



# War of Shadows: How Turkey's Conflict with the PKK Shapes the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan

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# Executive Summary

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## About this Report

- With Syria and Iraq in flames, Turkey's escalating conflict with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) has created yet another tinderbox in the region. This report seeks to explain how the fate of the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan has and will continue to be influenced by this bitter contest.
- This struggle hinders the recapture of Raqqa, poses large obstacles to political solutions of the conflicts in both Syria and Turkey, and ultimately prolongs the existence of the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). It also, in the longer term, threatens the stability of Turkey.
- The bigger picture is that the territorial defeat of ISIL is unlikely to resolve conflicts in the region. As the report shows, the rise (and imminent fall) of ISIL has always been part of a larger set of conflicts and interests which will continue even if ISIL no longer maintains its self-declared Caliphate.

## The PKK in Iraq and Syria

- Despite the PKK's terrorist designation, the organization has played an instrumental role in both the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIL. The PKK's longstanding transnational presence in both Iraq and Syria has ensured that they are deeply involved in both theatres of conflict.
- Multiple credible sources indicate that the PKK is the driving force behind the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).
- US cooperation with the PKK and their affiliates dates back to the beginning of Washington's involvement in the anti-ISIL campaign. Their partnership successfully repulsed the ISIL offensive from Iraqi Kurdistan and helped retake much of northern Syria from ISIL control. Despite vehement Turkish objections, the US government has only continued to ramp up support for the YPG and SDF.

## Erdogan Strikes Back

- As the PKK has gathered its strength in Iraq and Syria, Ankara has grown increasingly restless. An intervention in northern Syria, an offensive in the predominately Kurdish southeast of Turkey, and intensified airstrikes in both countries against YPG and SDF targets were all triggered by President Erdogan's fight against the PKK.
- As a result, Turkey is increasing their support for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the ruling political party in the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), in order to serve as a counterweight against the PKK's interests in the Levant. The struggle for control of the strategically important province of Sinjar serves as an illustrative example.

- Ankara views the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria as an existential crisis. The possibility of a PKK safe haven solidifying along their southern border will likely provoke further military action. Turkey's own domestic turmoil has only raised the stakes.

## **Epilogue: Conflict at a Crossroads**

- As the Syrian Civil War and the campaign against ISIL reaches a critical juncture, the battle between Turkey and the PKK will have pivotal implications on both of these conflicts going forward.
- ISIL defeats on the outskirts of Erbil as well as in Sinjar, Kobane and Manbij were largely dependent upon the PKK's ground forces under the guise of the SDF and YPG. Consequently, the PKK has established themselves as a dominant political and military force in northern Syria at the expense of Turkish interests.
- The key battlefield today is Raqqa. While the city is being slowly encircled and recaptured by the SDF, their lack of a strong Arab component will complicate future territorial advances in predominately Arab areas controlled by ISIL. Ankara's desire to influence the liberation of Raqqa could lead to further escalation in their conflict with the PKK.
- Policy makers should recognize that a destabilized Turkey is likely to resort to extreme and unexpected measures going forward in order to weaken the PKK in both Iraq and Syria. This war of shadows risks sparking an even deadlier regional conflagration.

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# List of Key Acronyms

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ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD – Democratic Union Party

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG – People's Protection Units

# Introduction

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As the Syrian conflict enters its seventh year, the war is more chaotic than ever. The Assad regime, with its Russian and Iranian backers, alongside its medley of allied sectarian militias, has solidified its power.<sup>1</sup> Their recapture of Aleppo brought the rebels to the brink, with most of them now concentrated in the governorate of Idlib. Yet a dizzying array of opposing factions there including Al Qaeda-linked extremists and other Islamist groups complicates clear policymaking.<sup>2</sup> International outcry followed a deadly chemical weapons attack in early April at Khan Shaykun. The fledgling Trump administration responded by flexing its military might, launching dozens of Tomahawk missiles against a Syrian airbase.<sup>3</sup>

Further north, a Turkish-led offensive has carved out a 2,000 square km foothold in northern Syria<sup>4</sup> while ISIL continues to be pushed back by the SDF.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile in Iraq, in the nearly three years since ISIL declared their caliphate to the world in the summer of 2014, the organization retains less than forty-seven percent of its territory<sup>6</sup> including their former stronghold of Mosul.<sup>7</sup> The KRG government has partially filled this power vacuum by creating new “natural borders” to expand their influence.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Turkish airstrikes have intensified against YPG and PKK targets in Iraq and Syria.<sup>9</sup> The map of the Middle East is being redrawn before our eyes.

