RESEARCH PAPER
- Nº1 -

THE SYRIAN KURDS AND THE ASSAD REGIME -
OPPORTUNISTIC ALLIES

KARI FRENTZEL

THE SYRIAN KURDS AND THE ASSAD REGIME -
OPPORTUNISTIC ALLIES

On June 5, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched their final operation against Raqqa, the capital of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). The SDF, which numbers at around 50,000 fighters, are heavily dominated by Syrian Kurdish fighters associated with the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Over the course of the last two years, the Syrian Kurds have emerged as the key ally of the United States in the fight against ISIS in Syria and have repeatedly proven themselves as an effective fighting force capable of defeating the terrorist group.

Despite this prominent position of the Syrian Kurds and their military achievements, their political ambitions within the context of the Syrian crisis are not as widely covered by the media. The Kurds are a crucial, yet undetermined actor in the conflict, as their military capabilities make them an indispensable actor in the Raqqa offensive; however their relations with other actors are more muddled. They have mostly avoided confrontation and conflict with the Assad regime throughout the course of the war, leading some to put forward accusations of collusion and collaboration. Yet PYD insistence that they are a neutral, "third line" within the conflict clouds the notion of strict active collusion between the two. Accordingly, the Syrian Kurds are the sole actor in the Syrian conflict that receives support from both the US and Russia.

In the midst of the ongoing civil war, northern Syria is experiencing a new and unprecedented experiment in self-governance and democracy by the Kurds. Historically, the expression of Kurdish identity and culture was severely repressed by the regime, thus

motivating Kurdish efforts at self-determination. The beginning of the conflict in 2011 saw the PYD seize on a window of opportunity to declare their autonomy, and to put their principles of self-governance into action. The resulting Kurdish administration of northern Syria, known as "Rojava", is the first of its kind in Syria; a largely autonomous, federal region.

This article seeks to provide an insight into the drivers of this relationship, including historical repression of the Kurds at the hands of the regime, and examines both actors' ambitions within the context of the civil war. The PYD-Assad relationship can be characterized as a "marriage of convenience" or an opportunistic strategy of mutual survival, which has led to a de facto agreement of non-confrontation between these two actors. Both the PYD and the regime seek to ensure their own sustainability and survival; the regime withdrew from Kurdish areas during the beginning of the uprisings to avoid fighting a multi-front war, and the Kurds similarly seek to ensure their own survival by allowing for the continuation of regime-provided services and critical economic ties. The PYD has also taken advantage of this relationship by capitalizing on the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the regime to establish their federal region of Rojava, founded on principles of Kurdish rights and identity. The PYD-Assad relationship is also interrelated with the interventions of international actors, as the Kurds' position as the most effective force against ISIS has positioned them to receive significant international support, both from Russia and the United States. Yet it has also drawn condemnation and attacks from Turkey, a fact which Assad has used to his benefit. Despite the establishment of Rojava and international laudation for its cause, the Assad regime's current upper hand in the conflict and its refusal to recognize Kurdish federalist ambitions point to clashes between these two actors, and a possible reversal to regime repression of Kurdish rights.

Pre-Civil War Kurdish-Assad Relations

The Kurds are spread across multiple countries in the Middle East, spanning Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In Syria, they constitute the largest ethnic minority, composing roughly around 10% of the Syrian population, and are historically concentrated in the north and northeast of the country, in the Kurdish cantons of Jazira (al-Hasaka governorate), Kobani (Ayn al-Arab in Aleppo governorate and Tel Abyad in Raqqa governorate) and Afrin (part of Aleppo governorate),[1] with smaller neighborhoods in Aleppo and in Damascus.[2] Historically, the Syrian Kurds were oppressed by the Ba'ath regime in Syria as the Arab identity of the Syrian state left little room for minority recognition and rights. Starting in the 1960s, the Syrian regime systematically implemented various policies aimed at the repression of the Kurdish population. As the only notable exception, the Assad regime provided the PKK with a safe haven in Syria and used it as a geostrategic tool against Turkey, before expelling the group in 1998. This oppression of the Kurdish population has left a lasting impact on Syrian identity politics and has contributed to the current political landscape motivating the Syrian Kurds to establish their self-administered region of Rojava.

Regime Policy of Arabization

The policy of "Arabization",[3] implemented by the Syrian regime beginning in the 1960s, resulted in the disenfranchisement and

---

1 Part of the regime's Arabization policy included the renaming of Kurdish cities and towns with Arab names, and thus, many towns in northern Syria now have two names.

2 "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", *International Crisis Group*, Jan. 22, 2013, available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle

3 Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Routledge, 2009, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies, 51.

marginalization of the Kurdish community. This policy was a result of the Syrian regime's emphasis on Arab nationalism and its rejection and exclusion of ethnic minorities. The peak of this repression was the Hasaka census of 1962, which stripped thousands of Syrian Kurds of their citizenship, hence, leaving them stateless within the country of their birth. The aim of the regime through this census was to implement a policy of demographic change in majority Kurdish areas by marginalizing the Kurdish population and by encouraging Arabs to re-settle in these areas. This census, carried out in one day in the Hasaka region, required Kurds to provide proof of residency in Syria prior to 1940. When many Kurds were unable to do so (or even some who were), their Syrian citizenship was forcibly revoked. Estimates of Kurds affected by this census number at around 120,000, and by 2011, around 300,000 Kurds were stateless in Syria.[4] This census was one of the most detrimental policies of the regime towards the Kurdish population, as it formed the foundation for future discriminatory policies and has caused long-lasting economic, political and cultural effects continuing to the present.

The census created three categories of Kurds living in Syria: citizens, *ajanib* (foreigners), and *maktumiin* (unregistered). *Ajanib* include the Kurds who participated in the census, but who were unable to provide documentation of their residency or citizenship, and thus were subsequently registered as foreigners living within Syrian borders. As non-citizens, they are not allowed to own or inherit property, are ineligible to receive state subsidies on basic goods, are excluded from several sectors of employment, and cannot run for public office.[5] *Maktumiin* on the other hand, face

---

4 "A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power", *Human Rights Watch*, 2010, available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0710webwcover.pdf
5 Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, I.B. Taurus, 2015, 153.

even stricter restrictions, as they are unregistered and no record of their existence exists with any Syrian authority. Hence, these Kurds have no rights under the law, and no access to public services or educational opportunities.[6]

It is through these citizenship categories that the Assad regime was able to carry out repressive measures aimed at marginalizing the Kurdish population economically, politically and socially. Harsh restrictions on employment, a lack of access to financial loans and assistance as well as the expropriation of Kurdish land were all measures implemented by the regime.[7] Traditionally, most Kurds living in the northeast were farmers, and enjoyed relative success and affluence in Jazira's fertile regions; yet, the regime instituted a policy known as the "Arab belt" in the 1970s to both reduce the power of the Kurdish landowners, as well as to introduce demographic shifts in the area. As foreigners and unregistered Kurds, many faced discrimination and ineligibility for government land reform programs, and as a result, Kurdish land was forcibly taken and redistributed to Arab settlers. Overall, it is estimated that the regime expropriated around six million acres of land from Kurdish landowners as a part of this policy.[8] The regime also purposely left Kurdish areas underdeveloped during this period, not only to keep Kurdish regions dependent on the government economically, but also to encourage Kurds to migrate to larger Syrian cities, where they would be exposed to Arab culture and language, and would eventually be forced to assimilate.[9] As a result of these policies, unemployment and poverty rates skyrocketed in majority-Kurdish areas compared to

