir Ez-Zor Military Council had 10,000 fighters<sup>(190)</sup>.

In a study published on the PYD website on August 28, 2018, Abdi said that SDF had 130,000 fighters (which means an increase of 70,000 fighters in four months only), explaining that the increase reflect the SDF reliance on the local military councils, where each area or city has its own troops fighting under a local banner<sup>(191)</sup>.

In an article in Foreign Affairs magazine in April 2019, Brett McGurk put the number of SDF troops at 60,000 fighters<sup>(192)</sup>.

In November 2019, the SDF Executive President Ilham Ahmed told Asharq Al-Awsat that SDF had 70,000 fighters, and with the police, the number amount

---

(188) "In response to a report by the Syrian National Coalition calling for designating YPG and SDF as terrorist organizations", PYD website, July 30, 2017 <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/23318>

(189) "Military and Security Structures in the AANES Areas," Omran, October 2017 . <https://2u.pw/dL6M5>

(190) Mazloun Abdi told Asharq Al-Awsat that he discussed the US withdrawal from the East of Euphrates with Trump's envoy ... He stated that ISIS is still there, Asharq Al-Awsat, April 26, 2018 <https://2u.pw/1YZEy>

(191) "Syrian Democratic Forces - Roots, Structure, and Goals," PYD website, August 28, 2018 <https://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/39095>

(192) "Brett McGurk: After the US withdrawal .. How Washington protects its allies and achieve its objectives" Translated by the Kurdish Center for Studies, April 17, 2019 <http://www.nlka.net/news/details/810>



to 100,000, and that 70% of these troops were Arabs<sup>(193)</sup>.

Mazloun Abdi told Foreign Policy on October 13, 2019 that SDF had 70,000 fighters<sup>(194)</sup>, and about one month later (on December 17, 2019), he told Asharq Al-Awsat that the number was 80,000, and the number of the police forces was 30,000<sup>(195)</sup>.

## **Our approximate estimates of the actual numbers of the SDF troops**

Historically, PKK has significantly exaggerated the numbers of its troops and supporters, and even its killed members, for political and economic reasons as well as for media purposes to maintain popularity among the Kurds as their political representative vis-à-vis other competitors, and to justify blackmailing them, through imposing royalties (that PKK calls Alikariyeh) and fund-raisers under so many excuses.

Likewise, PKK has consistently exaggerated the numbers of SDF forces to maintain the Global Coalition support and obtain the largest amount of its financial aid, in the name of salaries, aid for the injured and blood money for the killed.

In order to provide realistic estimates, we used some anonymous sources, which estimated the numbers of SDF troops in open locations, while we could not know their numbers in Qamishli and Hasakeh, so we estimated them as follows:

### **The number of SDF troops in Hasakeh**

In Hasakeh, there are three factions: the PYD-affiliate YPG, al-Sanadid Forces (Shammar tribe), and the Syriac Military Council forces affiliated with the Syriac Union Party<sup>(196)</sup>.

---

(193) "Ilham Ahmed: We seek to establish official recognition of AANES", PYD website, November 11, 2019 <http://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/56113>

(194) Mazloun Abdi, article in Foreign Policy: If We Have to Choose Between Compromise and Genocide, We Will Choose Our People, October 13, 2019, Kurdish Center for Studies <http://www.nlka.net/news/details/908>

(195) "Mazloun Abdi: We have 110,000 combatants, Ibid <https://2u.pw/ugBa7>

(196) "The Syrian Syriac fighters are divided between the regime and the Kurds", Al-Arab, November 10, 2015 <https://2u.pw/LuDpE>



## People's Protection Units:

PKK members constitute the YPG backbone that includes Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi fighters, as well as Iranian fighters belonging to the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). A US study confirmed relation between YPG and these groups based on the death toll reports published by Idrak Center, in February 2017<sup>(197)</sup>.

On the ground, the YPG troops operate throughout Hasakeh province including four border guard regiments deployed along the province borders with Iraq (from Al-Malikiyah to Al-Shaddadi in the south), and a part of them are located in Ayn al-Arab. They include the following regiments:

- Malikiyah Regiment: Deployed along the Iraqi borders, from Al-Malikiyah city to Al-Ya'rubiya subdistrict, this Regiment has five border outposts, 15 men each, which means a total of 150 YPG fighters<sup>(198)</sup> and such a small number is explained by the presence of the Kurdish Peshmerga on the Iraqi side.

- Ya'rubiya Regiment: The regiment command is based within Al-Ya'rubiya border gate Free Zone, and it has 700 YPG fighters, deployed on the Iraqi borders along Al-Ya'rubiya, Yarmouk and Tel Hamis.

Al-Hawl Regiment: The regiment headquarters is located in Al-Bahra village (5 kilometers east of Al-Hawl town), and it consists of 200 YPG fighters, deployed on the Iraqi borders along Al-Hawl subdistrict.

- We also believe that there is another border guard regiment in Hasakeh, along Al-Shaddadi borders with Iraq, and it has 300-350 fighters (this figure has been estimated based on the length of the borders and other border areas already known for us). Then Markada subdistrict begins and it is the responsibility of Deir ez-Zor Military Council.

Thus, the number of the [YPG] border guards along Hasakeh borders with Iraq is 1,350-1,400, 90% of whom are Arabs and 10% are Kurds who often assume leadership jobs.

---

(197) Gard Vares and Andrew Salve, "The Dead Don't Lie", Idrak for Studies and Consultations, February 2017 <https://idraksy.net/dead-do-not-lie/>

(198) The border guard regiments operate in two shifts.



## **YPG within urban areas:**

**Al-Malikiyah District:** The YPG in this district has 1,370 - 1,520 fighters, more than 66% of whom are Arabs. Around 250 troops operate in the city, while the remainder are deployed in the Malikiyah subdistricts as follows:

**Al-Jawadiyeh Subdistrict:** 450-500 fighters are stationed in the Jawadiyeh center and Al-Qasimiyeh village, as follows:

**Al-Jawadiyeh center:** About 300 YPG combatants are based in the Agricultural Extension Unit building and a school on Deir Ghosn Road to the north of the town. A short while ago, there was also YPG troops in the Agricultural Bank warehouses, but they evacuated recently.

**Al-Qasmiyah village:** Located four kilometers south of Al-Jawadiyeh, Al-Qasmiyah is the main base of Al-Faris family, sheikhs of the Arabic Zabid tribe. Al-Qasmiyah, in addition to the neighboring Dhahiriyah (inhabited mostly by Zabid tribe members, was the cradle of the Arab revolution in Al-Jawadiyeh subdistrict.

In the beginning of August 2012, Al-Dhahiriyah was stormed by Regiment 154, stationed east of Qamishli, and eight people, mostly from Zabid, were killed in the clashes.

The YPG has around 200 fighters in Al-Qasimiyah, stationed in the municipal building and the [Baath] party hall, which was turned into military dormitories. Arabs constitute around 60% of the total YPG troops in the subdistrict.

**Rmelan City:** SDF has 300-400 YPG fighters in Rmelan, protecting the oil installations in the area.

**Al-Ya'rubiyyah Subdistrict:** YPG has 370 fighters in Al-Ya'rubiyyah; 150 of them are headquartered in the subdistrict building and in the police residential area. The remaining 220 fighters are deployed at checkpoints in and around the city, while the subdistrict villages have no YPG units.

**Yarmouk "Jaz'aa", Tal Hamis, Al-Hawl, Al-Shaddadi and Qahtaniyah subdistricts:**

These subdistricts have only Asayish forces and there is no YPG presence there.

**Ras Al-Ain District:** Before the launch of the Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, YPG had 500-700 fighters in Ras Al-Ain and its countryside, at least



70% of them were Arabs.

**Al-Darbasiyah Subdistrict:** In Darbasiyah, the YPG has 250-350 fighters, at least half of them are Arabs. These are currently deployed facing the safe zone, along with the troops that withdrew from Ras al-Ain.

**Amuda Subdistrict:** In Amuda, there are 250-350 YPG fighters, half of whom are Arabs. 50 fighters are stationed in the carpet factory east of the city, and about 75 are in Tel Mozan archaeological site, seven kilometers east of Amuda, while the remaining fighters are in Hittin grain center, 30 kilometers south of Amuda, near the Aleppo-Iraq highway.

Thus, the number of YPG troops in Hasakeh province, except the cities of Qamishli, Hasakeh and Al-Hawl is between 2370 and 2920, of whom at least 65% are Arabs. If we add the border guards, the total number of YPG troops in Hasakeh province, except the cities of Qamishli and Hasakeh, is between 3720 and 4320, of whom 74% are Arabs and 26% are Kurds.

### **The police force (Asayish)**

Since 2013, PYD established a police force, called Asayish, which was later affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Now, Asayish is affiliated with the Interior Department at the Federation of Northern Syria (FNS).

Asayish monitors the Turkish border, in addition to its work as police and checkpoints in urban and rural areas. Asayish also has a traffic unit, prison police, and an information department similar to the [Syrian] political security.

Outposts on the Turkish borders:

Asayish operates 23 outposts on the Turkish borders, at an average of 16 policemen each, working in two 48-hour shifts, 8 policemen each. Thus, Asayish has a total of 268 policemen on the Hasakeh borders with Turkey.

**In cities and towns:** Asayish operates in the local police stations and in checkpoints on roads and city entrances, as follows:

Darbasiyah, Amuda, Qahtaniyah, Jawadieh, Tal Tamer and Al-Hawl have each 150-200 Asayish troops, while Ya'rubiyah has only YPG troops. Al-Yarmouk and Tel Hamis have 300 Asayish members, deployed in the local police stations.



Al-Shaddadi has around 500 Asayish troops deployed in four checkpoints on the old Hasakeh-Deir ez-Zor road, from Qana, south of Hasakeh city till Al-Azza-wi site in Markada subdistrict, in addition to the local police stations and prison, and Al-Arisheh subdistrict. They are based in the residential area at the Workers' City in Jbisah. Thus, the total number of Asayish forces in Hasakeh province, except the cities of Qamishli and Hasakeh, is between 1968 and 2268.

### **Total of YPG and Asayish personnel in Hasakeh Province:**

Based on previous estimates, the number of YPG and Asayish forces in Hasakeh Province, except the cities of Qamishli and Hasakeh, is between 5688 and 6588 fighters. Assuming that Qamishli city and Hasakeh city has each 1000 fighters, the total number of YPG and Asayish troops in the province of Hasakeh will be 7688-8688, of whom more than 70% are Arabs.

### **Al-Sanadid Forces:**

This is a tribal force led by Humaydi Daham (head of Shammar tribe). It has 1500-1800 fighters belonging to the various Arab tribes in the countryside of Qamishli and Yaarubiyeh, and their headquarters is in the Yaarubiyeh free zone on the Iraqi borders.

Al-Sanadid forces operate in the countryside of Yaarubiyeh, Tal Hamis, and Yarmouk towards the city of Qamishli. They have only one checkpoint called Tahouneh [mill] on the M4 road, 7 kilometers to the south of Al-Jawadiyeh.

### **The Syriac Military Council forces:**

The Syriac Military Council has approximately 200 fighters affiliated with SDF.

### **Number of Asayish and SDF forces in Hasakeh Province:**

In a final estimate, the number of Asayish and SDF forces in Hasakeh province is between 9388 and 10688, of whom more than 73% are Arabs.





### **Number of SDF troops in Deir ez-Zor Province:**

In Deir ez-Zor, north of the Euphrates, and in Markada (of Hasakeh province), the forces of the SDF-affiliated Deir ez-Zor Military Council are deployed. Together with Asayish, they have between 10,000 and 13,000 fighters, operating in headquarters within the subdistricts and towns, on checkpoints, and on the Iraqi borders.

### **Number SDF troops in Manbij, Raqqa and Ayn al-Arab:**

The SDF forces in Raqqa province can not be separated from SDF forces in Ayn al-Arab and Manbij. They, together, actually form one inseparable bloc, which has a total of 7,000 - 10,000 fighters, including the Asayish members. Arabs constitute 90% of these troops and operate in Raqqa and its countryside, and in tunnels and shelters in Al-Shamiyeh on the Euphrates, Hammam Mountains, Mount Mashta Nour, in addition to regular checkpoints on Ayn al-Arab and Manbij roads.

After the Operation Peace Spring and Sochi Agreement on October 22, 2019, SDF is no longer existent in Ayn al-Arab and its Kharus Camp was removed, after their withdrawal 10 kilometers away from the city.

### **Total number of SDF troops:**

Based on the above estimates, the total number of SDF and Asayish forces is between 26,388 and 33,688, of whom more than 86% are Arabs.

### **Arab affiliation with SDF:**

At the beginning, Arabs had only small presence in the YPG units (estimated at tens and then at hundreds), due mainly to the conscription law issued by the PYD, and to the poor living conditions, which made the salary paid by the YPG a source of income for many families in Hasakeh province. However, the recruitment of Arabs in large numbers later came to protect their families and villages after the violations committed by SDF against the Arabs in East of the Euphrates in general, which increased after SDF had been adopted by the US-led Global Coalition.



Recruitment increased again with the preparation for the battle to liberate Deir ez-Zor from ISIS, where the United States did not allow the Arabs to fight independently from SDF. Joining SDF is prompted by traditions, where Arabs prefer affiliation with SDF rather than having strangers come to their houses, without any knowledge of Arab customs and traditions.

For PYD, Arabs recruitment means acquittance from PYD murders and ethnic displacement against the Arabs, and entitling PYD to speak on their behalf (they constitute more than 80% of East of the Euphrates population), in addition to winning a large number of persons fighting for its project. Meanwhile, by recruiting Arabs, PYD ensures that they will not be exploited by hostile actors. Generally speaking, PKK members still monopolize the leadership positions, in YPG, SDF, Asayish and intelligence forces, even within the governing civilian bodies<sup>(199)</sup>.

Thus, we believe that the above Reuters estimates by the US official on November 15, 2015 are the closest to reality. They show that the US officials were aware of the actual numbers of these forces, yet they chose to deploy them to fight ISIS, before larger numbers of Arabs joined SDF and brought it to the current number. SDF originally consisted of around 3,000-4,000 fighters, mainly YPG units in addition to 1,000 from other components, but the American support helped it achieve the current levels.