Yet despite all of this, the escalating conflict currently being waged between the PKK and Turkey has created yet another tinderbox in the region. The PKK, commonly known as the leaders of the decades long insurgency in Turkey that has cost the lives of more than 40,000 people since 1984, plays a pivotal role in Syria and in the struggle against ISIL in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the 20th century, the PKK's campaign in southeastern Turkey had become increasingly defined by terror attacks, including suicide bombings, in the international community.<sup>11</sup> Today NATO and more than 20 other countries classify the PKK as a terrorist group.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, to Ankara's chagrin, the US and other international powers have attempted to reconcile this terrorist label with their pivotal cooperation with PKK linked groups in the fight against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria.

In truth, the conflict between Turkey and the PKK will decisively shape both the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan. This report aims to shed light on this bitter contest and discuss some of its major implications. Firstly it will underscore the critical impact of the PKK, and its affiliates, the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), the YPG, and the YPG-led

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1 'The decay of the Syrian regime is much worse than you think', *War on the Rocks*, 31 August 2016.

2 'Idlib's rebel split: A crossroads for Syrian opposition', *Al Jazeera*, 2 February 2017.

3 'Trump launches attack on Syria with 59 Tomahawk missiles', *CNBC*, 7 April 2017.

4 'Turkey ends "Euphrates Shield" operation in Syria', *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2017.

5 'The Latest: US-led coalition lauds capture of Syrian IS town', *ABC News*, 11 May 2017.

6 'Map: Daesh areas of influence – February 2017 Update', *The Global Coalition against Daesh*, 28 March 2017.

7 'Iraqi forces have fully retaken Mosul, U.S.-backed coalition confirms', *USA Today*, 10 July 2017.

8 'Iraqi Kurdish Leader Calls for Redrawing Regional Borders – And Attacks Fellow Kurds', *The Nation*, 18 May 2016.

9 'Turkish airstrikes kill US-backed Kurdish forces battling ISIS' *CNN*, 25 April 2017.

10 White, P., 2015. *The PKK: Coming Down From the Mountains*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, p. 102

11 'Will Putin be the "Liberator Tsar" of the Kurds?' *Newsweek*, 20 March 2016.

12 'Remove the PKK From the Terror List', *The World Post*, 21 July 2013.

SDF on the Syrian Civil War and the security of Iraqi Kurdistan. Secondly it will assess Turkey's responses to these organizations growing influence in Turkey, northern Syria, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Finally it will look ahead, discussing the conflicts impact on the battle for Raqqa, assess the growing strength of the PKK in Iraq and Syria, and weigh Turkey's options in combating the PKK and their affiliates in the future. Ultimately this war of shadows will pose serious challenges to any future peace settlements in both Iraq and Syria and will have a decisive impact on the future of the region.



# The PKK in Iraq and Syria

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**D**espite their terrorist designation, the PKK have had a large hand to play in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts. The organization's presence in Iraq over the decades has at times buttressed and destabilized Iraqi Kurdistan, whether it was halting the advance of ISIL on Erbil or provoking Turkish incursions. Meanwhile, their deep-rooted partners have been instrumental to the US-led anti-ISIL coalition's efforts in Syria. Acknowledging their close relationship with the PYD's armed forces, the YPG, and the YPG-led SDF in Syria is fundamental in order to appreciate their role in the region as well as Turkey's subsequent responses.

## The PKK and the PYD in Syria

The PKK's impact on the Syrian Civil War stems from the close cross-border social and political ties between the Syrian and Turkish Kurds. Kaya and Lowe detail how, between 1980 and 1998, Damascus allowed the PKK to operate training camps in Syria and in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. The Syrian government did so in order to provide the PKK a safe haven from which they could perpetuate attacks against their rival Turkey.<sup>13</sup> The PKK was even granted an official representative office in the capital. In addition, the Syrian regime actively encouraged its disenfranchised Kurdish populations to join the PKK and to fight abroad.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that between seven to ten thousand Syrian Kurds joined the PKK during that period and they currently comprise approximately one third of the PKK's forces.<sup>15</sup>

These findings largely coincide with Barak Barfi's estimate that about twenty percent of the PKK's fighters training at their Qandil base in Iraq are Syrian. As a result, thousands of Syrians have died fighting for the PKK's cause.<sup>16</sup> However, the PKK had to dramatically reshape their operations in Syria following the Adana Agreement of 1998. The organization decided that in order to retain their influence in Syria, they needed to establish offshoot political parties under different names. One of the most successful was the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>17</sup> Osman Öcalan, brother of the PKK's Abdullah Öcalan as well as one of the senior members of the PKK, claimed that he had created the PYD in 2003. He unequivocally stated that the PYD acts on the PKK's orders.<sup>18</sup> In fact, when the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, many members of the PKK leadership, who had operated within Syria prior to 1999, left their hideouts in Qandil and returned to lead the PYD.<sup>19</sup>

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13 Kaya, Z. and Lowe, R. 2016. [Forthcoming]. 'The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship' in: Stansfield, G. and Shareef, M., E. ed. *The Kurdish Question Revisited* Hurst Publishers. [Online]. [Accessed 7 June, 2016]. Available from: <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/the-kurdish-question-revisited/> p. 2

14 *ibid.* p. 2

15 *ibid.* p. 2

16 Barfi, B. (2016), 'Ascent of the PYD and the SDF'. *The Washington Institute*, p. 7

17 Kaya and Lowe (2016), p. 5

18 'The PYD & the PKK: two sides of the same coin', *The Hill*, 10 May 2016.