6 Ibid, 153.
7 Author Skype interview, March 27, 2017.
8 Allsopp, 2015, 25.
9 Fabrice Balanche, "Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Aug. 24, 2016, available at http://www. washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy

the rest of the country. Political oppression of the Kurds was also a key element of the Ba'ath regime policy. As the cornerstone of the Ba'ath regime, the concept of Arabism clashed with Kurdish expression of identity within Syria. In addition to a lack of political rights, Kurdish political activism has been severely repressed by the regime, and Kurds are underrepresented in government. Cultural repression of the Kurds by the regime included a ban on the speaking, teaching and publishing in the Kurdish language, a clamp-down on Kurdish holidays and celebrations, and even a prohibition on the naming of children with traditional Kurdish names.[10]

Assad and the PKK

Despite the regime's implementation of policies aimed at repressing Syrian Kurdish political and cultural activity, Assad's relationship with the Turkish Kurds, notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK),[11] contrasts significantly with that of the Syrian Kurds. The regime was able to use the PKK as a tool against Turkish interests, and also to redirect Syrian Kurdish grievances and protests away from the Syrian regime onto Turkey. Turkish-Syrian relations are mainly rooted in tensions over access to water from the Euphrates River. Over the course of the past several decades,

---

10 Author Skype interview, March 27, 2017.

11 The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was established in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, and since then, it has been actively pursuing armed conflict against the Turkish state. Its original aim was to establish an independent Kurdish state, but has since changed this policy to the recognition of Kurdish political rights and autonomy within Turkey. Its ideology is loosely based on theories found in Marxist-Leninism, and since Öcalan's arrest, he has promulgated his theory known as "democratic confederalism", which seeks to establish a Kurdish autonomous region within countries with Kurdish populations. This ongoing conflict has resulted in more than 30,000 deaths, and the PKK has also been designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, Syria, the US, the EU and NATO. "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", *International Crisis Group*, May 8, 2014, available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria

Turkey has threatened to dam the river, thus cutting off Syria's water supply. Tensions ultimately culminated with Turkey's 1977 announcement of a project aimed at damming the waters of both the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, to which Syria claimed that it would lose more than 40% of its water supply from the Euphrates, and raised concerns that Turkey would use control of the dam to influence regional politics.[12] In response to this, Hafez al-Assad granted safe haven to the PKK, and Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's founder and ideological leader, subsequently came to Syria in 1980. Inside Syria, the PKK was provided with training facilities, instructors, weapons and access to financial assistance from the Assad regime.[13] This relationship was mutually beneficial to both Assad and Öcalan; the PKK was able to operate with relative freedom from inside Syria in order to conduct attacks against Turkey, and Assad was able to leverage the PKK's position in Syria as a geostrategic balance and as a negotiating card for Syria against Turkish ambitions. However, as PKK activity and violence began to escalate, Turkey completely dammed the flow of the Euphrates to Syria in 1990 to incentivize Assad to stop harboring Öcalan and the PKK.[14] Syria was then forced to declare the PKK a terrorist organization to appease Turkey, and under severe Turkish pressure, Syria finally expelled Öcalan in 1998, which eventually led to his arrest by Turkish authorities later that year.

During this time however, while the regime tolerated and even encouraged PKK activities against Turkey in Syria, repressive measures against the Syrian Kurds remained relatively in place. Yet, the regime did make some minor concessions in an effort to prevent Syrian Kurdish uprisings against the regime. Due to the prominence of the PKK in Syria in the 1980s and 1990s, many Syrian Kurds joined this group and the armed struggle against

12 Tejel, 2009, 75.
13 Ibid, 76.
14 Ibid, 77.

Turkey. Exact figures regarding the number of Syrian Kurds who joined the PKK vary, but it is reported that around 7,000 to 10,000 Syrian Kurds were killed throughout this time,[15] pointing to a large number of Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK. The regime's awareness of this participation led it to limit conscription of Syrian Kurdish youth into the Syrian army,[16] thus facilitating the PKK's recruitment base from within Syria. This allowed Assad to redirect Syrian Kurdish political activism towards the Turkish authorities as opposed to the Syrian regime, sparing Assad of having to deal with a Kurdish uprising within Syria.

Syrian Kurdish Political Activism

Due to the presence of the PKK in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s, a distinct Syrian Kurdish political movement was late in its emergence compared to other countries with Kurdish populations. However, the Qamishli uprising in 2004 marked one of the first times that the Kurdish population rose up and protested against regime repression, yet it also caused a regime crackdown against Syrian Kurds. In March 2004, clashes between Kurds from Qamishli and Arabs from Deir ez-Zor broke out during a soccer match when each side chanted slogans in support of then US President George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein, respectively.[17] The mayor of Qamishli reportedly gave the order to security forces to fire on Kurdish attendees, which resulted in seven deaths. In the aftermath of these clashes, protests broke out all across Kurdish areas, as well as in Damascus and Aleppo, with government buildings burnt and portraits of Assad torn down.[18] The outcome of these protests and clashes was a harsh crackdown by Assad;

15 Ibid, 76.
16 Ibid, 76.
17 "The Al-Qamishli Uprising: The beginning of a new era for Syrian Kurds?", *KurdWatch Report*, Dec. 2009, available at http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_qamischli_en.pdf
18 Allsopp, 2015, 35.

he sent in the military to police Kurdish areas, installed a curfew and arrested around 2,000 Kurds, the majority of whom were youth.[19] This uprising was viewed by many Kurds as an attack on the Kurdish community, and an effort by the regime to quell the expression of Kurdish identity and culture. However, despite this, the Qamishli uprising marked the beginning of the Kurdish push for recognition and demands for political rights, and has remained a strong motivator among Syrian Kurds.

Following the uprising in Qamishli, Assad's repressive tactics were mainly focused on the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD was formed in 2003 as the PKK's Syrian counterpart after the expulsion of the PKK and the arrest of Öcalan.[20] For the first decade of its existence, the PYD was mainly based in the Qandil mountains of Iraq,[21] a PKK stronghold, as Assad's repression of Kurdish activities inhibited operations and a support base within Syria. The PYD was only able to return to Syria after the uprisings in 2011. While the PYD considers itself a separate and independent political party from the PKK, its foundations and ideological frameworks are based on those of the PKK.[22] Similarities in the ideological underpinnings of the PKK and the PYD include a basis on theories found in Marxism-Leninism, as well as Öcalan's theory of "democratic confederalism" that proposes a bottom-up, decentralized system of governance and governing

---

19   Ibid, 26.
20   Ibid, 40.
21   Relations between the PYD and the Iraqi Kurdish political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) are characterized by political rivalry and competition for influence and regional allies. This is mainly derived from the KDP's close relationship with Turkey, and Turkey's view of the PYD as an extension of the PKK. The KDP has also sponsored the establishment of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of Syrian Kurdish parties opposed to the PYD, which has often faced repression at the hands of the PYD.
22   "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", *International Crisis Group*, May 8, 2014, available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria

power concentrated within local councils.[23] The PYD has also consistently stated that it is pushing for a decentralized system in Syria, as opposed to partition or independence.[24] Yet, one of the main tenets of its ideology is the push for the constitutional recognition of Kurdish legal and political rights within the Syrian political landscape.[25] The 2011 uprisings allowed for the PYD to expand its base within Syria, and to begin to advance efforts to establish Kurdish self-governance based on these principles.