## YPG' death toll

In August 2018, Aldar Khalil, a high ranking AANES official at the time, estimated the number of the YPG death toll at 5,000<sup>(200)</sup>. In May 2019, Amjad Othman, spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Council, estimated the number at 11,000 and that of the wounded at 20,000<sup>(201)</sup>. In October 2019, AANES statements kept the death toll at 11,000 while the number of wounded rose to 24,000<sup>(202)</sup>.

---

(199) "Fighting ISIS: Way to Raqqa and Beyond", International Crisis Group report, April 28, 2017.

(200) "Syrian Jazeera and Expected Destiny | Political Salon" - Syria TV, August 12, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqtRuUF-Ovs&feature=share>

(201) "Coalition denies wounded Kurdish fighters of Syria visas for medical treatment, Rudaw, May 4, 2019 <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/040520192>

(202) Statement by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in Ain Issa on October 13, 2019.



In April 2016, Hamid Darbandi, who is in charge of Rojava affairs in Kurdistan Region in Iraq, said that the Region had received 218 wounded YPG fighters in the past three years<sup>(203)</sup>, which confirms the exaggeration in numbers by the AANES officials.

In August 2019, a statement by the AANES teachers in the pro-PKK Hawar News estimated the number of those who experienced disabilities in eight years at 5,000, while the number of deaths remained stable<sup>(204)</sup>. In September 2019, PKK Deputy Chairman, Mustafa Karasu estimated the death toll at 10,000<sup>(205)</sup>.

Therefore, the statistics published by PKK, PYD and affiliated sites are too contradictory to be trusted. Moreover, some local statistics show that the total number of YPG fighters killed since YPG started taking part in the battles in Syria, is 2000-3000, based on the number of graves at the PYD cemeteries.

SDF receives \$ 18,000 from the Coalition as blood money for every killed member (which explains why they insist on exaggerating the death toll number), while the amount they pay to the family of the dead person does not exceed \$ 500.

### **SDF payroll:**

SDF fighters receive \$ 150 - 200 per month, paid in Syrian pounds. After the recent pay increase in November 2019, salaries range between 150,000 and 195,000 Syrian pounds, paid by the AANES Defense Department, while the Coalition pays part of the salaries of the military councils in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Manbij<sup>(206)</sup>.

---

(203) Kurdistan Region Sets Conditions for Reopening of Faysh Khabur Crossing, April 28, 2016 - Kurdistan 24 website <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/news/8bae35f5-b75b-4247-ad9e-c22557f4fe8b>

(204) "Turkey aims to occupy the region and commit genocide against the people through the so-called Peace Corridor," Hawar News, August 21, 2019, <https://2u.pw/sIL6X>

(205) "Karasu: We must prepare for a long-term war", Hawar News, September 23, 2019 <https://2u.pw/ftvK6>

(206) Mazloum Abdi told Asharq Al-Awsat that he discussed the US withdrawal from the East of Euphrates with Trump's envoy ... He stated that ISIS is still there, Asharq Al-Awsat, April 26, 2018 <https://2u.pw/1YZEY>



## Armament of SDF troops:

Initially, and just like all other Syrian factions, the YPG used individual weapons consisting mainly of the Russian Kalashnikov and a few BKS guns and RPG launchers. Upon taking charge of the borderline from the regime forces, YPG gained hundreds of weapons (mainly Kalashnikov) from the police stations and subdistricts.

When the battle of Ras Al-Ain with the Free Army began at the end of 2012, the regime provided YPG with medium and heavy weapons including several tank trucks, artillery and some mortars. YPG also used around 1700 fighters of its forces in Qandil Mountain. Later, YPG got Javelin anti-tank missiles, Hummer vehicles and some warships<sup>(207)</sup>, from the Coalition. In March 2017, photos were taken of heavy artillery (155mm Howitzer), long-range missile launchers and dozens of armored vehicles (sophisticated version of Hummers) and tank trucks, as well as various munitions.

## Foreign troops in the East of the Euphrates:

Before the Operation Peace Spring, American troops were deployed in more than twenty military bases and points. After that operation, they were redeployed to the eastern half of East of the Euphrates and they established new bases, hence evacuating old bases which were quickly entered by Russian forces. Below is a list of foreign bases in the East of the Euphrates.

### U. S. Bases:

- a. **Rmelan Base and Airport:** Located 60 kilometers east of Qamishli, near the Rmelan oil fields in Al-Malikiyah, this base was established by the United States at the end of 2015, and started operation in 2016. It has an agricultural airport receiving the US helicopters and cargo planes. This base is said to be the military brain of the US forces in Syria, because it has operating and aerial surveillance rooms, as well as artillery, missile launchers and armored vehicles. The base is guarded by YPG units and cannot be approached by anyone.
- b. **Rubaria Airport:** It is 5 kilometers south of Al-Malikiyah, 15 kilome-

---

(207) Warships were used for the first time in March 2017 to transport the SDF troops from the left bank of the Euphrates, near the Castle of Jaabar, to the western countryside of Tabqa.



ters to the north of the Rmelan Base, and 5 kilometers from the Turkish borders. This US agricultural airport is dedicated for helicopters.

c. **Tel Baidar Base:** It is located 40 kilometers north of Hasakeh and 40 kilometers away from the Turkish borders. It was originally devoted to training YPG members by US soldiers. Now, there are French soldiers in addition to American soldiers, and it has a heliport. The US troops have recently strengthened their presence in this base.

d. **Tall Tamr base:** It is located in Al-Khareeta village, 20 kilometers west of Hasakeh and contains American and French soldiers. It was recently reinforced to restrict the movement of Russian patrols.

e. **Al-Shaddadi Base:** It is located in the 48 Neighborhood in Jbisah workers' city in Al-Shaddadi, 60 kilometers south of Hasakeh and it contains a number of helicopters.

f. **Hanadi (Himo) base in Qamishli:** It is located 2 kilometers west of Qamishli on Amuda road, and 3 kilometers away from the Turkish borders. Previously, it was an agricultural mechanization community college, with many buildings, laboratories and vehicles. The US troops use it as a land base, with several armored vehicles, and they control hundreds of dunams of fertile farmland.

g. **Al-Wazir Base:** It is located near Life Stone resort next to the western dam, 20 kilometers northwest of Hasakeh on Darbasiyah road, and 20 kilometers from Tel Baidar base.

h. **Ghweiran Base:** On February 7, 2020, the US forces started transporting materials and equipment to build a base in Ghweiran Neighborhood in Hasakeh.

i. **Al-Omar oil field Base:** A US base on the northern bank of the Euphrates, 15 kilometers to the northeast of Al-Mayadeen, and 7 kilometers from Theeban subdistrict. The base is located in the residential area and has a heliport.

j. **Cunico gas plant Base:** The field is 10 kilometers to the north of Deir ez-Zor city on Hasakeh road.

k. **Al-Jafra oil field Base:** It is located near Al-Sour town, northeast of Deir ez-Zor

l. **Al-Tanak oil field Base:** Al-Tanak is one of the biggest oil fields in Deir ez-Zor near Abu Hamam town in the Syrian desert, 20 kilometers from the Iraqi borders and 90 kilometers from Deir ez-Zor city.

m. **Bab al-Khair Silos Base:** It is located in the middle of the southern road between Raqqa and Hasakeh.

The Coalition also has troops in Al-Tanf base on the Iraqi borders. It looks that



new US bases will be constructed north of Qahtaniyah, Hasakeh and in Deir ez-Zor oil fields but final locations have not been determined yet. The total number of US forces in Syria is estimated at 1,000 soldiers.

Russian bases:

The Russians in East of the Euphrates operate only in the western part of Qamishli. All attempts to expand eastwards have failed because the Americans are apparently determined not to allow the Russians to cross the Hasakeh-Qamishli line eastward.

- a. **Qamishli Airport:** Russian forces have been present in Qamishli airport since 2015. Last October, they were reinforced by helicopters, and they built a camp near the Agricultural Club near the airport, and they deployed air defense systems, in addition to a number of military vehicles.
- b. **Al-Bashiriyah Intelligence Unit in Qamishli:** It was previously a military intelligence unit, and Russian soldiers have been stationed in it recently.
- c. **Amuda vocational high school:** Located in the south of Amuda, it was the YPJ headquarters and is now used by the Russian troops.
- d. **Dikiyeh Agricultural Airport:** It is located 5 kilometers west of Amuda on the road to Darbasiyah, and 5 kilometers from the Turkish borders. The Russian troops were stationed in this airport recently.
- e. **Ghannamiyeh Airport:** An agricultural airport located 5 kilometers south of Derbasiyah. SDF withdrew from it and delivered it to the Russians.
- f. **Cattle Station in Tall Tamr:** It is located at the northern entrance to Tall Tamr, 45 kilometers west of Hasakeh, and has about 100 Russian soldiers.
- g. **Al-Alyah Silos:** It is located 20 kilometers west of Tall Tamr on the international M4 Road, and contains regime troops beside the Russians.
- h. **Tabqa Airport:** After being evacuated by the US troops last October, the Russians entered this airport and brought in helicopters and military land vehicles.
- i. **Ain Issa Base:** After the withdrawal of American forces, the Russians established this base in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Tank Brigade near Ain Issa, north of Raqqa, and reinforced it with armored vehicles. The base has regime troops as well.
- j. **17<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters in Raqqa:** It is located in the northeastern part of Raqqa city, and was entered by Russian forces last November.
- k. **Al-Sabt Base:** Located to the north of Sirrin subdistrict in Ayn al-Arab, the American forces withdrew from it and then Russian forces replaced them.

The Russians currently have around 1500 troops in East of the Euphrates. Both the Russian and American military bases are expected to increase in this region,



in light of the ongoing redeployments.

#### Regime forces: Locations, Weapons, Role and Action

The regime forces are present in Hasakeh province only; there are no regime units to the north of the Euphrates in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor provinces.

The regime forces operate within the so-called security square (city center) in Hasakeh and Qamishli, which contain province building, police headquarters, [Baath] party branch, security services and government departments, while the YPG and SDF forces are deployed in the remaining parts of the province.

In Hasakeh, the regime forces are located in the headquarters of Hajjanah Regiment, in the 123<sup>rd</sup> Regiment in Mount Kawkab, 10 kilometers east of Hasakeh city, and in the police stations and security departments.

In Qamishli, the regime forces are located in the 154<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Tall Tartab near Qamishli, police headquarters, security services, and the checkpoint in Qamishli roundabout on the M4 Road. In Hasakeh province, the regime has around 300 soldiers only and 1200-1500 policemen and security personnel.

The armament of the regime forces consists mainly of Kalashnikovs, PKS guns, and machine guns installed on four-wheeled vehicles, in addition to a few old military vehicles and a few tank trucks. The regime forces have almost no role outside the security squares, where they organize traffic and handle some administrative transactions for the citizens, in addition to crime control within their jurisdiction.

After signing Sochi Agreement between the Turks and the Russians on 22 October 2019, the regime forces were redeployed to the outposts on the Turkish borders, from Ayn al-Arab to Ain Dewar on the Iraqi borders, except the Peace Spring zone in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain that are controlled by the National Army and Turkish troops. The regime also has some forces in Tabqa alongside the Russian troops, in Shuyukh Tahtani town, alongside the Russian troops as well and on the Turkish borders alongside the Asayish.



## CHAPTER VI: INSTITUTIONS OF THE PYD “AUTONOMOUS ENTITY”

### **Social Contract:**

I will list the most important provisions of both the AANES’s Social Contract, announced by the PYD in 2014 and the Social Contract of the Federation of Northern Syria announced by the PYD in 2016, without challenging them, because this needs addressing historical, political, and social factors, which is not within the scope of this study. Thus, we shall only provide an overview of the intended entity, its mandate and structure as specified in both documents:

In April 2014, the so-called Democratic Autonomous Administration, established by the PYD in Al-Jazira canton, passed the final version of what they called Charter of the Social Contract (Constitution), which came in 94 articles, and was based on the right of peoples to self-determination. The document considers the AANES areas in Al-Jazira, Ayn al-Arab and Afrin a single “semi-independent” political and administrative system, whose capital is Qamishli, and this system forms an integral part of the “Democratic Federalism of Syria” based on a consensual pluralist federal parliamentary system, in which the AANES constitution supersedes the federal constitution.

The Charter designated YPG as the only national institution responsible for defense, territorial integrity and territorial sovereignty, while internal security and the police will be the responsibility of Asayish. The constitutional oath in the Charter does not include any reference whatsoever to the Syrian state and it only talks about protecting and preserving the AANES areas. The door was left open for any Syrian city or region to join the AANES, provided that it accepts the Social Contract. The Charter designates a governor for each of the three counties<sup>(208)</sup>, in addition to a parliament; local councils to be formed through direct elections; executive board (government) consisting of 22 ministries, including foreign affairs, defense, interior, and finance; a judicial council; a high electoral

---

(208) In 2014, Humaydi Daham (head of the Shamar tribe in Al-Jazeera) was appointed governor of Al-Jazeera County, while Afrin and Ayn al-Arab counties remained without governors and they only have the position of head of the executive board (prime minister).





commission; and a supreme constitutional court to determine on conflicts of laws with the central administration. The social contract grants the AANES powers in foreign affairs and defense and in other areas to peacefully resolve disputes with the neighboring countries and entitles the legislative council to ratify international agreements and treaties and declare a state of war, which is a clear violation to the internationally known federal system. The Contract establish a flag, an emblem and an anthem for the AANES territory, and considers Arabic, Kurdish and Syriac as official languages.

The Social Contract of the so-called Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, announced by the PYD on 18 June 2016 derives its legitimacy - according to its draft - from the will of the peoples of Rojava, Beth Nahrain and Syria. It is based on the awareness of these peoples of the tragedies brought by the nation-state and the centralized authoritarian nationalist regime. These historical, social and national issues can only be addressed under a democratic federal system based on political decentralization.