19 'Archives, Testimonies Confirm PYD/YPG's Organic Link with PKK Terror Organization', *Daily Sabah*, 19 February 2016.

Nevertheless, neither the PYD nor the PKK publicly acknowledge how close their relationship actually is. While the PYD claim that they are proud of their PKK roots, they define their relationship with the organization as purely ideological rather than institutional. Saleh Muslim, co-president of the PYD, argues that although the PYD has a corresponding ideology to Öcalan, the PYD maintains its own decision-making authority.<sup>20</sup> Osamah Golpy, a former Kurdish free lance journalist, said that in order to reinforce that narrative, Saleh Muslim actively encourages media coverage by being, “very welcoming to journalists just to give them access and portray the PYD as Western, democratic, secular...the kind of image they want to have in the West” as opposed to the offshoot of a designated terrorist organization.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, Barfi contends that the PYD's co-leaders only hold nominal power despite their presence in the international spotlight. The original charter of the PYD even put Abdullah Öcalan as its leader and declared the sovereignty of the PKK parliament.<sup>22</sup> This report argues that Saleh Muslim should be seen as a useful public figurehead who attempts to conceal the influence of the PKK members who are the true power brokers in the PYD.

There is no coincidence that the PYD controlled areas in the north and east of Syria largely manifests Öcalan's vision of a de facto state that strives to decentralize all social, political, and economic affairs in local councils.<sup>23</sup> Their relationship ensures that the PYD's YPG armed forces, and the YPG dominated SDF, are principally guided by PKK priorities. One PKK fighter in Sinjar province, who was interviewed by the Wall Street Journal in July 2015, illustrated the fluidity of these organizations by saying, “Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK [a PKK affiliate, active in Iran], sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK.”<sup>24</sup> As Bill Park, of the Department of Defence Studies at King's College London, explained, “the Syrian Kurds, PKK, PYD, whatever you want to call them” are one and the same.<sup>25</sup>

## The PKK and the Fight Against ISIL

Due to the PKK's terrorist designation, Michael Gunter writes that Washington has declined to publicly give them praise for the instrumental role they have played in the US-led anti-ISIL coalition.<sup>26</sup> In fact, their fighters deserve substantial credit for halting ISIL offensives and recapturing territory in both Syria and Iraq. The PKK has integrated themselves, and cooperated with the KRG's *peshmerga*, as well as the Syrian Kurdish armed forces under the PYD's control, the YPG and the SDF.<sup>27</sup>

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20 Kaya and Lowe (2016), p. 3

21 Osamah Golpy, telephone interview with author, 1 August 2016.

22 'Archives, Testimonies Confirm PYD/YPG's Organic Link with PKK Terror Organization', *Daily Sabah*, 19 February 2016.

23 Barfi (2015), p. 8

24 'America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS', *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2014.

25 Park, Bill. 'The Crisis in Iraq: Unexpected Alliances, Western Intervention and the Question of Kurdistan' Panel Discussion, Centre for Kurdish Progress, London, UK, 9 September 2014.

26 Gunter, M., (2015). 'Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey'. *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2015, Volume 23, Number 1

27 White (2015), p. 166

When the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) *peshmerga*, armed forces representing the two major parties in the KRG, were pushed back to within 20 kilometers of Erbil in August of 2014, the PKK came to their rescue. The 'guerillas' as the *peshmerga* called them were, by their counterparts' accounts, excellent fighters.<sup>28</sup> They had honed their skills fighting the Turkish military, NATO's second largest armed force. *Al Monitor* reported that a PKK spokesman claimed that their forces are placed throughout Makhmour, Kirkuk, and Sinjar. The KRG's acting president Massoud Barzani, a friend of Ankara and rival of the PKK for leadership of the Kurdish people, felt so indebted to the PKK fighters after they helped repel ISIL's advance that he visited one of their camps on August 13th 2015.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the PKK and the YPG, along with US support, played the decisive role in rescuing tens of thousands of Yazidis who were surrounded by ISIL fighters from the top of Sinjar Mountain.<sup>30</sup> The media's "myth" of the stalwart *peshmerga* fighter rings hollow if you strip away the support of the PKK.<sup>31</sup>