PYD-Assad Relations: A Policy of Non-Confrontation

The Syrian Arab opposition has put forward multiple accusations of PYD-regime collaboration, and has even instigated allegations of an alliance between these two actors. These accusations are mainly based on the withdrawal of regime forces and the subsequent establishment and control of a self-administered Kurdish region in the north, as well as the introduction of Kurdish-language schooling without any interference from the regime,[26] despite Assad's strong rejection of federalism as a post-conflict model and its historical repression of the Kurdish language. On the other hand, the PYD rejects all implications of collaboration with Assad, and Assad has refused to recognize the federal region of Rojava. The true nature of this relationship, however, likely falls somewhere in between these two claims. PYD-regime relations should not be characterized as strictly active cooperation, but rather as more of an opportunistic strategy of survival on both

23 Wes Enzinna, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard", *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2015, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html

24 Rodi Said, "Syria's Kurds rebuked for seeking autonomous region," *Reuters*, March 17, 2016, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0WJ1EP

25 Tom Perry, "Exclusive: Syrian Kurdish YPG aims to expand force to over 100,000", *Reuters*, March 20, 2017, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-exclusive-idUSKBN16R1QS

26 "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", 2013.

parts that has developed into a policy of non-confrontation. The regime's withdrawal from Kurdish areas at the beginning of the uprisings was undertaken out of necessity, as this withdrawal not only prevented the regime from fighting a war on multiple fronts, but Kurdish control of these areas was seen as preferable to opposition or ISIS control. The Kurds are similarly motivated by survival, both militarily and economically in light of the continuing conflict, and abiding by this arrangement of non-confrontation has prevented clashes with the regime in addition to ISIS and other opposition groups. The Kurds can be viewed as an opportunistic partner in this relationship, as they have not sought out such cooperation with Assad, but have taken advantage of openings and opportunities they have found vis a vis the regime. The PYD capitalized on the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the regime and established the federal region of Rojava based on principles of Kurdish self-determination. Furthermore, the Kurds view this so-called alliance with the regime as more advantageous over one with the opposition, as opposition groups have refused to recognize Kurdish rights and self-determination.

The Regime Withdraws

The withdrawal of regime forces in 2012 and the subsequent takeover of these areas by the PYD form the basis of opposition accusations of an alliance and collaboration. However, the decision to withdraw on the part of the regime was prompted by escalating protests and threats against regime security in Damascus. Assad has sought his own survival by preventing a multi-front war as well as seeking to avoid provoking yet another adversary fighting against his control; hence he decided to withdraw from areas in northern Syria. The regime has also allowed the PYD to operate relatively uninhibited by turning a blind-eye towards Rojava, as it benefits from Kurdish neutrality in the war, and also from their military operations against ISIS. This withdrawal of regime forces

has acted as a catalyst for the subsequent so-called alliance with the PYD.

With protests and violence escalating in the first year of the uprising, the regime was forced to deploy its armed forces to multiple areas of the country, thus resulting in the overstretching of regime forces and the takeover of large portions of the country by opposition groups. The breaking point for the regime was the July 2012 opposition bombing that killed several high-ranking regime officials in Damascus.[27] In response to this, the regime withdrew from Kurdish-inhabited areas in the north in order to divert its attention and armed forces to other, more pressing areas of the country.[28] However, unlike the accusations put forward by the opposition, no formal agreement existed between the PYD and the regime; this was merely a decision made by Assad to ensure his survival. As to why the regime chose to withdraw specifically from the Kurdish-inhabited areas of Syria, it is likely that the regime believed that Kurdish control of these areas would prevent yet another area from rebelling, in light of the Kurds' tense relationship with the opposition, and their priority of defeating ISIS.

Rojava also acts as a temporary tool for the regime to ensure that the Kurds will not also rise up against regime control, yet to indirectly retain some semblance of control in Kurdish areas. Some analysts have argued that the regime has "instrumentalized" Rojava in this sense.[29] By allowing for this project to continue uninhibited from regime intervention, the regime has ensured that Rojava and the PYD will remain a neutral, yet compliant partner for the duration of the conflict. For example, prior to his withdrawal, Assad made

27 Rana Khalaf, "Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria," *Chatham House*, Dec. 8, 2016, available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria
28 Ibid.
29 "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", 2014.

an attempt to appease the Hasaka Kurdish population by allowing *ajanib* Kurds to apply for Syrian citizenship, thousands of whom subsequently did so.[30] Additionally, Assad issued Decree 107 in 2011, which deals with the issue of decentralization within the context of the civil war. This decree allows for the transfer of political power, including financial decisions regarding community development, from the regime to local councils and other elected assemblies in the provinces.[31] While the implementation of this decree has been scarce and is likely a temporary solution in Kurdish areas, the passing of this decree was a strategic decision by the regime to temporarily allow for Kurdish self-governance in order for the regime to prioritize other areas under attack. In spite of the withdrawal, the regime has managed to retain some degree of influence within these Kurdish regions. It still pays public sector and government employees' salaries within Rojava, and maintains a presence in government buildings in the form of issuing official government documents.[32] The regime also left in place the National Defense Forces (NDF), a group of Arab and Assyrian tribal fighters loyal to the regime, in Kurdish areas after the withdrawal.[33] The NDF presence has allowed for continued regime surveillance and influence in Kurdish areas.

By abiding by this policy of non-confrontation with the PYD, Assad has also been able to capitalize on the YPG's military capabilities against ISIS, as this serves to the regime's benefit of not having

---

30 "Stateless Kurds in Syria granted citizenship," *CNN*, April 8, 2011, available at http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/04/07/syria.kurdish.citizenship/index.html

31 Samer Araabi, "Syria's Decentralization Roadmap", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2017, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/68372

32 Khalaf, 2016.

33 Ghadi Sary, "Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition," *Chatham House*, Sep. 15, 2016, available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/kurdish-self-governance-syria-survival-and-ambition

to deploy its own forces. There have been numerous reported instances of government support of YPG forces; the regime has reportedly supplied the YPG with weapons and assistance at various points throughout the conflict, starting in November 2012 during clashes between the YPG and Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups in Ras al-Ayn in northeastern Syria.[34] The governor of Hasaka has reported that the Syrian army supplied the YPG with weapons to fight jihadists in August 2016,[35] and reports also exist that the regime provides YPG forces in Qamishli with ammunition and military equipment for protection, and that this aid increases particularly when YPG forces are involved in an operation against rebel groups that overextends their capabilities.[36] By arming and supporting YPG forces with weapons and ammunition to fight ISIS and opposition forces, the regime has benefitted from the military expertise of the YPG while not having to expend its own forces.