**The federation has its own flag and emblem, and its capital is Qamishli, and [the Contract contains] no reference to the Syrian state, whose central administration has been reduced to a coordinating body.**

The document divides the society into economic cooperatives, professional, cultural and social communes, and local councils for neighborhoods, towns, sub-districts and districts, and these local councils have their own executive boards. Then counties and cantons are formed. Each canton includes at least one county with unique historical, demographic, economic, climatic and cultural characteristics as well as distinct geography. The canton has the right to build diplomatic relations with the neighboring peoples and countries. At the top, comes the federal structure that consists of:

- a. A legislative council called the Democratic People's Conference, which, nationally, includes Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians, and Chechens; and religiously, Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, Alawites and Shiites.
- b. An executive board with foreign affairs powers including concluding agreements with other countries. The board consists of 18 departments or ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, and Finance, and has affiliated bodies including a judicial council, a military council, and police department.



The Contract devotes a separate chapter to SDF, the almost autonomous body in charge of defending the federalism, and also leaves the door open for any region to join the federalism.

In a quick look of the common provisions between the two documents, we can say the following:

- 1- Both documents are based on a misinterpretation of the right of peoples to self-determination.
- 2- Both documents attempt to establish a hypothesis about the existence of Syrian Kurdistan.
- 3- The two documents aim to form a separatist entity under the pretext of political decentralization, in an attempt to establish a mini-state, similar to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, which is a violation of both administrative decentralization and federalism.
- 4- The two documents assign the intended entity with sovereign powers, including foreign affairs, defense and the interior, as well as establishing relations and concluding agreements with other countries.
- 5- Six years having elapsed since their issuance, the two documents have not earned the support of any social, political, or partisan entity outside the PYD-controlled territory.

### **The judiciary in the intended entity:**

Since the beginning of 2012, the PYD started to establish the so-called People's Courts in its areas. These courts are run by people appointed by the PYD with no legal background; some are even illiterate, and others do not have any degree or certification. These courts issue rulings on felonies, misdemeanors and crimes, with penalties up to life imprisonment, which Human Rights Watch described as “unfair.”<sup>(209)</sup>

In 2015, the PYD restructured its judicial council, renaming it to “Council of Social Justice,” and changed the name of the People's Courts to Diwan [Court] of Justice, which is equivalent to the Magistrate's Courts. The Investigation and Public Prosecution Commission replaced the Public Prosecution and the Cassation Board replaced the Appeals Board that issues final rulings. The PYD judicial system lacks qualified staff, fingerprints/signatures analysis experts, and special-

---

(209) Human Rights Watch, June 19, 2014.



ized forensic medicine.

To enforce their rulings and decisions, PYD courts have to apply the Syrian laws, while the regime courts are still fully operational in the PYD areas. In Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, courts of justice have been established, and there are no regime courts there. The Diwan of Justice is also supervised by PKK members, and one of them (Iranian named Qazi) was arrested in 2016 for criminal charges.

### **Intelligence in the intended entity:**

Establishing an intelligence service was the first step by the PKK after resuming its activity in Syria in mid-2011. This service is still operating under the name “Anti-Terrorism Agency”. It was based in Al-Malikiyah, but was recently moved to Rmelan. The Agency was founded and headed by Bahoz Erdal until he left Syria, and he was assisted by Mazloun Abdi.

The Agency has around 200 members, of whom 150 work in its new headquarters in Rmelan, and the remaining 50 members work in the old headquarters in Al-Malikiyah and in others units throughout the area. The Agency recruits agents, collects information, monitors people, and conducts studies on job candidates. Intelligence jobs are exclusively assigned to Kurds, namely pro-PKK members. Its employees, in civilian clothes, are operating throughout the AANES sites and facilities. In addition to its intelligence work gathering information about the entire Syrian territory, the Anti-Terrorism Agency investigates the members’ violations, corruption and other crimes.

### **Municipalities in the intended entity:**

The regime municipalities continue to operate<sup>(210)</sup> beside the newly established AANES municipalities. The regime municipalities currently carry out cleaning works only, while the AANES municipalities do other works including maintenance and paving of key roads.

---

(210) On February 5, 2020, the Hassakeh province appointed Ibrahim Amo as mayor of Amuda, beside the municipal leadership affiliated with AANES.



## Conscription in the intended entity:

After returning to Syria, PKK resumed its approach of recruiting young men and women and even minors without family agreement, which has been documented by numerous organizations<sup>(211)</sup>.

In July 2014, PYD issued the so-called “Military Service Regulation Act”, which obliges each household to send a family member at the age of 18-30 years, to serve a 6-month defense duty. The Act exempted the families of YPG killed members and Asayish, as well as families with children among the PKK ranks or with single child, and individuals with disabilities or chronic diseases. In early 2016, the military service period was increased to nine months, and the conscription age limit to forty years. In June 2019, the AANES passed the new conscription act, which raised the service age to 12 months, and left determining the age limit to each region.

Despite the introduction of the conscription process, PYD continued its traditional method of relying on its supporters (including teachers who contributed to recruiting their students), and killing the defectors<sup>(212)</sup>.

The Interior Ministry issued a travel ban on the age group 18-30 years and the PYD forces started arresting those wanted for military service, and turning schools into recruitment camps. Some people were killed while being pursued, or because they rejected military service. Asayish was turned into gangs who kidnapped boys<sup>(213)</sup> and girls from schools, and put them in recruitment camps, despite their families’ disapproval<sup>(215)</sup> <sup>(214)</sup>.

---

(211) Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban, Human Rights Watch, July 15, 2015 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2015/07/15/279226>

(212) KurdWatch interview with a girl kidnapped by PKK with the intention of recruiting her, but she managed to escape, June 1, 2015

(213) On October 29, 2014, Mohamed Ibrahim Saadoun, born in Khaznah village in 1992, was killed at a YPG checkpoint, because he rejected conscription.

(214) On 18 August 2014, Jaffan Hasan al-Yousef, born in 2000, was abducted by Asayish in Qamishli, and sent to a training camp in Sarran, east of Qahtaniyah.

(215) On November 14, 2014, Jemin Saiddiq Ahmad, 14, was kidnapped from Khawlah Bint Al-Azwar School in Qahtaniyah, by an Asayish patrol.



Forced recruitment was not limited to the Kurds, but included Arabs as well, which triggered violent reactions; while some soldiers defected quietly, others had to use arms during the defection move<sup>(216)</sup>.

In Raqqa, PYD launched the first conscription center on December 17, 2018, under the pretext of “Self-Defense Duty”. It also established training centers, called academies, some of which were based in schools. Ahmed Ali Academy, the first in Raqqa, was established on January 22, 2019, on the old site of Brigade 17. Then followed Bashar Hussein Jraibah Academy in Al-Kasrat district, Tel Al-Samn Academy (school-based), Jumaa Al-Nazzal Academy in Tabqa, and the Ridor Academy in Al-Jirniyah.

Recruits in these academies undergo 30-day or 45-day courses. Families, employees, teachers, men and women, and even members of loyal parties, are trained in these centers on how to use small arms. In Deir ez-Zor, the first self-defense office was opened in April 2019, but no military academies were opened. Deir ez-Zor population did not abide by the conscription act, as membership in Deir ez-Zor Military Council is optional.

In Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, those born between 1990 and 2001 were called for military service, while in Hasakeh, the range was 1986 - 2001. On January 23, 2020, AANES issued an order making the service age starting in 1990. No person is employed, unless he shows a certificate of completing the self-defense service or pays a cash allowance. Those serving at the regime army are recognized by AANES to have completed such service, and vice versa.

Recruits receive a monthly salary of \$ 100 and permanent personnel receive \$ 150-250, while the Coalition pays military councils in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Manbij \$ 200 monthly per combatant.

### **Fees and taxes in the intended entity**

Since the announcement of AANES in early 2014, PYD imposed duties and taxes on the population. The first incidence was in early April 2014, when the PYD municipality in Qamishli issued an order requesting owners of commercial and industrial businesses and real estate offices to pay licensing fees. The munic-

---

(216) On December 13, 2014, Mahmoud Sobh Abdel Aziz (an Arab) defected from the Kurdish checkpoint in Tall Tamr after killing four of its guards, *The Holocaust* (2), Abdullah an-Najjar - Shabab Post, July 28, 2017 <https://twsas.org/archives/7027>

ipality also charges a monthly cleaning fee of 300 Syrian Pounds per household and an equivalent of \$ 5 per month from shops, clinics, and commercial offices.

In May 2014, the owners of cars and motorcycles were required to register their vehicles with the AANES Traffic Department and to use plates issued by Asayish.

In 2015, the PYD closed some popular restaurants in Hasakeh and Qamishli, for lack of registration, which forced their owners to get register these and pay the respective fees. In August 2015, the PYD launched an arms licensing campaign, where fees were imposed even on small arms licensed by the regime before the revolution.

In September 2016, the AANES Legislative Council passed the Income Tax Law, which took effect in 2017. The PYD administration also collects fees ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 from farmers, in exchange for providing them with diesel, in addition to a lump-sum tax on harvesters and agricultural machines. PYD charges fees and royalties under various names, including reconstruction, assistance to martyrs' families, support to YPG, YPJ and other formulations<sup>(217)</sup>.

Given the AANES failure to process transactions at the regime departments and due to citizens' needs, the latter are obliged to pay fees and taxes twice: first to AANES that cannot provide services in real estate and banking transactions, because all [regime] agricultural and credit banks are still operating, and farmers received the price of their crops through them last summer; secondly, to the regime. This double taxation was added to the existing administrative dualism.

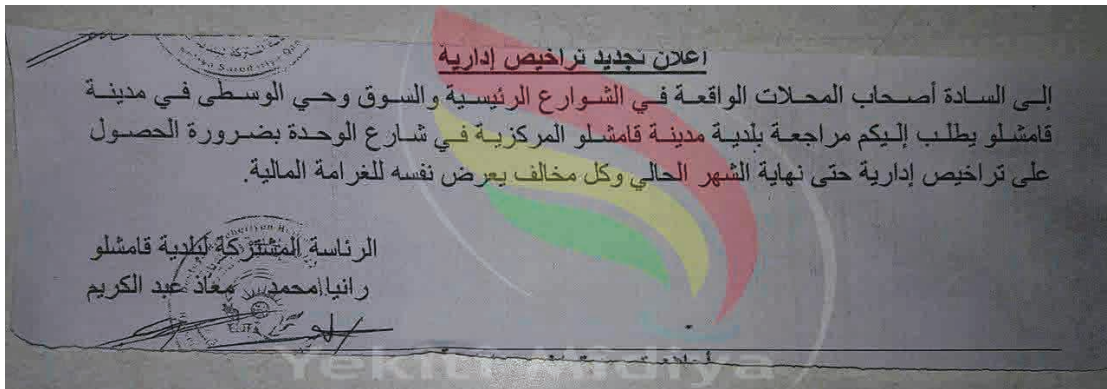


Photo No. (...) An order requiring shopkeepers to get their store licensed by AANES even though they are duly licensed [by the regime].

(217) PYD imposes new royalties on shopkeepers in Qamishlo market, Yekiti Party website, April 14, 2016 <https://2u.pw/op2Z0>



## Customs in the intended entity

Since its establishment, AANES charges fees for all materials entering its territory, whether coming from other parts of Syria or from abroad, such as cars, cement, sugar etc.) The Kurdistan Regional Government had previously closed the Faysh Khabur crossing on the Tigris, because AANES was charging import fees, and declared that the crossing would only be reopened when such fees were abolished<sup>(218)</sup>. Yet, the PYD authorities proceeded with imposing taxes on exported cattle (\$6 per head)<sup>(219)</sup>. Materials coming from the Syrian interior have to pay fees on the formerly Euphrates Bridge for materials coming from Manbij, and at Alyah checkpoint for those coming from Raqqa.

To give an idea about the taxes, the owner of a car purchased from Aleppo, for example, at \$20,000 must pay \$2,000 to get it registered with AANES.

## Education in the intended entity:

### PYD curricula in East of the Euphrates

Since it controlled the border line in the fall of 2013, even before announcing its AANES, PYD began intervening in the educational process. At the beginning, they started teaching the Kurdish language several hours a day in schools within their territory (Qamishli, Ayn al-Arabs and Afrin).

After announcing AANES, PYD took the next step: changing the elementary school curricula, starting with Grade 1 in the academic year 2014-2015, followed by G2 and G3 in the year 2015-2016, and finally G4, G5 and G6 in 2016-2017.

In the academic year 2017-2018, PYD changed the middle school curriculum. In 2018-2019, it changed that of G10 and in 2019-2020 that of G11<sup>(220)</sup>. In the academic year 2020-2021, the Baccalaureate (G12) curriculum is scheduled to be

---

(218) Reopening of the Faysh Khabur crossing on condition that customs duties on goods are removed, Rudaw, June 7, 2016 <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdi%20stan/070620164>

(219) "Faysh Khabur-Semalka" Crossing Opened to Trade Between Kurdistan Syria and the Region, Voice of Iraq, July 1, 2016 <https://www.sotaliraq.com/newsitem.php?id=338775>

(220) Mohamed Saleh Abdo, Head of Education Department, interview with the PYD newspaper, September 11 2019 - <http://pydrojava.net/arabic/archives/53332>



changed.

### **Imposing Kurdish curricula on non-Kurdish communities:**

In a further step, PYD began imposing its partisan curriculum on non-Kurdish communities in its territory, then on the Arabs in the SDF-controlled areas in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. In the academic year 2016-2017, PYD started imposing its curriculum on Arabs, Christians and other components, after translating it into Arabic and Syriac and adding the Kurdish language as a mandatory subject. This step was rejected as were the previous steps, but in vain; the PYD responded by closing some schools<sup>(221)</sup>.

In August 2018, the AANES closed many private schools run by churches, including Syriac and Armenian schools, for rejecting the PYD curricula, claiming that they were not licensed<sup>(222)</sup>. Moreover, Curriculum Officer in the Syriac schools in Qamishli, Issa Rashid was beaten by unknown persons, because he refused the AANES curricula<sup>(223)</sup>.

### **Parents resist the PYD policy**

The new curriculum was opposed by the regime, which closed the schools in response to the PYD move. However, the PYD troops broke the locks and opened schools by force, and punished the administrators who objected its orders and accepted the regime's orders. The new curriculum was also rejected by the parents of Kurdish students, who began moving their children to schools in the Arab towns and villages, and regime-controlled neighborhoods in Hasakeh and Qamishli. This increased the number of students in the latter schools (up to 100 per classroom), and meant additional financial burden for parents due to moving, transportation and housing. Many families preferred to move to the regime-controlled neighborhoods, which turned the schools located in the Qamishli and Hasakeh security squares into crowded places attending in two shifts: morning and evening, with thousands of students, while they had had only hundreds attending one shift only.