A Strategy of Survival

Similar to the regime, the PYD's adherence to this understanding is rooted first and foremost in a strategy of survival that has resulted in a degree of pragmatism when dealing with situations that call for cooperation. Abiding by a policy of non-confrontation has thus served to the benefit of the PYD. This arrangement with the regime has prevented conflicts with multiple actors, as non-confrontation allows the PYD to focus solely on ISIS and other rebel groups. This marriage of convenience has also alleviated the effects of the war on Kurdish areas, by sparing Kurdish areas of destruction and civilian casualties and also allowing for crucial economic relations to continue.

---

34 "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", 2014.

35 "Al-Hasakah: Pentagon sends Fighter Jets", *KurdWatch*, Aug. 26, 2016, available athttp://www.kurdwatch.org/?e3937

36 Sary, 2016.

The threat posed by ISIS and other radical Islamist groups has often placed the regime and the PYD within the same line, as Kurds view ISIS expansionism as their main threat. While this should not be characterized as strictly active cooperation, it is rather a pragmatic strategy on the part of the Kurds in that they are willing to accept regime assistance and cooperation in order to minimize potential additional adversaries to ensure its survival. PYD officials have stated on several occasions that they view ISIS and other radical Islamist groups as a main threat, and they have proven themselves as one of the most effective actors on the ground against ISIS, successfully driving the group out of Kurdish regions. Saleh Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD, has voiced his concerns about the rise of ISIS, arguing that "if the regime collapses because of the salafis [fundamental Islamic militants] it would be a disaster for everyone."[37] The PYD has also made clear its pragmatism relating to its priorities and its relations with other actors; "the threat of terrorism means it [PYD] would partner with any group, including the Syrian government, if it's committed to a democratic Syria."[38] This marriage of convenience, encompassing the withdrawal of the regime and the following agreement of non-confrontation, has benefitted the Kurds as it has allowed the PYD to prioritize their fight against ISIS, while also simultaneously preventing the Kurds from additionally fighting regime forces, both of which are threats to their survival.

By abiding by this non-confrontation policy with regime forces, Kurdish areas have seen less destruction than compared to other

37 Patrick Cockburn, "Syria Civil War: Kurdish Leader Says Collapse of Assad Regime 'Would be Disaster' Despite its Treatment of his People," *The Independent*, Sep. 24, 2015, available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-kurdish-leader-says-collapse-of-assad-regime-would-be-a-disaster-despite-its-10515922.html
38 "Syrian Kurds Set Terms for Partnership with Assad", *Al Jazeera,* Aug. 4, 2015, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/syrian-kurds-sets-terms-assad-partnership-150803191234786.html

areas of Syria. With the conflict entering into its seventh year, many Syrian cities have been destroyed beyond the imaginable, and standards of living have deteriorated rapidly. It is estimated that around 50% of all major cities in Syria have been destroyed due to the war.[39] This includes regime shelling and barrel bombs, which are often used against opposition-held areas, resulting in mass casualties and the destruction of infrastructure. Engaging with the regime in a non-confrontational manner has spared Kurdish areas the destruction of such regime airstrikes, unlike opposition areas. While clashes between regime forces and the YPG have occurred, they have been relatively rare; the largest clash occurred in August 2016 in Hasaka, which has been the only reported instance of the regime deploying its air force and conducting airstrikes on Kurdish positions.[40] While violence and conflict is a reality of everyday life in Rojava, Kurdish areas have experienced relatively low civilian casualty levels compared to other regions of the country under regime attack. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has estimated that over the course of the now six years of war, the regime has been responsible for the majority of civilian deaths, mainly through airstrikes, chemical attacks, torture and imprisonment. It estimates that out of the total 96,000 civilian casualties, 83,500, or around 86% of all civilian casualties have been at the hands of the regime. In contrast, Turkey, ISIS and rebel groups have killed a combined estimate of 11,200 civilians.[41] Thus, as Kurdish areas have only been subject to regime airstrikes on one reported occasion, the Kurdish population has essentially

39 Diana Al Rifai and Mohammed Haddad, "What's Left of Syria?", *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2015, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/03/left-syria-150317133753354.html

40 Tom Perry and Lisa Barrington, "Syrian planes said to bomb Kurdish-held areas for first time", *Reuters*, Aug. 18, 2016, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-hasaka-idUSKCN10T11T

41 "Syrian War Monitor Says 465,000 Killed in Six Years of Fighting," *Reuters,* March 13, 2017, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-casualties-idUSKBN16K1Q1

been spared of much of the violence of the conflict experienced in other areas. In contrast to other regions of the country, the major concern in Kurdish areas consists of unemployment and the lack of basic goods, however, the continuation in public services and survival of main infrastructure has allowed Kurdish areas to have remained relatively unscathed thus far.

Economics also plays a role in this relationship, as limited, yet crucial economic relations have allowed for trade with regime-controlled areas, which have been critical for the sustainability and survival of Syrian Kurds. This economic relationship is not only driven by the continuing civil war and its associated effects, but also the economic and trade embargoes in place against Rojava by both Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. While the Kurds were previously mostly reliant on the border crossing with the KRG, the KRG often closes their borders without warning for days at a time and the border crossings with Turkey have been permanently closed since 2012.[42] Despite multiple statements denying collusion from the PYD, trade and economic assistance has benefited Kurdish areas as manufactured and humanitarian assistance items have become few and far between, and the Rojava project would likely be unsustainable without the continuation of basic services and goods provided by the regime in Kurdish areas.

Northeastern Syria, consisting mainly of the Kurdish canton of Jazira, is one of the most fertile regions of Syria, rich in wheat and cotton[43] and is also estimated to contain around 70% of Syria's oil

42 Sardar Mlla Drwish, "Will Syria's Kurds Succeed at Self-Sufficiency?", *Al Monitor*, May 3, 2016, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/kurdish-areas-norther-syria-economy-self-sufficiency.html
43 Allsopp, 150.

reserves.[44] Yet, due to the regime's historical policies of Kurdish economic repression, including the policy of leaving these areas underdeveloped, it has made it extremely difficult for Rojava to become economically self-sufficient. As a result, Rojava officials report that their overall revenue is derived from taxes imposed on agricultural products and revenue from oil exports produced in the northeastern Rojava canton of Jazira.[45] Thus, Kurdish areas are reliant on other areas of the country for export markets to which to export natural resources for manufactured items, while Damascus and western areas in Syria rely on the raw materials produced in the northeast.[46] Rojava administration officials have confirmed this trade relationship with the regime, as the deputy head of the Rojava Economic Body stated that "the regime is still buying wheat from farmers [in Hasaka] in order to provide flour and bread to other provinces."[47] Additionally, Assad has permitted the Kurds to extract and produce oil from the Rmeilan oil fields in Jazira, has provided them with equipment and has continued to pay employee salaries.[48] As this area is rich in oil, regime assistance in restarting oil production has been essential in the economic sustainability of PYD-controlled areas. Access to crucial trade routes with regime-controlled areas is also critical for the PYD, and was a key factor motivating PYD participation in the 2016 Aleppo offensive and other areas. When the PYD was able to link up with regime forces south of Manbij in February

44 Tom Perry and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian army advance opens new link to Kurdish areas," *Reuters*, Feb. 27, 2017, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-north-idUSKBN166250

45 Perry, 2017.

46 Fabrice Balanche, "Rojava Seeks to Break Out in Syria", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,* April 12, 2017, available at http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojava-seeks-to-break-out-in-syria

47 Sardar Mlla Drwish, "Will Syria's Kurds Succeed at Self-Sufficiency?", *Al Monitor,* May 3, 2016, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/kurdish-areas-norther-syria-economy-self-sufficiency.html

48 Sary, 2016.

2017,[49] this corridor created a new, stable route for trade to increase between Rojava and regime-controlled areas, and thus to import manufactured goods for the construction and repair of infrastructure, as well as crucial items such as medicine and humanitarian supplies to Rojava.[50] While Rojava publically prides itself on its bottom-up, self-sufficiency model of governance, in fact, it is largely dependent on other areas of Syria, and has thus driven it to seek such trade relations with the regime for survival.

A Window of Opportunity for Kurdish Self-Determination

As a result of the decades of repression experienced by the Kurdish community at the hands of the Assad regime, PYD ideology is couched in rhetoric espousing support for Kurdish rights and efforts at promoting self-administration of Kurdish areas within Syria. Öcalan's theories of establishing a federal region that would be successful in reclaiming Kurdish identity has motivated the rise of the PYD, and these ambitions came to fruition with the declaration of the federal region of Rojava in March 2016. This would not have been possible without the regime however; the PYD capitalized on the security vacuum created by the regime's withdrawal and seized on this window of opportunity to pursue its self-governance project. Moreover, an implicit understanding with the regime has helped PYD governing efforts by ensuring the continuation of basic services and institutions facilitated by the regime, as well as fostering Kurdish expansionist efforts, all which have aided the PYD in its self-governance endeavors.

Opportunism on the part of the Kurds defines much of the relationship between the PYD and the Assad regime, and this was demonstrated through the establishment of Rojava. In light

49 Perry and Al-Khalidi, 2017.
50 Tom Perry and Rodi Said, "Syria's Kurdish-led administration sees end to economic siege", *Reuters*, March 3, 2017, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-northeast-idUSKBN16A0K2

of the regime withdrawal in July 2012, the northern Kurdish areas were suddenly facing both a political and security vacuum, which the PYD saw as a window of opportunity. The PYD subsequently took control of both political and security affairs in these areas, symbolically replacing the Syrian flag with the Kurdish one and also portraits of Assad with those of Öcalan.[51] The "Democratic Federation of Rojava—Northern Syria" was then officially proclaimed in March 2016, when Syrian Kurdish leaders voted to unite the three cantons into a federal democratic region.[52] Within this new entity, emphasis is placed on bottom-up governance, and a series of local councils and assemblies run each province.[53] Much of the Kurds' historical relationship with the regime has been a driving factor of these ideological principles, as for many Syrian Kurds, Rojava serves as an opportunity for an autonomous area where they will be recognized as citizens and will be able to express, without threat of oppression, their identity and culture. Thus, Rojava's official constitution, known as its "social contract", is couched in terms that promote Syrian unity regardless of ethnic or religious differences, a strong respect for women's rights, efforts aimed at reclaiming citizenship for Kurds as well as promoting Kurdish culture and language.[54]

While the Rojava project in theory aims to establish its own administrative structures in line with Öcalan's principles of bottom-up governance, the co-optation of existing regime administrative structures and services has allowed Rojava to develop more effectively and promptly than by establishing its own institutions from scratch. When the PYD took control of Kurdish areas following the regime withdrawal and sought to establish its own administration, vacant regime institutions

---

51 Allsopp, 206

52 Said, 2016.

53 Fabrice Balanche, "The Kurdish Path to Socialism in Syria", 2017.

54 Author interview, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, March 7, 2017.

provided an opportunity for the PYD to establish self-governance. PYD officials relabeled many of the existing regime institutions in these areas, such as schools, hospitals and administrative institutions as their own, and allowed financial assistance from the regime to continue.[55] The regime continues to pay public sector salaries within Rojava, as well as facilitates the issuing of government paperwork and identification documents.[56] Such regime services, including water, electricity and administrative assistance, have provided a foundation from which the Rojava project has been able to develop. Because of the prior existence of such structures, the PYD has been able to establish additional Rojava administrative institutions to provide services to the population under PYD control. PYD officials have stated that they have started new projects, such as health, sewage, medical and agricultural projects[57] to provide improved services for their citizens. As a result of this opportunism on the part of the PYD, the overall 2016 budget of Rojava culminated at around $55 million.[58] Without these pre-existing regime administrative structures in Kurdish areas, it is estimated that Rojava governance efforts would not be experiencing the level of development that it currently is.

The political and security vacuum created as a result of Assad's withdrawal from Kurdish areas not only allowed the PYD to take control of majority Kurdish areas, but has also provided them with the opportunity to spread into additional areas, thereby expanding the borders of Rojava. The PYD is currently in control of a large area in northern Syria, a result of their recapturing of territory from ISIS and other rebel groups. In addition to the historical Kurdish-inhabited areas in the northeast cantons of

55 Sary, 2016.

56 Khalaf, 2016.

57 Tom Perry, "Syrian Kurds' spending plans reflect rising ambition", *Reuters*, July 28, 2015, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCN0Q21BK20150728

58 Ibid.

Jazira and Kobani, as well as Afrin in the northwest, the Kurds have expanded south towards Raqqa as a part of the liberation battle, as well as west of the Euphrates River, including the city of Manbij. Currently, it is estimated that the Kurdish YPG controls around 16% of Syria, all under the Rojava umbrella.[59] The ultimate Kurdish goal in terms of territory is to connect the two eastern cantons with Afrin to create a unified autonomous Rojava region in the north of Syria. Thus, seizing on opportunities to capture some of these areas has been a key component of Kurdish expansion. Aleppo, which falls in between Afrin and Kobani, constitutes a strategic area for the PYD in this goal of unification, and thus explains YPG participation in the Aleppo offensive. While not directly cooperating with the regime in Aleppo, YPG fighters did play a role in supporting regime operations, particularly by assisting regime forces in controlling and cutting off rebel control of Castello road.[60] As a result, the YPG is currently in control of the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo. Additionally, PYD officials have issued statements detailing the extent of their territorial ambitions, such as their plans to possibly create a trade corridor extending all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as occupying the city of Raqqa following its liberation from ISIS, and even pushing further south to Deir az-Zor.[61] The lack of a regime presence in these areas has allowed the YPG to expand the borders of Rojava, taking control of political administration and security in these areas.

---

59 Mark Townsend, "Syria's Kurds march on to Raqqa and the sea", *The Guardian*, May 6, 2017, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/06/syria-kurds-raqqa-mediterranen

60 Fabrice Balance, "Kurdish Forces Bolster Assad in Aleppo", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 29, 2016, available at http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-forces-bolster-assad-in-aleppo

61 Townsend, 2017.

The PYD and the Syrian Opposition

Accusations of PYD-regime collusion were first put forward by elements of the Syrian opposition in response to Kurdish inhibitions to join and participate in the uprisings when they first began in 2011. While the PYD denies all cooperation with the regime, they have also voiced their distrust of and opposition to Syrian Arab groups. As the Kurds prioritize their survival and are also pushing for Kurdish rights, they have sought out partners within the conflict who can supply them with such support, including the recognition of Kurdish rights and Rojava as a region if a settlement to the conflict is ever reached. However, the opposition's emphasis on their own goals and refusal to recognize Rojava or Kurdish rights, as well as their strong backing by Turkey, has pushed the PYD's interests closer to those of the regime in a "lesser of two evils" scenario. The Kurds have recognized that the opposition will not assist them in these goals and thus, a policy of non-confrontation with the regime appears to be more advantageous to the PYD.