---

(221) PYD closed both Salem Khalaf and Hammoud Al-Abdullah schools in Ghweran neighborhood, Hasakeh, for non-compliance with PYD curricula.

(222) AANES closes many private (Syriac and Armenian) schools in northeastern Syria, Syrians for Truth and Justice, August 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/ar/732/>

(223) "Syriac Council condemns the PYD attack against the Syriac Curriculum Officer in Qamishli, Al-Khabour website, September 25, 2018 <https://2u.pw/WUEi9>





The well-to-do parents moved their children to costly private schools run by churches in Qamishli, Malikiyah and Hasakeh, where government curricula are taught. However, the PYD threatened these schools, hence forcing them to expel the Kurdish students<sup>(224)</sup>, who were left with only two options: either to study the PYD partisan curriculum (which has no scientific prospects) or stay illiterate.

Parents organized many protests<sup>(225)</sup> that fell on deaf ears. Several civil society organizations<sup>(226)</sup> and Kurdish parties<sup>(227)</sup> issued statements considering the imposition of Kurdish curricula an unjust decision that enforce ideology and partisan thought on students. Unfortunately, all these protests went unheeded and the PYD continued its policy, significantly increasing the dropout levels.

For a long time, the Syrian Kurds have been waiting to learn in their mother tongue. However, it seems they never thought that introducing an unrecognized curriculum, even if in Kurdish, would not entitle their children to enter universities, not to mention the lack of relevant expertise and competencies in developing such curricula. This was one reason why many Kurds left the country to secure a career for their children, despite the fact that their areas have remained outside the armed conflict zone.

### **School curricula in East of the Euphrates:**

After controlling East of the Euphrates and imposing PYD curricula on the Kurds and Arabs, there are now four curricula:

**First:** The regime curriculum, which is taught within the regime-controlled security squares in Qamishli and Hasakeh, and includes the curriculum taught at the Syriac schools in these squares.

---

(224) On October 20, 2015, Christian schools sent written messages to parents, stating as follows: (Dear parents, Please never send your children to school starting tomorrow, and apologize to you. Please comply, and we can receive your inquiries at school or on the phone no. 426536. Thank you very much.)

(225) On October 12, 2015, parents of students organized a sit-in in Amuda. They demanded that schools should remain away from partisan ideologies, and warned that introducing racist-based curricula might deepen racial discrimination. They also demanded that Kurdish should be taught alongside Arabic and English languages. On October 22, parents organized a demonstration in Qamishli, and on October 26, another demonstration was organized in Maabadah, Malikiyah.

(226) A statement issued by a number of civil society organizations regarding the school curricula issue - October 21, 2015, Yekiti website . <https://2u.pw/vkejv>

(227) The Kurdish National Council (KNC) organized several demonstrations in Qahtaniyah, Jawadiyah, Malikiyah, Qamishli, and Hasakeh protesting against the ideologization of education, and some KNC members were arrested by Asayish.



**Second:** The PYD curriculum, which is in Kurdish (Latin alphabet), is taught in the rest of Hasakeh, Afrin (before it comes out of PYD control), and Ayn al-Arabs (Kobani) in Aleppo Province.

**Third:** The PYD curriculum in Arabic is taught to the Arabs in the PYD-controlled areas.

**Fourth:** The PYD curriculum in Syriac is taught in Syriac private schools only. However, this curriculum was removed due to the opposition of the Syriac people and churches who threatened to close down schools and churches if this curriculum had been enforced. The AANES and the schools finally came to an agreement to teach only two subjects of it (Syriac language and music), while maintaining the regime curriculum.

After the liberation of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor from ISIS, the two provinces became under SDF control and the school curricula became more chaotic. The PYD curriculum is taught in 88% of Hasakeh schools, while the regime curriculum is taught in 53% of Raqqa schools and 89% of Deir ez-Zor schools. UNICEF curriculum is taught in 40% of Raqqa schools, according to statistics by the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) in December 2019<sup>(228)</sup>, while local sources indicated that the PYD curriculum is taught in all Ayn al-Arab schools and part of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor schools. Meanwhile, PYD always include the “democratic nation” subject, which reflects the complete administrative and organizational chaos in the educational process in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

Statistics, published by the AANES Education Department in Al-Jazira region, indicate that during the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 821,544 students in North and East of Syria. The ACU estimated the number of students in Hasakeh at 139,237, in Deir ez-Zor at 86,395 students and in Raqqa at 91,511 students<sup>(229)</sup>, which means that the actual number of students constitutes only 38% of the AANES numbers. ACU also estimated the dropout levels at 54% of all children aged 6-18 years in Deir ez-Zor, 31% in Raqqa and 35% in Hasakeh<sup>(230)</sup>. ACU attributed these dropouts to the reluctance of studying the PYD curricula and conscription and - we add - poverty, child labor, failure to stop school dropouts, and the lack of specialized educational and administrative staff.

---

(228) ACU Annual Report, Schools in Syria, p. 72 - Fifth Edition - December 2019.

(229) ACU Annual Report, Schools in Syria, p. 94.

(230) ACU Annual Report, Schools in Syria, p. 111.



The AANES Education Department said they had 41,077 teachers, but the actual number is much lower. Local sources say the total educational staff in this Department in East of the Euphrates does not exceed 13,000, about half of them are in Hasakeh province and the other half is in Raqqa, Ayn al-Arab and Manbej. The AANES pays these teachers 50,000 - 60,000 Syrian pounds (around \$ 75) per month.

The Department said it has 4230 schools east of the Euphrates, while local sources estimated the number at 1650, of which 350 are typical schools in city centers and cover all educational levels, while small, non-typical schools are operating in the countryside and cover primary education only.

While the regime conducts general exams for primary and secondary students, and issues end-of-stage certificates entitling them to enter universities and colleges, the PYD does not conduct such exams and all grades are transitional, and students are awarded certificates that are not recognized nationally nor internationally. To justify this, PYD says the evaluation process depends on actual performance rather than on traditional exams in elementary and middle schools, and on education based on quarterly or annual evaluations.

### **The content of the PYD Kurdish curriculum:**

Changing the Arabic language as the official language of school curricula was a top PYD goal. PYD decided to replace Arabic with Kurdish in its curriculum taught in Kurdish communities, with the Arabic being as a second language, starting from grade 4, in addition to teaching English as of grade 6.

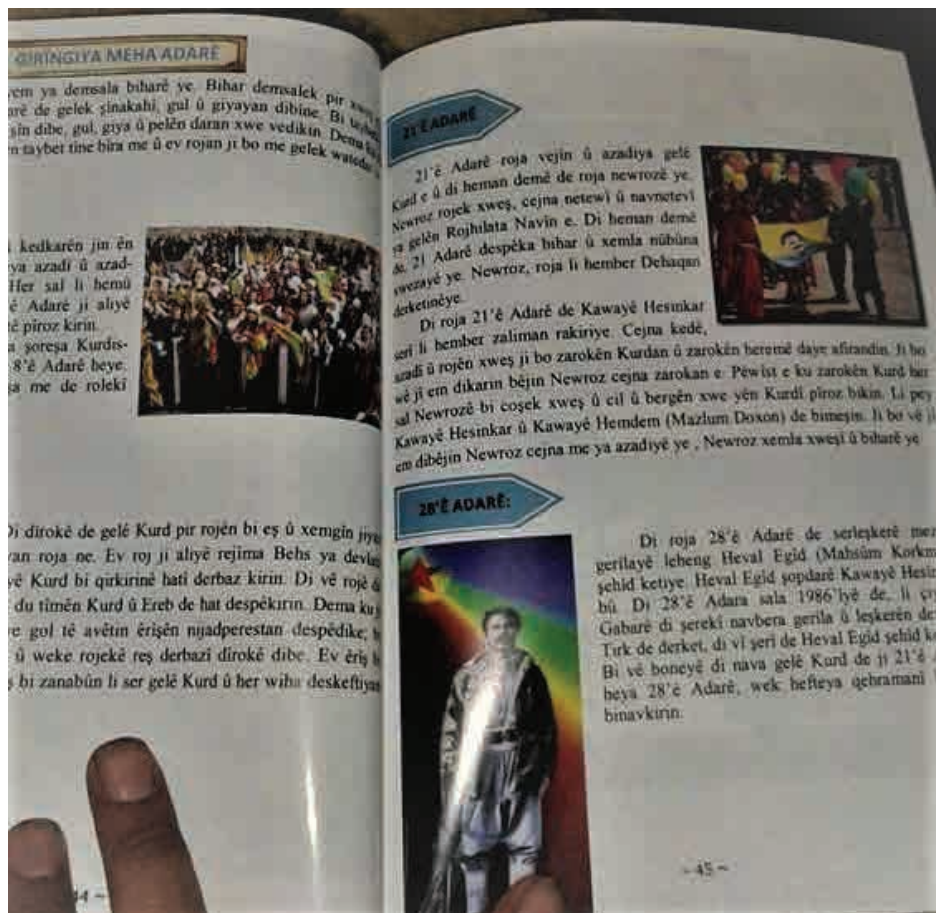
The PYD translated its Kurdish curriculum into Arabic, and used it for Arabs and other components under its control in Hasakeh, and later on in Raqqa and part of Deir ez-Zor. The religious education subject was removed from school curricula and replaced by non-curriculum sessions, where PYD teachers present content close to Zoroastrianism.

Social education subjects were replaced by new content, including the PYD thought and ideology, which derives from the ideology of PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan. The National Education subject was replaced by the article “democratic nation”, on which the PYD built its theory after abandoning nationalism. The old history and geography subjects were replaced with Kurdistan history and geography, with much content being about PKK battles, famous leaders and killed

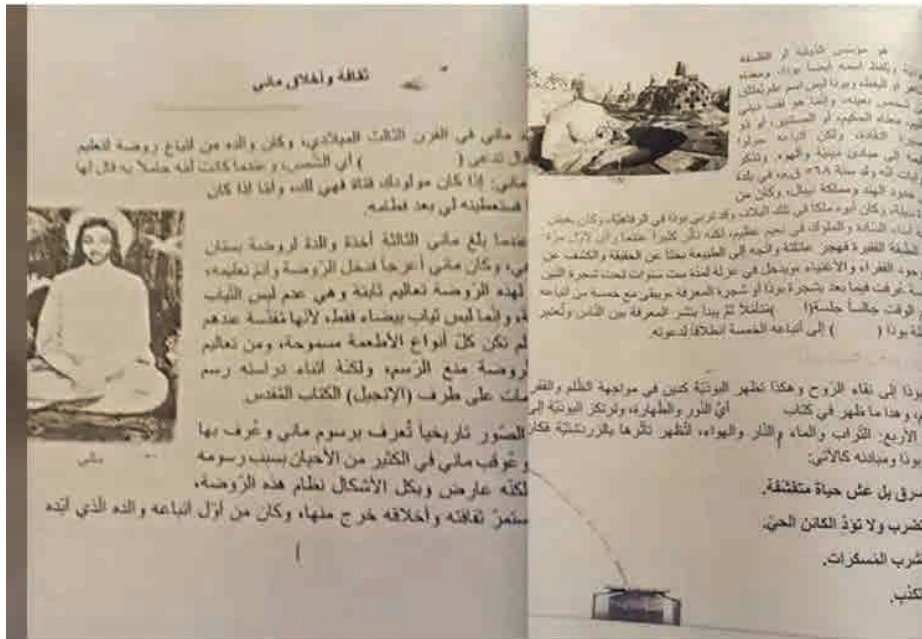


members, as well as about deepening hostility toward the Turks and mobilization for liberation, Kurdistan geography in addition to topics on capitalism, socialism, environmental society that aim to distilling the thought and literature of PKK and its Syrian branch, the PYD. The PYD curriculum also replaced the official names of Arab cities, towns, and villages with Kurdish names and introduced new Kurdish names that sound strange even for the local Kurds (e.g., renaming Mount Abdulaziz to Kazwan).

An ACU study indicated that these curricula differ from all other curricula in Syria, even those adopted in the opposition-controlled areas, in terms of scientific content, political ideas and history<sup>(231)</sup>.



(231) ACU Annual "Report, Schools in Syria" p. 71 - Fifth Edition - December 2019.



**مطلَقاً فقط**

BAZIYA ZAHIST U RAMANE AZAB YA TIL KOGER  
**AKADEMIYA S.RISTEM TIL KOGER**


أكاديمية الريستم رستم تيل كوجر

الاسم العربي: رستم تيل كوجر  
الاسم المحلي: ساهر خلد الصالح  
اسم الأم: ناهيا  
مكان وتاريخ الميلاد: حمص  
مكان وتاريخ الاستشهاد: جزعة ١٩٧٩/١٠

-١-

في ربوع مدينة تيل كوجر ترعرع الكثير من الأبطال اللذين  
سقطوا بدمائهم ثريخ شعبهم في صفحات التاريخ، شعوب  
عريقة تتلث عليها الكثير من الأسي والالام فولدت في  
رحمها مقاومة وطنية تعاضت بفضل نماء خيرة الشباب  
الواعي الوطني والعاشق للحرية فكان الشهيد رستم ميم  
تعاضت به ثورة روج أفا وانضم إلى قاموس التضحية  
والفداء، وهو من شهداء السكون العربي وتم تسمية  
الأكاديمية في تيل كوجر باسمه تخليداً لبطولاته .