When protests first broke out in southern Syria in the beginning of 2011 calling for the ousting of Assad, the Syrian Kurds were apprehensive about joining the protests. Many Kurdish parties argued at the time that rising up against the regime, as the Kurds had done in Qamishli in 2004, would result in violence and harsh repression measures on the Kurdish population.[62] The public memory of Qamishli and the subsequent repression remained relatively strong among Kurds, particularly the lack of an Arab response in support of their protests in 2004. As a result, there was no official Kurdish position taken on the uprisings for the first few months, and while several Kurdish youth groups did participate, the Kurds tried to present themselves as a "third line"

---

62   Allsopp, 2015, 197.

in the conflict.[63]

Ultimately, what distanced the PYD from the opposition movement were statements and rhetoric from the opposition itself, as well as Turkey's support of rebel groups. Much of the rhetoric espoused by the opposition is couched in Syrian Arab nationalist terms, and many view the PYD project as against Syrian unity. In addition to several critical comments made by opposition leaders about the PYD and Kurdish self-governance, the opposition has often defended the use of the title, the Syrian "Arab" Republic, and has insisted that "Syria [is] an Arab state and part of the Arab nation".[64] As a result of these comments, the PYD began to shift away from the uprisings of the opposition, and instead, they saw the regime as a much more advantageous partner within the context of the war. The opposition's rejection of federalism as a model for post-conflict Syria has also contributed to tensions between the opposition and the PYD. In a report issued by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in response to the declaration of Rojava in March 2016, they stated that, "The [Syrian] Coalition totally rejects the unilateral declaration of a federal region in northern Syria."[65] This rejection of decentralization has led to the view among Syrian Kurds that the opposition will not respect Kurdish rights and the Syrian Kurds as an equal partner if the PYD were to join with the opposition. These tensions have led to multiple clashes between the Kurds and rebel groups throughout the course of the war, as many opposition groups, supported by Turkey, seek to constrain

63 Bethan McKernan, "The Kurdish Woman Building a Feminist Democracy and Fighting ISIS at the same time," *The Independent*, Jan. 5, 2017, available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdish-woman-building-feminist-democrac-fighting-isis-at-the-same-time-syria-kurdistan-rojava-new-a7487151.html
64 Allsopp, 2015, 199.
65 Hisham Arafat, "President Assad: 'Most Syrian Kurds Reject Federalism," *Kurdistan 24*, March 31, 2016, available at http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/deb23ceb-34fc-4840-9cf5-0934fb112cd1

Kurdish expansion. Turkey's support of opposition groups, as well as its airstrikes against Kurdish positions, the most recent ones in April 2017, has also pushed PYD-Syrian opposition relations to a breaking point. Turkey's support has caused multiple clashes between these two actors, including in the Aleppo offensive where Turkey provided support to shore up the opposition, and also in al-Bab, where Turkey is attempting to prevent the unification of the Afrin and Kobani cantons of Rojava. In addition, Saleh Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD, has stated that he considers the Syrian opposition to be "Turkish puppets",[66] further distancing the Kurds from the opposition's cause, and pushing the PYD closer to the regime.

A Complex Web of International Alliances

The PYD-Assad relationship has also become entangled in several and increasingly overlapping alliances with international actors. Both the regime and the Kurds have used the interventions of international actors into the conflict to their advantage. The regime, continuing with their previous relationship with the PKK, has used the presence of the PYD in northern Syria as a bulwark and a geostrategic balance against Turkish attacks and interests in Syria, and has also managed to shift Turkey's Syria policy to focus solely on Kurdish expansionism in the north, as opposed to Assad himself. On the other hand, the Kurds' position of not openly siding with one actor in the war, and instead as a "third line",[67] has left them open to international support from both the US and Russia. The international community's prioritization of defeating ISIS has been a window of opportunity for the PYD in their effort to expand and defeat ISIS, and thus, they have been on

66 Andrew J. Tabler, "The Syrian Opposition and the PYD," In: Patrick Clawson, "Syrian Kurds as a US Ally", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Nov., 2016, available at http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-kurds-as-a-u.s.-ally-cooperation-and-complications
67 McKernan, 2017.

the receiving end of significant international support.

Turkey

Turkey's direct intervention into the Syrian conflict in August 2016 in its so-called "Operation Euphrates Shield" was motivated by two main factors: removing ISIS and other extremist groups from its border region, as well as preventing the Syrian Kurds from establishing a contiguous autonomous region on their southern border, as Turkey fears that this could motivate similar efforts among their own Kurdish population.[68] Turkey considers the PYD and the PKK to be essentially the same; a terrorist organization that seeks to attack the Turkish state, and thus, it has made every effort against the Syrian Kurds, including preventing them from participating in the international negotiations in Geneva.[69] In light of these objectives, Turkey has carried out a policy of supporting rebel groups opposed to the PYD, and has become the PYD's main opponent in its efforts to stop its expansion.

Prior to Turkey's intervention, its support of opposition groups threatened Assad's hold on power, thus Assad strategically used the PYD as somewhat of a trump card to counter Turkish actions in northern Syria, similar to Syria's harboring of the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s. The regime's withdrawal and allowance for the establishment of Rojava to be undertaken with little military or political interference has allowed the PYD to not only gain control in these areas, but to counter Turkish influence and interference in northern Syria.[70] By allowing the PYD relatively free reign, the

68 "Turkey ends 'Shield' military operation in Syria, PM says," *Reuters*, March 29, 2017, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN17030R

69 Author interview, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, March 7, 2017.

70 Sammy Ketz, "To counter Turkey, regime forces sidle up to Kurds", *Agence France Presse*, March 2, 2017, available at http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2017/Mar-02/395671-to-counter-turkey-regime-forces-sidle-up-to-kurds.ashx

regime has created a belt of protection for itself against Turkish attacks, as it has been able to keep the Turkish armed forces focused on Kurdish targets, as opposed to regime ones. In this way, the regime has been able to shift Turkish policy in Syria from focusing on Assad to preventing Kurdish expansionism in the north, thereby decreasing Turkish attacks on regime positions. PYD control of northern Syria has also hindered Turkish support of opposition groups by cutting off Turkish supply routes, a key strategic goal of the YPG during the Aleppo offensive.[71]

The United States

PYD military prowess has proven it to be a reliable and effective actor on the ground against the so-called Islamic State, and has thus won it the support of international actors, notably the United States. The US views the Syrian Democratic Forces, nominally a mixed-Kurdish and Arab force, but in fact a YPG-dominated force, as their main ally on the ground in Syria in the fight against ISIS and has supported their military offenses against the terror group with airstrikes, military support as well as military advisors on the ground.[72] The Kurds have been able to capitalize on US support for the SDF, as it has not only supported Kurdish military offenses against ISIS and allowed them to expand into more areas, but the US presence in northern Syria has created a bulwark against Turkish aggression towards the PYD.

Beginning in Kobani in 2014, when the US first took notice of Syrian Kurdish forces as a crucial component of the fight against the Islamic State, the US has continued to supply the SDF with weapons

---

71 Sary, 2016.
72 Liz Sly, "U.S. military aid is fueling big ambitions for Syria's leftist Kurdish militia", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 7, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-military-aid-is-fueling-big-ambitions-for-syrias-leftist-kurdish-militia/2017/01/07/6e457866-c79f-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html?utm_term=.f26b3d7d3a3b

as it defeats and takes back territory from ISIS. More recently, US military commanders have recommended arming them for the battle against ISIS's de facto capital of Raqqa, and President Donald Trump announced in May 2017 that the Pentagon would continue to arm the SDF in this effort as it considers it as "the only force on the ground that can successfully seize Raqqa in the near future."[73] However, US support of the SDF has also raised tensions with Turkey, but US insistence on arming the Kurds for the Raqqa operation has created a buffer zone for the Kurds against Turkish attacks, and US actions have made clear their view of the SDF as their main ally on the ground. The deployment of US troops to Manbij in March 2017 was in an effort to prevent clashes between the SDF and Turkish forces,[74] and the US also sent in helicopters and tanks to the Kurdish-Turkish border regions in the aftermath of the Turkish airstrike on YPG positions on April 25.[75] Such US support essentially prevents direct Turkish attacks on YPG/SDF targets, thus facilitating Kurdish expansion and protection. Additionally, the Kurds have welcomed this support, as it not only bolsters their military strength needed for operations against ISIS and protection against Turkish attacks, but such support from an international actor has increased Rojava's legitimacy in the eyes of many Kurds, and has also boosted its international reputation.

73 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "In blow to US-Turkey Ties, Trump Administration Approves Plan to Arm Syrian Kurds Against Islamic State," *The Washington Post,* May 9, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/05/09/in-blow-to-u-s-turkey-ties-trump-administration-approves-plan-to-directly-arm-syrian-kurds-against-islamic-state/?utm_term=.e66837150c5b
74 Carla Babb, "US Troops in Manbij 'Deter' Skirmishes Between Turks, Kurds", *Voice of America*, March 7, 2017, available at https://www.voanews.com/a/us-troops-in-manbij-to-deter-skirmishes-between-turks-kurds/3752065.html
75 Barbara Starr and Angela Dewan, "US troops patrol Turkey-Syria border after Turkish strikes on Kurds", *CNN*, April 30, 2017, available at http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/30/middleeast/turkey-syria-us-troops-patrol/index.html

Russia

In addition to support from the US, the Kurds have also been on the receiving end of military assistance and diplomatic recognition from Russia. Such support not only serves to provide the Kurds with an ally against Turkey, but also allows them to engage diplomatically on the international stage. In addition to military support of the YPG and its air defense system located at the Khmeimin airbase in Latakia, Russian airstrikes on opposition-controlled areas have often acted as safe cover for the Kurds against opposition attacks and Turkish airstrikes. By engaging with both the US and Russia, the Kurds have strategically been able to ensure protection for all areas under the Rojava umbrella, as the US provides support east of the Euphrates River, while Russia mainly engages with the Kurds west of the Euphrates in Afrin canton. The Kurds have also taken advantage of such support to further their territorial ambitions. While the YPG denies active cooperation between the two, they have admitted that the Russian presence serves to their benefit, as the PYD has informed the Russians of the positions of YPG forces so they are not targeted.[76] In February 2016, the Kurds used Russian airstrikes against rebel positions along the Turkish border as an opportunity, and subsequently seized some of the rebel-held territory for themselves.[77] Russia has also recently deployed troops to Kurdish-controlled areas, where they intend to collaborate with the YPG.[78] Russian-PYD indirect agreements and collaboration serves as a benefit to the PYD as it prevents Turkish airstrikes from targeting Kurdish positions, as well as

76 Sardar Mlla Drwish,"Why Syria's Kurds are Cooperating with Russia", *Al Monitor,* June 22, 2016, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2016/06/syria-kurds-accusation-cooperation-regime-russia.html
77 Daren Butler, "Kurds' advance in Syria divides U.S. and Turkey as Russia bombs", *Reuters,* Feb. 17, 2016, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCN0VQ1FR
78 Townsend, 2017.

assisting them in their territorial expansion ambitions.

In conjunction with military support, Russia also supports the Kurds, and especially the Rojava project, diplomatically on the international level. For Russia, engaging with the Kurds allows them to present another anti-opposition player during international negotiations, in an effort to shore up the Assad regime. Russia has pushed several times for the inclusion of the Kurds at the Geneva peace talks, and despite the fact that their participation is always vetoed by Turkey, Russia has also made efforts to include elements of Kurdish rights in proposed agreements. In January 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with the PYD and other opposition parties to discuss the new Russian draft of the Syrian constitution, which heavily emphasized elements of decentralization and Kurdish autonomy.[79] The PYD also subsequently opened a representative office in Moscow in February 2016, and has attended several meetings with Russian officials to discuss cooperation and Kurdish demands for autonomy.[80] These efforts have been rejected by Assad, but it nevertheless shows Russia's insistence of Kurds joining the negotiating table, and Kurdish pragmatism and prioritization of their own survival in accepting such support.

A Future for Rojava?

The sustainability of the Rojava project is often called into question, and despite their almost four years of self-governance, the future of the Kurdish self-determination effort has yet to be determined. Although the PYD has provided security and administrative structure to Kurdish areas in the aftermath of the

79 "Why Did Russia Offer Autonomy for Syria's Kurds?", *Al Monitor,* Jan. 29, 2017, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/russia-offer-kurds-syria-autonomy-turkey-islamic-state.html
80 "Syria's Kurds to open first European office in Moscow", *Rudaw*, Feb. 7, 2016, available at http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/070220161

regime withdrawal, local and international legitimacy regarding the Rojava project is highly debated, creating uncertainty around support for the Kurds. As Assad has been successful in retaking back multiple areas from rebel opposition groups, Kurdish-Assad relations may revert back to pre-civil war conditions, as the PYD and the regime lack an official understanding and Assad has unilaterally rejected any form of decentralization. In addition, Rojava governance efforts are unstable due to short-term international military and diplomatic support for the PYD.