**ساعتين خيراً**



يا أيها السائل ما الخربة	سالت عن جوهرة سنية
تضيء ارواحاً لنا زكية	يا نعمت الحياة بالخربة
* * *	* * *
لأداة طاهرة نقية	تبعت في قلوبنا الحميه
يا جاهلاً معاني الخربة	يا فاقداً جس الحياة
* * *	* * *
تعيش عبداً حالة شقية	مستضعفاً تمفك البرية
لنبدل دوتها ضحية	النفس والنفس والخرية

معاني المفردات:



## Teaching staff:

The teachers complied with the decisions of the [regime] directorates of education to boycott any schools teaching the PYD curriculum, because they do not believe in its ideas for the reasons we mentioned above, on one hand and on the other hand, to maintain their salaries, which the regime continued to pay to those attending its schools or educational centers. This made the PYD hire university graduates, who are very few, and fill the gap by holders of secondary and intermediate certificates, and even elementary certificates sometimes, after subjecting them to Kurdish language courses. Consequently, the teaching and administrative staff now lack qualifications as well as teaching and academic experience. Meanwhile, the selection process is politicized and based mostly on how closely candidates are connected with PYD and on other aspects of favoritism that had been in place before the regime departure.

Teachers of Kurdish language are chosen based on political and kinship considerations. They undergo a six-month course before they are appointed as teachers. Recently, Kurdish language institutes were opened<sup>(232)</sup>, and the period of study in them is up to one year.

## Kurdization of Public Life:

Arab and Kurdish neighborhoods intermingle in Hasakeh. Arab and Christian minorities also live in cities with Kurdish majority, such as Amuda, Al-Darbasiyah, Al-Malikiyah and Ayn al-Arab, but there are no Arab or Syriac schools in these cities, which forces parents to enroll their children in schools that teach the Kurdish curriculum in Kurdish. This will ultimately lead to the Kurdization of these minorities and forgetting about their mother tongues (Arabic and Syriac).

The Social Contract recognizes three official languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac, to be used in East of the Euphrates, in official departments, federal councils and the two civilian councils of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. In practice, individuals need to know the Kurdish language in order to access services, because Kurdish employees and workers dominate the vast majority of jobs and senior positions, and that is why some comment jokingly: “We should bring an interpreter when visiting AANES departments.”

---

(232) In August 2015, the PYD education department decided to turn Michel Saliba secondary school in Qamishli into a Kurdish language teaching institute for PYD teachers, hence forcing all the 840 students to move to other schools.



The regime civil service departments are still operating in Hasakeh, where employees register birth and death incidents and issue family and individual ID cards, without direct interference from the de facto authorities. The same applies to the real estate registry, still run by the regime.

### **Services provided by the entity**

Although the PYD authorities took over government institutions in Hasakeh, they retained the regime employees who work under the supervision of their managers, all paid by the regime, while the PYD has representatives in these departments. The governmental electricity authority continued its services, but the significant outages drove the PYD to use big generators, seized from Rmelan oil fields, and feed the government grid, upon request and in return for specific fees.

The regime's water authority also continued to deliver drinking water to households, but the AANES authorities collect the electricity and water bills from citizens. It is not known whether the collected funds go to AANES or, as we suggest, are shared with the regime. Bakeries also continue to provide the regime-subsidized bread, and government banks, telephone, post office, agricultural departments and educational complexes are still operating.

### **PYD and the property of absent persons**

Once PYD had established militarily control after the regime withdrawal, it began taking the citizens' funds and properties. In a mid-2013 campaign, PYD confiscated dozens of homes, shops, cars, and tractors in Qamishli, Ayn al-Arab and Afrin, in addition to four olive presses, under the pretext that their owners were absent. After assuming full control of Ras Al-Ain region and displacing its Arab population at the end of 2014, PYD seized their properties and cultivated their lands after assigning large farmlands to its members and fighters.

After establishing its AANES, PYD attempted to legalize those actions. On September 15, 2015, PYD issued the so-called "Law on managing and protecting the property of immigrants and absent persons", claiming that the law will protect the money and property of absentees and immigrants from trespassing and the widespread illegal seizure by others, and will use them for the good of society and AANES population. The law considered as migrant or absentee every individual





leaving the region without legal excuse for one full year, starting from the date of departure. The law also abolished all powers of attorney prior to its issuance, and recognized only second-degree kinship to avoid the seizure of the absentee's property. The law covers all departures including those living abroad for decades and holding the nationalities of destination countries. The PYD entitled the absentee funds management committee to run and rent real estate and movable and immovable property, and transfer their proceeds to the AANES treasury, and the owners were denied the right to claim them after their return.

Syriac representatives in the Legislative Council made reservation to the law. They saw it as a threat to the property of Syriacs and Christians, who constitute the majority of immigrants and owners residing outside the country. The Assyrian Observatory for Human Rights described it as an episode of demographic change that started with confiscating Al-Amal (complex of private schools), and then destroying and stealing houses, churches and schools in Assyrian villages north of the Khabour, which remained under the YPG control when ISIS occupied the Assyrian villages south of the Khabour<sup>(233)</sup>.

Likewise, Syriac churches considered it a demographic threat to all Christians in Al-Jazira; an attempt to seize agricultural lands and real estates in the countryside, where Christians own approximately 35%, and to intimidate the others, and threaten those who immigrated not to return to their homeland<sup>(234)</sup>.

Once the law had been passed, PYD employees started counting the absentees' properties<sup>(235)</sup> including those leased to others. They asked the lessees not to pay rent to the owners' agents, and keep them pending the collection of relevant PYD committees.

In June 2016, PYD also seized Syriac houses in Al-Firdous neighborhood in Hasakeh, but returned them after the Vatican intervention, since those houses are owned by the Syriac churches. The PYD Municipality in Qamishli seized Hadaya Hotel, located in the city center and owned by a Christian family, and is still using it as PYD headquarters. Under the Law on managing and protecting the property

---

(233) Assyrian Observatory for Human Rights: A new episode of demographic change in Hassakeh province, Ankawa website, September 16, 2015 <http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?topic=792125.0>

(234) Public statement from Christian churches, institutions, political parties and civil groups in Al-Jazeera, October 20, 2015.

(235) The PYD's AANES forms a committee to explore expatriates' houses in Qamishlo with a view to seizing them, Yekiti website, September 18, 2015 <https://2u.pw/M6pmW>



of immigrants and absent persons, PYD has confiscated the houses of its opponents, including some leaders of the Kurdish parties<sup>(236)</sup>.

### **Attitudes of Arab communities regarding the establishment of an independent entity in the East of the Euphrates**

The Arabs in Al-Jazira, regime supporters and opponents alike, rejected the PYD project from the beginning. They considered it a threat to Syria's unity and a step towards dividing the country. This is the case despite the fact that PYD managed to gain some Arab supporters, in return for personal benefits, and because the regime has supported PYD along the previous years, which has prevented the Arab tribes to strictly oppose this project. In general, none of the tribal leaders, except Humaydi Daham (Sheikh of Shammar), was part of the PYD project.

An anonymous statement, published on the Internet in March 2015, called for maintaining the Arab identity of Hasakeh Province, the unity of the Syrian lands, and peaceful coexistence among the components, while respecting the rights, traditions and beliefs of all<sup>(237)</sup>.

When the Kurdish forces took control of Tal Brak town in March 2015, displacing and committing massacres against its population, the Arab tribes called for a meeting in Jermez village, near Qamishli, to form a tribal military force to protect the Arabs, but the move failed, reportedly because of the regime. The Arab tribes also rejected the federalism announced by the PYD in 2016<sup>(238)</sup>.

After the PYD had joined the Global Coalition and formed the SDF, the Arab tribes could no longer resist the American-backed PYD forces, for fear of being accused of supporting ISIS. Meanwhile, the pro-revolution tribesmen are all out of the country. During the past years, they have formed several tribal alliances

---

(236) "Democratic Union Party is seizing the house of the son of Yekiti leader, Fouad Aliko," April 15, 2017 <https://2u.pw/pLHkp>

(237) Statement No. One - Al-Jazeera is Arab Syrian, published on March 2, 2015, and it is believed that pro-regime tribes were behind him.

(238) In an interview with Al-Mayadeen television, Muhammad al-Faris (leader of Taysi tribe) negated the participation of Arab tribes in the federalism conference held by PYD, April 3, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIESFKatGb-g&list=PLwSdSI6vdrsUgdRM6lhJ3uKPQsMHHC9Fu&index=2>



that included Arabs, Syrians<sup>(239)</sup> and Turkmen<sup>(240)</sup>, but these kept within political activity only.

Since SDF took control of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, the Arabs would protest peacefully, demanding disengagement from the PYD authority and be allowed to manage their regions, but no response by the Americans so far.

### **PYD policies towards political, social and media activities:**

In February 2017, CIA documents (declassified under the Freedom of Information Act) stated that the PKK considered all opponents as “traitors and murderers”, and hence should be killed in the name of the Kurdish people. The documents confirmed PKK execution of many opponents<sup>(241)</sup>.

PYD pursued the same policy towards opposing activities in Syria. It killed and arrested many Kurdish activists, completely stopped political activity, blew up offices of several Kurdish parties<sup>(242)</sup> and closed down the remainder<sup>(243)</sup>, banished their leaders, prosecuted and arrested or banished many Kurdish journalists<sup>(244)</sup>,

---

(239) On June 2, 2014, the Arab National Council was established in Urfa, Turkey from representatives of the Arab tribes and Syrians from Al-Jazeera, who participated in the revolution.

(240) On December 5, 2015, the Brotherhood Alliance was announced, which included Arab and Turkmen tribes.

(241) “CIA Documents: CIA PKK executed many opponents and its funding came from royalties on the Kurds”, Basnews, February 7, 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/kurdiştan/328865>

(242) “Unidentified people blow up the Kurdish National Council Office in Karaki”, Basnews, March 15 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/kurdiştan/336558>

(243) “Asayish closes dozens of offices of the Kurdish National Council parties and blew up Karaki locality,” Basnews, March 15, 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/kurdiştan/336569>

(244) Branches of Kurdish parties in Europe: Statement on PYD abuses, May 22, 2014. Signatories were: Kurdiştan Democratic Party - Iraq

Kurdiştan Democratic Party - Turkey

Kurdiştan Democratic Party - Syria

Kurdish Democratic Party - Syria

Yekiti Party of Kurdiştan - Syria

Kurd Future Movement - Syria



and banned satellite channels<sup>(245)</sup>.

The documentary “Dream of Rojava” produced in 2015 by Kurd Watch and the European Center for Kurdish Studies in Berlin, presents part of the PYD violations, and its attempts to keep the Kurds away from the revolution, through a carrot and stick policy, and practice political, media and military violence against activists<sup>(246)</sup>.

As of October 2015, activists collected 482 local and international statements and indictments against PYD and YPG, mostly issued by Kurdish organizations and parties<sup>(247)</sup>.

PYD arrested and tortured members of Kurdish parties<sup>(248)</sup> in secret prisons, prosecuted relatives of those affiliated with Peshmerga<sup>(249)</sup>. The PYD supporters attacked and tried to burn the headquarters of the Kurdish National Council and other opponent Kurdish parties<sup>(250)</sup>, and prevented them from celebrating the Kurdish Women’s Day<sup>(251)</sup>.

During three days (14-16 March 2017), PYD closed 44 headquarters and offices of civil society organizations, Kurdish and Syriac Assyrian women and youth groups, and political parties, and sealed some of them with red wax, under licensing excuses<sup>(252)</sup>.

---

(245) In August 2015, PYD banned Orient news and Rudaw channels from operating in Hasakeh, and canceled their licenses.

(246) The film was aired at the German Cinema in Berlin and in Erbil, Iraq.

(247) 482 Local and international statements and indictments; Yet, YPG still denies violations, Newsyrian.net, October 23, 2015. <https://2u.pw/N1xhE>

(248) “Human Rights Report Reveals Details of Secret PYD Prisons and Detention Centers”, Basnews, March 10, 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/reports/335501>

(249) “PYD militants warn families with children in Western Kurdistan Peshmerga to evacuate their homes”, Basnews, March 9, 2017 <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/kurdistan/335224>

(250) “Human Rights Center asks PKK to stop mob attacks and unlawful arrests and kidnappings”, Rojava News, March 7, 2017 <https://rojavanews.com/arabic/index.php/ku/item/19385-rojavanews>

(251) “PYD militants warn families with children in Western Kurdistan Peshmerga to evacuate their homes”, Ibid, March 9, 2017

(252) - “AANES closes the headquarters of its opponents in northern Syria”, Asharq Al-Awsat, March 17, 2017 <https://2u.pw/s6qRy>



The Yekiti Media report for March 2017 documented about 66 kidnappings and 18 attacks against the KNC offices and members, closure of all its offices, as well as death threats by PYD members and supporters<sup>(253)</sup>.

---

(253) “Yekiti Media monthly report.. 66 kidnappings and 18 assaults against KNC offices and parties, and closure of all KNC offices”, Yekiti website, April 2, 2017 . <https://2u.pw/iIu02>



## CHAPTER VII: ECONOMIC SITUATION IN SDF-CONTROLLED AREAS

The East of the Euphrates economy relies mainly on oil and agriculture, as well as on small industrial and craft enterprises, which do not constitute a reliable economy. Therefore, the East of the Euphrates economy is a rentier economy that relies on oil, followed by agriculture.

### **Agriculture:**

East of the Euphrates wheat is a strategic crop for food security in Syria. Till 2011, Hasakeh produced over 1.5 million tons of wheat annually (50% of Syria's total production). Deir ez-Zor would produce 10% and Raqqa 15%, which means that 75% of wheat production in Syria is produced east of the Euphrates. The same applies to lentils, barley, cotton and sugar beets, which are all basic and critical crops for the Syrian economy.

Agricultural production in East of the Euphrates declined due to the war. Large areas of lands in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor went out of production, as were some other crops like cotton and sugar beets, because transportation roads were interrupted and cotton gins and sugar factories went out of service. The lack of energy (electricity, fuel) caused decrease in irrigated lands, and consequently, decrease in overall agricultural production. It was estimated that Hasakeh produced one million tons of wheat in 2019, but only 400,000 tons were harvested (and shared between the regime and AANES). Fires ravaged large wheat fields (estimated at hundreds of thousands of hectares), and the de facto authorities failed to figure out the reasons or identify the perpetrators, and farmers were not compensated for the loss.

### **Oil and Gas**

Oil and gas production:

Most of the Syrian oil reserves are east of the Euphrates. Specialists estimate



that 80% of the Syrian oil and gas is under SDF control, in Deir Ez-zor and Ha-sakeh provinces.

SDF is currently running 80% of Deir ez-Zor oil wells<sup>(254)</sup> (namely from the Al-Omar and Tanak fields), and produces more than 50,000 bpd<sup>(255)</sup> of light oil, according to local workers and merchants. This is higher than the figures released in November 2019 by the head of Deir ez-Zor Civilian Council when he put production at 30,000 bpd, in the first statement of its kind about the quantities of oil production<sup>(256)</sup>.

However, only 5% of Rmelan oil is extracted<sup>(257)</sup>, because it is heavy and difficult to sell<sup>(258)</sup>. Building on this, Rmelan production is estimated at 12,500-15,000 bpd, in addition to 18,000 bpd produced by Golf Sands<sup>(259)</sup> (owned by Rami Makhoul) in Block 26, near Al-Malikiyah. The production of the remaining Jbisah and Al-Hawl fields currently does not exceed 3,000 bpd. Thus, oil production in East of the Euphrates is estimated at 80-90 thousand bpd. The Americans are currently repairing, maintaining and developing the rest of the wells, so production is expected to increase<sup>(260)</sup>.

In Hasakeh, the Syrian Oil Company is currently operating in Rmelan fields, while the Chinese Company operates in Al-Qahtaniyah and Tal Odeh<sup>(261)</sup>. Swaidiyah and Rmelan have about 1,300 wells, all operational and a good part of them

---

(254) Based on local sources and oil merchants from the region.

(255) Based on local sources and oil merchants from the region.

(256) "Exciting figures about Syrian oil ... The hidden future of East of Euphrates", Al-Jazeera Net, November 23, 2019.

(257) Out of a sample of 100 wells in Rmelan, the source said only five wells, were working due to the inability to market the oil.

(258) In July 2019, the Lebanese Al-Akhbar newspaper published a document directed by Ilham Ahmed, President of the SDF Executive Committee to Moti Kahana, an Israeli businessman and President of Amaliah Association, in which she authorized him to represent SDF in all Syrian oil transactions in the SDF-controlled areas.

(259) In compliance with the economic sanctions, the company stopped working and authorized the General Petroleum Corporation to continue production.

(260) In December 2019, local sources reported that a group of Saudi Aramco engineers had arrived in Deir Ez-zor to conduct a study about the wells status and how they could be developed.

(261) Local source.



work by automatic pumping, but production levels depend on demand. For example, one of the areas there has about 100 wells, but only five are producing, due to the lack of demand<sup>(262)</sup>.

The most important oil and gas fields in East of the Euphrates (and production levels in 2011) are:

Ser.	Field	Number of wells	Location	Production
1	Al-Omar	318	35.083095, 40.590659	92000 bpd
2	Tanak Field	144	34.910358, 40.822695	46800 bpd
3	Rmelan Field	406	37.001698, 41.963106	86250 bpd
4	Al-Swaidiyah	255	36.948047, 42.127086	86500 bpd
5	Shaddadi	166	36.055014, 40.721387	22000 bpd
6	Bbisah	84	36.139804, 40.812615	14500 bpd
7	Al-Hawl	47	36.374471, 41.149811	7500 bpd
8	Al-Yusufiyah	21		4500 bpd
9	Rmelan Gas Field	39	36.998612, 41.950151	4.2 Million m <sup>3</sup>
10	Koniko Gas Plant	17	35.344378, 40.318386	2 Million m <sup>3</sup>

#### Oil revenue sharing:

Since Rmelan fields were delivered to PYD in mid-2013, oil revenues have been shared (65% for the regime and 35% for PYD). After liberating Deir Ezzor from ISIS, a new deal was concluded and the revenues of East of the Euphrates oil are now shared between the regime, USA and PYD, according to local sources and to Kurdstreet Network in August 2018<sup>(263)</sup>.

On December 17, 2019, SDF commander Mazloun Abdi also maintained that the regime government was receiving its share from oil revenues, although there was no agreement in this regard with SDF that controls the oil installations. This explains the regime silence with regard to the sale and smuggling of oil without its consent<sup>(264)</sup>.

(262) Local source talking to the researcher in September 2019.

(263) Nezdar Mohamed - private: A source reveals to Kurdstreet the discussions in the Damascus meeting, and Mustafa Mashayekh explains, Kurdstreet, August 14, 2018.

(264) Mazloun Abdi: We have 110,000 fighters... And we are committed to integrating our troops into the future army of Syria - Asharq Al-Awsat, December 17, 2019 . <https://2u.pw/ugBa7>





Consumption of produced oil:

Oil is produced and exported as follows:

**Local consumption:** East of the Euphrates consumes 1.5 million liters of fuel oil and gasoline per day (10,000 bpd). Part of these quantities is refined in Tel Awdeh field in Rmelan, where AANES has about 30 refineries. The rest is processed in primitive refineries (burners) belonging to Deir Ezzor population who sign contracts with oil merchants pledging to deliver part of the production to AANES in Rmelan, and sell the remainder to their customers<sup>(265)</sup>.

**Export to opposition-controlled areas in the north and northwest,** from the areas of the Euphrates Shield areas in Al-Bab and Jarablus to A'zaz, Afrin, western countryside of Aleppo, Idlib and its countryside, and northern countryside of Hama (before the regime re-gained control of the latter last summer). These are large areas, which depended on the diesel and gasoline coming from the east to satisfy their needs. Total consumption is more than 5,000 bpd, but the quantities dropped after the Operation Peace Spring.

**Export to regime areas:** There are 150 tank trucks transporting around 30,000 bpd, from Tal Adas station in Rmelan to the regime-controlled areas in Homs, through Al-Qatirji Company via Raqqa province. Other quantities that cannot be estimated accurately, are smuggled across the Euphrates in Deir Ezzor, using ferries and hoses, as reported by the Syrian Network for Human Rights and confirmed by local sources. This method relies on pumping the oil through plastic hoses, installed by SDF across the Euphrates in at least four locations. Hundreds of small tank trucks transport oil, day and night, from the wells to the smuggling sites. SDF owns dozens of these hoses<sup>(266)</sup>. In a detailed report, the Syrian Network for Human Rights said that SDF significantly contributed to providing the Syrian regime with oil and gas<sup>(267)</sup>.

**Export to Kurdistan Region:** Oil is exported through a 9-kilometer hose (with a diameter of 10 inches) that links Rmelan Refinery to the Sofia refinery (Aliyuka) in Al-Mahmudiyah village in Zammar, Iraq. The exported amount is around

---

(265) The number was according to local sources.

(266) "SDF violates the US and European sanctions and support the Syrian regime with oil and gas," Syrian Network for Human Rights, September 15, 2019.

(267) Ibid.



20,000 bpd, with an average price of \$ 15-20 per barrel.

The Kurdish satellite channel, Rudaw previously spoke about this process and explained that the PYD did not sign the agreement officially, but through private investors. On the part of KRG, the contract was also signed by a private company, reportedly owned by a PKK supporter in Iraq, and this company is delivering cash payments on monthly basis<sup>(268)</sup>. Oil is also transported to northern Iraq by tank trucks, via Sweidiyah and Faysh Khabur crossings on the Tigris. Tank trucks with KRG plates were spotted on the Hasakeh - Deir ez-Zor highway.

**Gas:** There are no accurate estimates of the quantities of gas currently produced in East of the Euphrates fields. However, large quantities are exported from Deir Ez-Zor fields to Gender Power Station in Homs, where the regime re-export electricity to SDF that sells it to the citizens.

Sources estimate the daily production of Swidiyah gas plant at 6,500 household gas cylinders, in addition to around 5,000 cylinders produced by Jbisah plant in Shaddadi, but these do not satisfy the population demand.

Prices of petroleum products:

SDF sells crude oil to the burners at \$ 29 per barrel<sup>(269)</sup>, and to the regime at \$ 12 only. It sells diesel oil to the public at SYP 17,000 (\$ 21) per barrel; gasoline at about SYP 100,000 (\$ 125) per barrel; and a gas cylinder at SYP 3000. Thus, the daily AANES income from oil and gas amounts to \$ 700,000 (or \$ 21 million per month), in addition to the electricity bills that they collect in return for the gas exported to the regime.

Employees and salaries at the oil and gas sector

There is a management - supervision dualism in Rmelan. The regime's Syrian Oil Company is still managing the Rmelan oil production in partnership with PYD. The current SOC director, Trad Al-Salem resides in Damascus, from which he runs the company. The heads of SOC department also work remotely, from Damascus or from other provinces. AANES also appointed a general supervisor, called Azad (a pseudonym), who works beside the SOC director as well as other supervisors who work beside the SOC department heads appointed by the regime.

---

(268) -" PYD receives more than \$ 10 million a month of oil revenues through the Kurdistan Region", Rudaw, September 21, 2015 <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/210920156>

(269) These prices were calculated based on the exchange rates of the US dollar at the time of the study.



Since 2012, all newly appointed engineers and technician have been graduates of the Rmelan Oil Institute, which is affiliated with the Syrian Ministry of Oil. Just like the management - supervision dualism, there is salaries - rewards dualism; employees of Rmelan fields receive salaries from the regime and another salary under the name of reward from AANES. Engineers receive SYP 60,000 - 70,000 from the regime, and the same amount from AANES. Workers receive SYP 45,000 - 55,000 from the regime, and the same amount from AANES. Drivers of heavy vehicles receive higher pay, up to SYP 100,000.

Rmelan field workers also provided with housing by SOC and commuting services by the government. Given the current war conditions and economic and security situations, many employees have left their work and houses, which were occupied by AANES supervisors. Oil workers live in the government housing units.

#### Deir az-Zor Oil:

SDF runs around 80% of the oil wells previously operated by the regime in Deir Ez-Zor. Oil production and sales are supervised by an SDF-appointed official named Shaheen (pseudonym), assisted by persons supervising the oil production and sale processes as well as contracting with consumers. For example, in Al-Omar field, there is a supervisor called Adnan Ibrahim, assisted by a person called Ibrahim as well, while in Tanak field, he has an assistant supervisor called Hawker (pseudonym).

#### Oil contract with merchants

Oil is sold to merchants and beneficiaries - mostly residents of Deir Ezzor region - through temporary time-bound contracts concluded with SDF, and prices vary according to quality and production capacity, both are well-known by the merchants.

In addition to the contract value, investors pay \$ 25,000 in bid bonds, to be refunded at the end of the contract, as a guarantee of compliance with standard operating procedures. To win the contracts, investors also pay between \$ 15,000 and \$ 20,000 to the brokers who are often Kurdish persons from Hasakeh. Oil is transported 24/7 by tank trucks, to supply the local market. Many investors provided the regime with oil, through smugglers who use hoses between the two banks of the Euphrates, mainly from Al-Basirah, Al-Shuhail and Dhiban. The Coalition forces have repeatedly destroyed smuggling tank trucks, but smuggling is still running.



### Oil outlets to the regime areas:

Executor	Coordinates	Transport type	Efficiency
Layeth area	35.071454, 40.466792	Under-river hoses	Good; supply has not been interrupted
Al-Mayadeen	35.015004, 40.484363	Under-river hoses	Good
Manbij Road	36.638284, 38.269399	Tank trucks	According to military situation (interrupted)
Al-Zabadi crossing	35.122410, 40.423393	Under-river hoses	Good and almost the most efficient
Raqqa Road	35.932036, 39.010645	Tank trucks	Good, because the route is relatively safe

### Estimates of PYD financial resources

The AANES financial resources cannot be estimated accurately, but they are in the area of tens of millions of dollars per month. A quick look at the proceeds of oil and exports is enough to estimate the AANES monthly income. AANES spend little of these revenues to pay salaries to its employees, and to part of SDF troops, as the United States and Coalition countries pay the balance.

Despite its economic crisis, the regime is still subsidizing bread and supporting hospitals and health centers in Hasakeh, including the salaries of healthcare professionals and municipal workers, as well as teachers, though the latter stopped going to work since PYD took over the educational process in the province.

Most sources maintain that all oil revenues go to the PKK leadership in Qandil, while current spending is covered by other AANES resources (taxes and fees, electricity and water bills, etc.)



## CHAPTER VIII: FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR EAST OF EU- PHRATES

### Introduction:

The PYD has supported the regime against the revolution, in exchange for a Kurdish self-administration, just as their leader Abdullah Öcalan had instructed<sup>(270)</sup>. PYD officials explained at the time that it is the same local administration mentioned in the Syrian law, while the regime did not care about such interpretations, since its focus was to neutralize the Kurds from the conflict and win another militia that would support it against the revolution.

Until the emergence of ISIS and the formation of the Global Coalition, PYD control remained limited in the areas the regime handed over to PYD (Afrin, Ayn al-Arab, Sheikh Maksoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods in Aleppo, Al-Malikiyah, Rmelan oil fields, Amuda and Darbasiyah, and the Kurdish neighborhoods in Qamishli and Hasakeh). The regime remained in control of the remaining neighborhoods of the latter cities including the two city centers. Later, with the regime support, PYD managed to control Ras al-Ain after driving out the Free Syrian Army and Islamic factions.

This situation remained until the formation of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and formation of SDF, where the Coalition support enabled PYD to control the entire province of Hasakeh, in addition to the northern parts of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor provinces. Thus, PYD controlled all the region East of the Euphrates, in addition to Manbij and Tabqa west of the river. PYD also reduced the regime's control in Qamishli and Hasakeh to the two security squares.

In the west, PYD extended its control in the northern countryside of Aleppo till A'zaz city, at the expense of the Free Army, with the support of Russian warplanes and regime troops.

After joining the Global Coalition, the PYD goals began to widen. In 2016, it announced the formation of the Federation in Northern Syria. It also established two PYD-affiliated councils in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, after liberating them from

---

(270) "If you believe in the people's cause and work for it, you must prioritize what has to be done:



ISIS. PYD demands went beyond local administration or administrative decentralization, towards having quasi independence in the form of a federation based on political decentralization, that include defense, foreign affairs and security powers, which affects the country's sovereignty.