Despite these instances of mutual interest with the regime, the PYD has no official agreement or strategy of cooperation with the regime, and therefore, future clashes are likely to occur if regime and PYD interests begin to diverge. There already have been several clashes between Syrian regime forces and the YPG in Kurdish areas, which is evident of a possible disintegration in relations. Despite avoiding confrontation for the majority of the conflict and thereby sparing Kurdish areas of destruction at the hands of the regime, Assad sent in the Syrian air force to quell clashes between members of the security forces left in Hasaka and YPG forces in August 2016. Regardless of previous cooperation between regime security forces and the YPG in Hasaka, tensions over the control of neighborhoods and administrative functions have begun to emerge between the two.[81] While the non-confrontation policy allows for Kurdish self-governance, the regime still has a presence within Hasaka, as well as in Qamishli, and Kurdish threats to this presence are likely what provoked this conflict. In addition, the presence of pro-regime NDF forces and Kurdish demands for their withdrawal also led to tensions. As a result, for the first time in the conflict, Assad ordered airstrikes on Kurdish positions on

---

81 Aron Lund, "Bombers Over Hasakah: Assad Clashes With the Kurds", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, Aug. 22, 2016, available at http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64375?lang=en

August 19, 2016, which was followed by additional conflicts on the ground.[82] Despite the semblance of regime tolerance of PYD and YPG control of these areas, these clashes are indicative of Assad's attempts to maintain some type of control within these areas. Assad has also been severely critical of the Rojava project publically, and has refused to officially recognize it. A foreign ministry official of the regime issued a harshly worded statement in the aftermath of the declaration of Rojava in March 2016 stating that "Any such announcement [Rojava] has no legal value and will not have any legal, political, social or economic impact as long as it does not reflect the will of the entire Syrian people."[83] As Assad regains the upper hand in the conflict, he is likely to try to regain the areas currently under Kurdish control, resulting in clashes and repression of PYD political activities.

The Kurds' success in recapturing areas from ISIS is aided by partnership with and support from international actors, yet this support is mainly concentrated on the fight against ISIS and is unlikely to continue past its defeat. In addition, Turkish opposition to the PYD hinders and complicates international support for the PYD. Despite the recent US announcement that President Trump has decided to arm the SDF as they advance towards Raqqa, it was made very clear that this support is limited to this operation. According to the US military commander in charge of arming the SDF, equipment and arms will be limited to only what is required for the Raqqa offensive, and will be distributed

82 Angus McDowall, "Kurds versus Syrian army battle intensifies, complicating multi-fronted war", *Reuters*, Aug. 21, 2016, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN10V0GD
83 Said, 2016.

gradually as they are required.[84] While the US views the SDF as their main ally in Syria in the fight against ISIS, US inhibitions of long-term engagement in the conflict have prevented additional support. This lack of US long-term support means that the PYD, following the defeat of ISIS, will be lacking in international support, as well as legitimacy. Washington has also refused to recognize Rojava, and has rejected decentralization, stating that they do not recognize "any unilaterally declared self-rule semi-autonomous zone."[85] Turkey's involvement also complicates this relationship. As a fellow NATO member, its objections to the US arming of the Kurds has limited the scope of its support. The Turkish response to the declaration of Rojava was clear in its opposition; "every unilateral initiative will harm Syria's unity".[86] Thus, as the PYD's military strength is significantly based on international support, the discontinuation of such support will leave the YPG weaker, and likely unable to prevent regime attempts to retake Rojava. The lack of representation in international negotiations, mainly a Turkish effort, also prevents the PYD from presenting their efforts to the international community. Despite Russian efforts to engage with the Kurds diplomatically and to promote their participation, Turkey's strong objection to this makes it unlikely.

Conclusions

Despite the appearance of PYD-regime collusion during several instances of the Syrian conflict, the actual nature of this relationship is slightly more nuanced. Both the PYD and the Assad regime

---

84 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Begins Arming Syrian Kurds for Final Assault on Raqqa," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/31/world/middleeast/us-begins-arming-syrian-kurds-for-final-assault-on-raqqa.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Feric-schmitt&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection
85 Townsend, 2017.
86 Said, 2016.

are motivated by an opportunistic strategy of survival that has pushed these two actors together. In the context of their Rojava project, entering into a policy of non-confrontation with the regime has allowed Kurdish areas to be spared of regime airstrikes and attacks, thus allowing the easier facilitation of Rojava governance efforts. The regime, when faced with multiple areas of attack at the beginning of the conflict, sought to concentrate its forces more effectively, and withdrew from Kurdish areas. Turkey also plays a key role in this relationship, as Turkish attacks on PYD positions provide a protective belt for the regime.

Kurdish self-determination and efforts to sustain their self-governed region of Rojava have also been facilitated by a lack of major confrontations with the regime, and the Kurds have been remarkably pragmatic in using the lack of regime political and security control throughout the conflict, as well as leveraging international support in the fight against ISIS to their benefit. Rojava has been able to establish a sense of legitimacy for the PYD both within Syria as a protector of the Kurds, and also among the international community as a possible model for post-conflict Syria. The Kurds have shown through their non-confrontation with the regime that they prioritize their self-governance project above all else, and that they are willing to take whatever measures necessary to ensure Kurdish rights post-conflict.

Yet, it is to be determined whether this self-declared region of Rojava will stand the time of the conflict and emerge as a federal region. Many international actors have lauded this effort and have put forward recommendations for the decentralization of Syria. However, despite the policy of non-aggression between Assad and the PYD, Damascus has repeatedly stated that it rejects the Kurdish project of Rojava and that decentralization is not the solution for a political settlement. It appears that the regime's tolerance of Rojava is a mere temporary solution, and as Assad

begins to take back areas of Syria under his control, it is likely that the regime and the PYD will come into conflict. At the current state of the conflict, it seems likely that Kurdish self-governance may come to an end and the Kurds will face further repression.

The Syrian Kurds have also been featured prominently in international headlines regarding their battles against ISIS, and are currently the leading actor in the liberation battle on Raqqa, yet their participation has raised several concerns regarding the aftermath of this assault. Kurdish expansionism throughout the course of the conflict has been in an effort to expand the borders of Rojava and to bring more areas under their control. Yet international actors, notably the US, have been steadfast in their insistence that the Kurds will not maintain control of Raqqa, but that they will hand it over once the liberation has been successfully completed. As the US position does not reflect PYD patterns of expansion, the question of the extent of this expansion becomes unclear, and if the Kurds choose to push further south to Deir az-Zor, regime or international interference could become a possibility.

International alliances and conflicts are also a complicated element regarding the position of the Kurds within the conflict. The international community's prioritization of defeating ISIS has provided the Kurds with support and assistance for the time being, but this aid is likely to decrease, particularly from the US, following the liberation of Raqqa. A cease in international support could raise the possibility of increased Turkish attacks against PYD positions, thereby inhibiting the Kurdish ambition of a unified, contiguous region in northern Syria. Additionally, President Trump's increasing engagement in Syria through airstrikes on the regime, a departure from the policies of Obama, could cause tensions with Russia, another supporter of the Kurds and Assad's staunch ally and backer. The complexities of the

international actors within Syria are becoming increasingly tense and fragile, and the Kurds' engagement with these actors makes them susceptible to these tensions.

As the Syrian conflict has increasingly become a battlefield amongst geopolitical actors, the Syrian Kurds' ambiguous ties to the regime and their alliances with a multitude of actors makes the status of the Kurds within the broader conflict unclear. However, in light of their history and their hard-won territory from ISIS, the Kurds are likely to continue to prioritize their long-term goal of seeing an autonomous region that recognizes Kurdish rights come to fruition and their opportunism towards this effort is likely to overshadow any current agreement of alliance.

Kari Frentzel
Kari Frentzel is an independent analyst and former Guest Researcher at the Syria/Iraq Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, where she focused on Iraqi politics and the role of the Syrian Kurds. She was previously based at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East in Washington, D.C. She holds a degree in International Relations with a concentration in Middle Eastern politics from Tufts University.