### **PYD territory demands:**

Normally, PYD should not demand autonomous administration throughout the East of the Euphrates, because the Kurds barely constitute one fifth of total population, and because such demands are rejected by the majority of Syrians, which threatens the whole PYD project. Meanwhile, it is not possible to divide each of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor into two parts, one south of the river affiliated with Damascus and the other north of the river affiliated with the Kurdish FNS. Therefore, the PYD demands are limited to a territory called Federation of Northern Syria, according to the Law on Administrative Divisions issued by PYD on August 1, 2017, and included the following areas:

1. **Hasakeh Province:** This includes the entire province called “Al-Jazira Region”, except Markada subdistrict on Deir Ez-Zor borders. Malihat Al-Tharew desert and Mount Abd Abdulaziz were excluded from the federation, while Tall Tamr and Ras Al-Ain were included.

2. **Raqqa Province:** At the Raqqa borders, the federation map moves north to include Tel Abyad district to ensure geographical linkage with Ayn al-Arab, while leaving the rest of Raqqa province outside the Federation<sup>(271)</sup>.

3. **Aleppo Province:** After Tel Abyad, the federation scissors went on annexing Ayn al-Arab and Sirrin subdistrict, while leaving Manbij and Jarablus districts and the nearby Al-Shuyukh subdistrict outside the Federation.

To the west of the Euphrates, the Federation has no geographic continuity with Afrin, which was annexed together with Tal Rifaat subdistrict after deducting it from A'zaz district.

The map shows an attempt to exclude Arab communities and to annex a Kurdish majority, establishing illogical boundaries, which are inconsistent with the

---

(271) In 2012, PYD-related websites published a map of Rojava, and advocated for annexing Tel Abyad to secure connection with Ayn al-Arab. After liberating it from ISIS, Tel Abyad was indeed annexed to Ayn al-Arab on October 21, 2015, despite the fact that both of them are administratively two separate districts.



international standards of administrative division. The provinces of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor are managed through civilian councils, formed liberation from ISIS. When PYD negotiates with the regime, it asks the regime also to negotiate with the representatives of these two councils.

## PYD Strengths and Weaknesses

The most important PYD strength is the American presence in the region, which guarantees PYD an un-declared no-fly zone, in addition to US pledges of protection announced by the SDF commander<sup>(272)</sup> and the Executive President of the Syrian Democratic Council<sup>(273)</sup>.

The US presence is also supported by the Arabs in both provinces who oppose the regime return, for fear of committing massacres against the population. Moreover, most US officials support keeping US forces in Syria, to eliminate ISIS threat, stop the Iranian expansion, and pressure both the regime and the Russians into accepting a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

In addition, there is a pro-Israel lobby in the United States supporting the US military presence. They believe that “Israel’s interest lies in maintaining the eastern enclave of Syria”<sup>(274)</sup>, as stated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, when he offered help to the Kurds. This offer was welcomed, according to Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister who added that Israel has received many requests for assistance, especially in the diplomatic and humanitarian areas<sup>(275)</sup>.

This is also confirmed by a demonstration of Israeli veterans, in front of the Turkish and American embassies in Tel Aviv, with the participation of a YPG representative, to protest against the Operation Peace Spring. The demonstrators demanded the Israeli government to intervene in the military situation in eastern Syria, by providing necessary ammunition, intelligence and military consultations

---

(272) “Mazloun Abdi: We have 110,000 fighters...” Ibid.

(273) Ilham Ahmed: We seek to establish official recognition of AANES”, PYD website, November 11, 2019.

(274) Jonathan Spyer, “The Future of Eastern Syria and the Israeli Interest”, Jerusalem Post, August 13, 2018.

(275) “Official: Israel aiding Syria’s Kurds, advocating for them with U.S.”, Reuters, November 6, 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/israel-aiding-syrias-kurds-advocating-for-them-with-u-s-official-idUSKBN1XG2AP>



to the Kurds, and by tightening pressure on Turkey and attacking the Turkish army if necessary<sup>(276)</sup>.

This group sees any American withdrawal as betrayal and demands that the Kurds should be rewarded a portion of the Syrian pie, by establishing an independent state, a federation, or autonomous administration or self-administration in the north of Syria. This is fueled by their hatred towards Turkey and desire to divide Syria, as part of the New Middle East project, which will create a small entity within a hostile environment, hence making it an ally of Israel.

Given that the Syrian crisis comes at the bottom of the American concerns, as expressed in the desire of the US President to withdraw, we can say that the outcome of all the previous elements favor a continued US military presence in the region, to give PYD the opportunity to consolidate the foundations of its separatist entity.

The second element is the exclusion of the military solution. The reasons that prompted the regime to withdraw from the region and hand it over to the PYD seven years ago are still there, and some of them have become more pressing. The military burden on the regime forces has become greater, after years of battles that have exhausted its resources. Moreover, its goal to neutralize the Kurds and show the revolution with a single national and religious color is still present, in addition to its desire to continue annoying and blackmailing Turkey because of its support to the opposition.

The third element is the geographical location of the PYD-controlled areas. On the eastern borders, there is Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which boasts unique geographical location and great physical and human resources that constitute an economic and political artery for the PYD, despite the political differences with the KRG that arise from time to time, but which can easily be overcome for the sake of the Kurdish common good, as proved along the past years. The existence of the Kurds of Turkey on the northern borders gives PYD confidence and assurance that its back is not exposed to enemies. This is evidenced by the fact that hundreds of Turkish Kurds are now fighting among the PYD troops in Syria.

As for the PYD weaknesses, the first is the absence of a demographically pure Kurdish region. Kurdish communities are scattered among other groups including Arabs, Syriacs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians and Chechens. Another weakness is the geographic interruption of Syrian Kurds. Al-Jazira in the east is sep-

---

(276) Adnan Abu Amer, "Israeli Concerns for Operation Peace Spring," TRT Arabic, October 17, 2019 <https://2u.pw/4Yylx>





arated from the Kurds of Ayn al-Arab in Aleppo by Raqqa province, as well as thousands of square kilometers inhabited by population that include only a few Kurdish communities.

Ayn al-Arab is also separated from Afrin by more than 100 kilometers of villages and cities with rare Kurdish presence. These are realities facing the PYD attempt to build an entity based on political decentralization. A third weakness is Turkey that is determined to destroy the “separatist project” on its borders, and the Operation Peace Spring will certainly not be the last round towards this goal. PYD is still giving Ankara justifications for intervention, through its continued affiliation with and inability to disengage from its parent party (PKK), which is causing the United States so much embarrassment that the US cannot defend PYD for long.

This relationship also affects the relations with non-Kurdish components under PYD control. These components will never believe in the power of one-party and one nationality<sup>(277)</sup>, and the only reason preventing them from turning against this power is the fear of a regime or ISIS return and the desire to maintain the stable security situation guaranteed by the Americans who still insist on keeping the actual leadership in the hands of the PYD Kurds who believe that such stability is the source of their legitimacy in ruling the majority, which seems wary of the PKK dominance on the security and military forces, but willing to maintain security and order<sup>(278)</sup>.

The PYD knows that the regime, which robbed the Syrians, including the Kurds, of all their political rights and even of their freedom, will not tolerate the establishment of a quasi-independent entity, and that the concessions the regime made during the past years are nothing more than a maneuver to avoid a greater loss by allowing a smaller one. Therefore, the regime will betray all promises when it recovers strength. It is also expected that the regime and Russian efforts to dismantle SDF will succeed either by pushing the Arab tribes to withdraw or more likely by the Russians persuading PYD to abandon its comprehensive demands for all components and stick to demands for the Kurds only, which will threaten

---

(277) In a report by International Crisis Group “Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa”, issued on April 28, 2017, SDF officials acknowledge that many non-Kurdish YPG recruits do not believe in the PKK ideology. We maintain - through surveying the moods of the people there - that All non-Kurdish components as well as a large portion of the Kurds do not believe in this ideology.

(278) In this report, International Crisis Group said: Residents appear relieved at the degree of safety and order provided, but wary of the PKK cadres-led, Kurdish-dominated Asayesh security forces.



the most prominent strength that PYD and YPG have relied upon to receive the US support and justify US presence in the region.

Relinquishing its broader demands in favor of Kurdish-specific demands means that PYD will focus on cultural rights as specified in the Russian version of Syria's constitution, and will give up the federal and self-administration demands and even administrative decentralization. Meanwhile, Iran, a key player on the borders of East of the Euphrates, has historically had an interruptive role, since the 1940s until the last independence attempt in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq two years ago. Iran fears any Kurdish national revival on its territory and considers it an existential threat, due to its diverse and almost balanced national fabric, despite its deep ties with PKK and exploiting it from time to time, to consolidate the Iranian control over the region.

### **Means of US pressure on the regime**

In addition to economic sanctions and the recent Caesar Act, the means of US pressure on the regime include preventing it from approaching the SDF sites throughout East of the Euphrates (except for the borders with Turkey) including the oil fields, while the regime is facing an economic crisis that heralds a looming revolution of the hungry.

Moreover, the continued US support to SDF indicates that the United States will - at least in the foreseeable future - not leave SDF as up for grabs to the Russians and the regime, even after the US re-deployment in the region, which will complicate the task of the Russian mediator trying to conclude an agreement between SDF and the regime. On the other hand, realities on the ground show that the US withdrawal is inevitable once the Kurds has reached an agreement with the regime and once the regime has returned to the currently prohibited oil fields, opening the way for its reproduction in what appears to be an ascetic solution to the Syrian crisis.

### **Possible scenarios of solution:**

Most scenarios build on the assumption that the East of the Euphrates problem cannot be addressed without tackling the Syrian crisis as a whole, but there is nothing preventing such a solution.



### **The first scenario: A Russian solution with continued US presence in East of the Euphrates:**

The Operation Peace Spring, launched last October, revealed a new scenario for resolving the Syrian crisis: mandating Russia to accomplish the solution, with US terms as follows:

#### **Easing the Turkish concerns and protecting SDF:**

This scenario includes easing the Turkish concerns. Turkey, along with the Syrian National Army, launched the Operation Peace Spring on October 9 against SDF and took control of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad, two days after the US withdrawal from these areas. On October 17, Turkey signed a ceasefire agreement with US Vice President Mike Pence in Ankara, which also stipulated a Turkish-administered safe zone, to ease the Turkish concerns about a separatist entity on their borders.

The US withdrawal allowed the Russians to spread along the Turkish borders and the borders of the new safe zone, to act as a mediator between Turkey, SDF and the regime. This led on October 22 to a second agreement in Sochi between the Russians and the Turks. The new agreement reinforced the first one, and added a third agreement, according to which SDF allowed the regime forces to deploy along the borders replacing SDF forces that withdrew 10 kilometers back. SDF also accepted the joint Russian-Turkish patrols, aimed at reassuring the Turks on the one hand, and protecting SDF from any possible Turkish attack, on the other hand.

With this, the United States achieved two goals that had remained unachievable for a long time. Their plan was to strengthen Russian presence, by withdrawing from the west and repositioning in the east, and away from the Turkish borders, which seemed as a response to an advice by the International Crisis Group<sup>(279)</sup>.

#### **Political agreement between SDF and the Syrian regime:**

Under this scenario, the Russians should mediate an agreement between SDF and the regime, according to which the regime will return to the northeast, and the SDF troops will integrate into its ranks, in exchange for recognizing a truly

---

(279) "Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, International Crisis Group, July 31, 2019 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/ar/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/204-squaring-circles-syrias-north-east>



decentralized government. However, sitting at this negotiating table means dealing with three components at once: AANES, Raqqa Council and Deir Ez-Zor Civilian Council. Negotiating with the representatives of three provinces at the same time means that the regime is expected to make concessions exceeding the Kurds demands and addressing the demands of the two provinces that were previously liberated by the Free Army and they took part in the revolution, which in turn means negotiating a solution to the whole Syrian crisis, something the regime would reject.

The regime also will not give the Kurds any exceptional status, which may open a door that is not easy to close. Now that the regime has regained control over the country, many regions (and perhaps entire provinces) will demand similar exceptional statuses, citing their specificity, to protect themselves from the regime's military and security machine.

### **Involving Turkey in the solution:**

Under this scenario, Moscow should involve Turkey in finalizing the proposed solution, which should be culminated in an agreement with the Syrian regime, to ensure the borders security, strengthen protection of the Kurds and address Ankara's demands to involve the Syrian opposition in the government (after becoming a de facto authority in the Euphrates Shield, Peace Spring and Olive Branch areas). The meeting between Ali Mamlouk and Hakan Fidan took place in this context.

The Turkish-Russian media escalation accompanying the Russian military escalation in Idlib indicates that Turkey rejected the Russian proposal to restore relations with the Syrian regime. The recent US restrictions on the Russian patrols in Hasakeh, in addition to the US plans to build new bases and the rumors about a US intent to drive the regime out of Hasakeh, all mean that the United States is supporting Turkey against the Russians<sup>(280)</sup>.

### **Expelling Iran and its militias from Syria:**

Under this scenario, the Russians should show clear signs of seriousness and intention to remove Hezbollah and Iranian militias from Syria, as part of their ef-

---

(280) "US forces in Hasakeh city.. Are they planning to drive the regime out?", Jisrpress website, January <https://2u.pw/IORuH>



forts to resolve the crisis. The builds on the lessons learned from Iraq. The United States does not want to repeat the experience of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and then surrendering the country to Iran.

As a token of such seriousness and ability, Moscow should remove sectarian militias from Al-Bukamal triangle away from the SDF sites on the other side of the Euphrates. In this context, came Russia's request that the Russian military police should assume responsibility of the Syrian borders with Lebanon, two days before Qassem Soleimani assassination, which pour in that direction. This applies to Russia's agreement with SDF to open the Salihya crossing in Deir Ez-Zor, on January 9, 2020, in preparation for the IDPs return to their cities and villages controlled by the regime and Iranian sectarian militias on the other side of the Euphrates, to enable the military police to take over, and drive out the regime and Iranian militias from Al-Bukamal triangle, similar to what happened in Damascus countryside and some reconciliation areas. The repeated shelling of Iranian militias in Al-Bukamal triangle by unknown aircrafts will also help Russia's efforts.

However, the Russian steps in this direction seem shy and slow, and do not reflect seriousness and ability to determine. The borders with Lebanon have not been handed over yet, and there is no sign of IDPs return, before removing the sectarian militias from Deir Ez-Zor.

## **Discussion:**

So far, Russia has met only the first condition and with American assistance, while it failed to achieve the other conditions. Its military progress in Idlib is supposed to be simultaneous with implementing the US conditions, but that did not happen. Russia shows seriousness there but inaction here, which means that it is neither serious nor sincere in meeting the American conditions.

The Russians and the regime believe that regaining east of the Euphrates would be a foregone conclusion of regaining Idlib and the other liberated areas. Therefore, they are not serious about signing a political agreement with SDF, and are counting on a US withdrawal before the American elections.

Until that time, the Russians are surreptitiously and gradually expanding to the east, towards the US bases near the oil fields, in an attempt to impose a fait accompli that will neutralize the US presence from supporting SDF, and deter the latter and drive it into accepting the Russian demands (namely, focusing on Kurdish



demands only and not those of the other SDF components). Then comes SDF approval to integrate its troops into the regime forces to fight the armed opposition. On the other hand, the Russians are inciting the Arabs to defect from SDF and join the regime forces. However, these attempts are doomed to failure. The US forces have recently reinforced their base in Tell Beydar, 15 kilometers west of Qamishli - Hasakeh - Deir Ez-Zor line that they control<sup>(281)</sup>.

They also resumed their patrols until Tall Tamr, 45 kilometers west of this line, and became stricter in preventing the Russian patrols from moving eastward. They have already prevented them from operating east of Qamishli and reaching Al-Ya'rubiyah and Rmelan, because these patrols are only expected to move along the Turkish borders.

SDF is also enjoying support from the regime and Iran. The visit of tribal leaders to Iran on December 26, 2019 indicates that Iran did not support Ali Mamluk's call for the Arab tribes to withdraw from SDF or get prepared to fight it. The Iranians aim to keep the Russians in need of their forces, and block them from achieving their fourth condition. Meanwhile, the regime aims to keep Iran presence to help it confront Russia that wants to control the regime alone. Thus, the Russians will fail to implement their plan, and the parties will move to the second scenario of returning to negotiations again.

### **The Second Scenario: Returning to negotiations with continued US presence:**

The Russian failure to implement the first scenario currently under way will lead to resuming negotiations between the regime and the opposition, either by activating the Geneva track, or following the Constitutional Committee track, which the regime prefers. SDF already feels the failure of the Russian plan, and consequently they are getting prepared to engage in negotiations that would lead to political transition, in accordance with international decisions, through returning to the Cairo Platform, in which PYD was a founder in June 2015. Even if SDF is not represented in the next delegation, they will most likely accept the Kurdish representatives from the Syrian Coalition and those of Cairo Platform. Thus, the solution should formally be Syrian, whatever the outcomes, which will certainly not include secession or the PYD desired federalism.

---

(281) The US troops are stationed to the east of the 270-kilometer Qamishli - Hasakeh - Deir Al-Zor line, which borders three quarters of Hasakeh fertile agricultural lands, which extend 50-90 kilometers till the Iraqi borders, including all oil fields and gas plants.



This scenario opens the door for a Syrian-Syrian solution, based on Geneva decisions that would lead to a transitional government and pave the way for the withdrawal of all foreign forces and combatants, deployment of the regime army over the entire Syrian territory, return of refugees and IDPs, abolition of demographic change, development of a new constitution allowing for administrative decentralization and ensuring political and cultural rights for all, and dismantling SDF or merging it into the army and security forces, according to agreed-on rules<sup>(282)</sup>.

However, this track is risky as well. The regime will likely return to interruption again, as it only believes in a military solution. The SDF insistence on direct representation in the delegation may disrupt the negotiations, especially if their representative is known to be a PPK supporter, which will outrage Turkey and thwart the negotiations before they start, and then blame the Turks. Thus, SDF has to accept the KNC representatives who are already in the High Negotiation Committee.

### **The Third Scenario: Negotiation failure with continued US presence**

This scenario is preferred by PYD and YPG who entirely control the SDF. Their separatist project, which is still a dream, would become a fait accompli. However, SDF is not confident that the US presence will continue forever, although there are many signs that such presence is long-term.

The failure to reach a Russian-American agreement to solve the Syrian crisis means that the semi-independent entity will continue to consolidate its separatist foundations under US protection and continued support to SDF, and with the expanding Kurdish control of the other components that will acquiesce in return for small gains such as the recruitment of their children, given the harsh economic and living conditions and the siege imposed from all directions: the regime and the Iranians from the west and south, and the regime and joint patrols from the north.

In this situation, there is hope for coexistence between the Kurds who are trapped in the Qamishli region and the Arabs to the south till Deir ez-Zor; coexistence that would create economic, political and social partnerships that would in a few years generate mutual interests making them accept the status quo, and even

---

(282) Harmoon Center, "Scenarios of the situation in Syria," Geiroon website, December 28, 2019.



protect it, due to the lack of communication with other Syrian regions, and would promote the idea that Syria has become a de facto “federalism”.

What supports this scenario is the continued US support to SDF, despite the elimination of ISIS, and the SDF continued marginalization of the Arabs, the largest component in the region, and preventing them from self-governing and exploiting their oil resources, dismantling their social (tribal) systems, promoting leaders loyal to SDF among them, and preventing the formation of any political or military arrangements outside SDF control.

The importance and seriousness of this trend is reflected in the Kurdish leaders’ attempts to fix up the relationship with Turkey under US mediation, as previously promised by President Trump. Receiving IDPs from Idlib to ease pressure on Turkey (which bears the burden of four million Syrians) was the first sign of goodwill and confidence-building, according to Mazloum Abdi who also offered to exchange intelligence information obtained from ISIS prisoners with the Turks to protect them from ISIS dormant cells in Turkey<sup>(283)</sup>.

This trend is also supported by some leaks about a US offer to export the Syrian oil through Turkey<sup>(284)</sup> via Tel Abyad crossing, in order to improve relations with AANES and make Turkey accept the status quo as a new version of Kurdistan Region in Iraq, especially if an agreement is reached between PYD and KNC as a political umbrella accepted by Ankara.

Under this scenario, there will be no political transition, no IDPs return and no reconstruction. Turkey will continue to bite the borders eastward, to protect its national security, and may even establish a buffer zone, supposedly to chase PKK members, hence turning the border line into a military zone.

### **The Fourth Scenario: Withdrawal of the US forces**

The US withdrawal would mean that Russia will proceed with its military solution, to restore the regime’s control of all regions, including East of the Euphrates.

---

(283) “SDF commander says that the Kurds are ready for dialogue if Ankara is sincere.” Al-Monitor, December 23, 2020. <https://cutt.us/tmIO0>

(284) On November 18, 2019, “Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan revealed that his country had received an offer to have a share in Syrian oil but rejected it because human beings are more important than oil,” Anatolia website . <https://cutt.us/3xw9e>





Moreover, the US withdrawal before reaching any agreement would push SDF into the arms of the Russians and the regime and make it accept what they offer, which will not be more than formal cultural and administrative rights provided to the Kurds as a gift, in exchange for merging their forces into the regime army to help the latter fight the remnants of the revolution and stabilize its dilapidated power. This will necessarily entail successive interventions by Turkey to protect its national security, by chasing the PKK members who will increase their cross-border activity and might even carry out military operations from Syria. In this case, the regime will not be able to implement the Adana Agreement, because it cannot chase them or arrest them, which may simply trigger Turkish intervention to occupy the entire border line.

For the Arabs east of the Euphrates, the only option is to conclude unguaranteed reconciliations, as was the case in other Syrian regions. Those wanted among them may join ISIS, given the regime/Russian siege on the region, which threatens that ISIS may come back to action. In this case, IDPs and refugees will not return, reconstruction will not take place, economic situations will not improve, and Syria will remain ruled by a weak unstable regime; it will never stabilize and will remain vulnerable to international interference.

### **The Fifth Scenario: Unilateral agreement between the regime and PYD with continued US presence**

Given the decreasing US interest in Syria and letting Russia proceed with its own military and political solution, the regime may attempt to reconcile with the Kurds represented by PYD without the representatives of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor provinces. This may include giving them the right to learn in their own language, removing the word “Arabic”, introducing constitutional provisions about the rights of minorities including the Kurds, and giving the Kurds guarantees of a long-term alliance with them and administrative and governance powers in their areas. The Kurds may accept that, given the uncertainty of the US presence that Trump has left unresolved, as well as the historical relationship between PKK and the regime, and because they fear to lose everything if the regime regains control of the whole country.

However, this agreement will not take place without US approval, preceded or followed by an explicit abandonment of SDF, which will mean betraying the Arabs in SDF and leaving them at the regime’s mercy. Under this scenario, there will



be no political transition and no refugee/IDP return, even those in the Kurdistan Region, and the YPG will be integrated into the regime forces. Turkish concerns will persist and even escalate as the YPG military presence becomes legitimate, which will not leave the northern borders in peace.

This scenario is supported by leaks talking about Russian attempts to persuade the Kurds to claim their rights only away from other SDF components, namely Deir Ezzor and Raqqa councils. However, this scenario has drawbacks as mentioned earlier, which the Kurds know very well. There is no guarantee that the regime will keep its word, as clearly evidenced by its record of agreements with other opposition groups.

## **Conclusion:**

A combination of factors has served the PYD interests and enabled it to control a large area of northeastern Syria, under US protection.

The PKK and its Syrian branch (PYD) dealt with the Syrian regime's need for their support to control the Kurds and prevent them from participating in the Syrian revolution, as a great opportunity to blackmail the regime. The latter rushed to bribe PYD, and Syrian Kurds in general to gain their sympathy against the revolution, by issuing Decree 49 of 2011 granting Syrian citizenship to the unregistered Syrian Kurds (who were stripped of their citizenship under the 1962 census), despite its reluctance to do so since the Ba'ath party assumed power in 1963. The regime also provided PYD with money, weapons and headquarters, and enabled it to control large areas in northern Syria, in disgraceful farces that led to establishing the PYD autonomous administration.

Meanwhile, the nationalist feeling among the Syrian Kurds was fueled by the growing Kurdish nationalism in the whole region (Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran), and by the regime discrimination against them. This made the Syrian Kurds escalate their pre-2011 demands in Syria (namely cultural rights such as using the Kurdish language and having their own schools and media outlets). The regime has consistently obliterated the Kurdish culture, Arabized the names of Kurdish cities and villages, and discriminated against the Kurds. They were denied higher military and security positions, diplomatic jobs and university faculty jobs. They were also deprived of the right to express their national identity. This discriminatory policy has heightened the Kurds' nationalist feelings and weakened their belonging to Syria. Kurdish nationalism was fueled after the revolution, towards



demanding an expanded self-government, like the KRG in Iraq, in preparation for full independence.

Israel's support to the establishment of a semi-independent Kurdish entity in northeastern Syria was a catalyst. It had significant impact on the attitudes of the US administration, beside the American need for local troops to fight ISIS. This was also encouraged by the existence of KRG in northern Iraq.

These factors have all favored the PYD interests and helped it gradually strengthen its authority independently from the regime, in large areas east of the Euphrates. PYD controlled these areas using arms provided by the regime first, then by the Americans, and with political support from the Iranians and Russians. The most important factor was the US support to fight ISIS. Thus, PYD established a semi-autonomous entity in large areas, which finally included the entire east of the Euphrates region.

From the first moment of the Syrian revolution, the situation east of the Euphrates attracted all types of international interventions. Foreign actors have always been searching for a foothold on the borders of Asia Minor (Turkey). In addition to SDF, the eastern Euphrates region has US and Russian bases, regime forces, British and French forces, and Turkish forces (Peace Spring, Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas), in addition to the Turkish observation posts in Idlib and Aleppo countryside. All this makes the east of the Euphrates a very complex region, and makes the situation there open to all scenarios.

However, the above five scenarios do not prevent the possibility of other solutions derived from one or more of them, or a combination of all scenarios. The regime may also pursue compulsory, life-saving solutions at a certain moment, or even overturn the table. For example, it may conclude an agreement with the Kurds, transforming Syria into a federal state, if the international community heads toward a solution that will remove it from power.

The PYD separatist project depends on the continuation of US protection. While we suggest that the US presence will most likely be maintained, given the absence of solutions and the regime's insistence on a full military victory, we expect a stalemate of the situations in East of the Euphrates. This certainly does not mean a US failure; it rather reflects a desire to divide the country, supported by players who still seek to divide the Middle East, starting from Syria.



## References

- Öcalan, Abdullah. *Defending a nation: Pleading to the European Court of Human Rights*, Zakho Rizgari (translated), 1st edition (DN, 2005)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Manifesto of Democratic Civilization: The Kurdish Cause and the Solution of a Democratic Nation*, Zakho Shyar (translated), (Azadi Press, April 2013).

- Barut, Muhammad Jamal. *The modern historical formation of the Syrian Al-Jazira*, 1st edition (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013).

Zaki Beik, Mohamed Amin. *Brief History of the Kurds and Kurdistan*, Muhammad Ali Awni (translated), Science and Impact Series (4), 2nd edition (Baghdad, 2005).

Saad Shaker Shalaby and Azbi Zaid Al-Osaimi. *The legal problem in the right to self-determination for Arabistan Region* (Amman: Zahran Publishers, 2014).

- Jared farse and Andrew Salve *The Dead Do not Lie*, Idrak for Studies and Consulting, February 2017.

- Jamal Qaresly and Talal Jassem. "Syria between War and Labor of Peace".

- McDole, David. *Modern History of the Kurds*, Raj Al Mohamed (translated), 1st edition (Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2004).

- Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), **Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava**, KNK publications, 20 May 2014.

- PYD "**Political Program: Introduction**", PYD website.

ICG reports.

Amnesty International reports.

Syrian Network for Human Rights reports.

HRW reports.



## Acronyms

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

ACU: Assistance Coordination Unit

IDPs: Internally displaced persons

KNC: Kurdish National Council

KRG: Kurdistan Region Government

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD: Democratic Union Party

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG: People's Protection Units

YPJ: Women's Protection Units

[www.harmoon.org](http://www.harmoon.org)

مركز حرمون للدراسات المعاصرة

Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies

Harmoon Arařtırmalar Merkezi

Doha, Qatar Tel. (+974) 44 885 996 PO.Box 22663

Istanbul, Turkey Tel. +90 (212) 813 32 17 PO.Box 34055

Tel. +90 (212) 524 04 05