On the Syrian front, the PKK's fighters and commanders serve at the core of their YPG colleagues in the fight against ISIL. Barfi writes that between January 2013 and January 2016, 49.24% of the YPG's casualties were Turkish citizens.<sup>32</sup> Kaya and Lowe claim that in addition to supplying personnel to the YPG, the PKK provide training and, possibly, weapons for their Syrian Kurdish counterparts. It has been reported that fellow Syrian Kurds have noticed an increase in the percentage of fighters and commanders from Turkey. The PYD for its part is unapologetic about the fact that 'former' PKK fighters are serving with the YPG.<sup>33</sup> The PKK's metal was put to the test in Syria when Mr. Erdogan, Turkey's president, finally permitted the Kurds to cross the Turkish border to aid in the YPG's defense of Kobane. Golpy mentioned that the PKK had successfully utilized the sympathetic one and half million strong Kurdish community in Europe<sup>34</sup>, "to help facilitate international pressure in the media on Turkey...trying to get a lot of attention and support" to the YPG.<sup>35</sup> Their decisive victory over ISIL in Kobane spurred the recapture of much of northern Syria from the so-called Caliphate, with the help of the anti-ISIL coalition. In truth, the YPG is reliant on the PKK in their fight against ISIL.

## The YPG-led SDF

To bypass Turkish pressure on Washington to stop backing the PKK linked YPG, and in part to alleviate Arab concern about the coalition's reliance on Kurdish ground troops, the Americans helped the YPG create the SDF in October of 2015. It was built on the shoulders of a group the YPG established in September of 2014 called Euphrates Volcano, a joint coalition with several Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades. The SDF was constructed as a mixed Arab and Kurdish force in order to try to alleviate local Arabs fears that the Kurds were controlling their Arab partners while cooperating with US-led coalition in order to subjugate them to Kurdish rule.<sup>36</sup> Leaders

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28 'PKK forces impress in fight against Islamic State', *Al Monitor*, 14 September 2014.

29 *ibid.*

30 'The myth of the plucky Kurdish warrior', *The Spectator*, 27 February 2016.

31 *ibid.*

32 Barfi (2016), p. 8

33 Kaya and Lowe (2016), p. 3

34 White (2015), p. 165

35 Osamah Golpy

36 Barfi (2016), p. 2

hoped that Arab units in the SDF would generate more trust with the predominately Arab populations under ISIL control, thus making the SDF more capable of recapturing and holding ISIL territory.<sup>37</sup> A spokesman for US-led anti-ISIL coalition, Colonel Steven Warren, once claimed that there were about 5,000 Arab fighters in the SDF.<sup>38</sup> On January 5, 2015 Brett McGurk described the SDF before a special briefing for the US Department of Defense as an effective, "coalition of Syrian Kurds and Arabs" that had made dramatic gains against ISIL near Al-Hal.<sup>39</sup> Washington has continually praised the SDF as a fighting force that could liberate the predominately Arab city of Raqqa.

Unfortunately for the coalition, the Arab components' role in the SDF is negligible when compared to the PKK dominated YPG. The Arab contingent has simply failed to prove themselves on the battlefield when compared to their Kurdish counterparts.<sup>40</sup> For instance in February of 2016, Brett McGurk claimed that at the time of the YPG-SDF capture of the IS controlled town of al-Shadadi in Raqqa province, 60% of the SDF's fighters were Kurdish while 40% were Arabs.<sup>41</sup> Yet a Kurdish journalist following the SDF advance on al-Shadadi observed that the Arab members of the SDF had next to no impact on the battle and they were simply manning the theatre's reserve operations. In addition, the journalist found that the YPG fighters on the frontlines were not even affiliated with the SDF. While some members of the Arab component of the SDF, such as the Raqqa Revolutionaries and the Shammar tribe, possess a degree of Sunni Arab support, they appear too weak to recapture Arab territory without rigorous Kurdish backing. Arabs living under ISIL control should acknowledge that their SDF would be 'liberators' are predominately Kurds, rather than Arabs.<sup>42</sup>

As a result the PKK are the most capable fighting forces in both Iraq and Syria today. The PKK's high degree of training, proven leadership, and battle experience is unparalleled amongst the Kurds. ISIL defeats on the outskirts of Erbil, in Sinjar, Kobane, Manbij, and the large Kurdish advances in the north east of Syria were largely dependent upon the PKK's ground forces under the guise of the SDF and YPG. Nevertheless the future of the US-led coalition's efforts to defeat ISIL as well as the prospects of any peace deals in both Iraq and Syria emerging continue to be complicated by the PKK's designation as a terrorist organization.

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37 *ibid.* p. 2

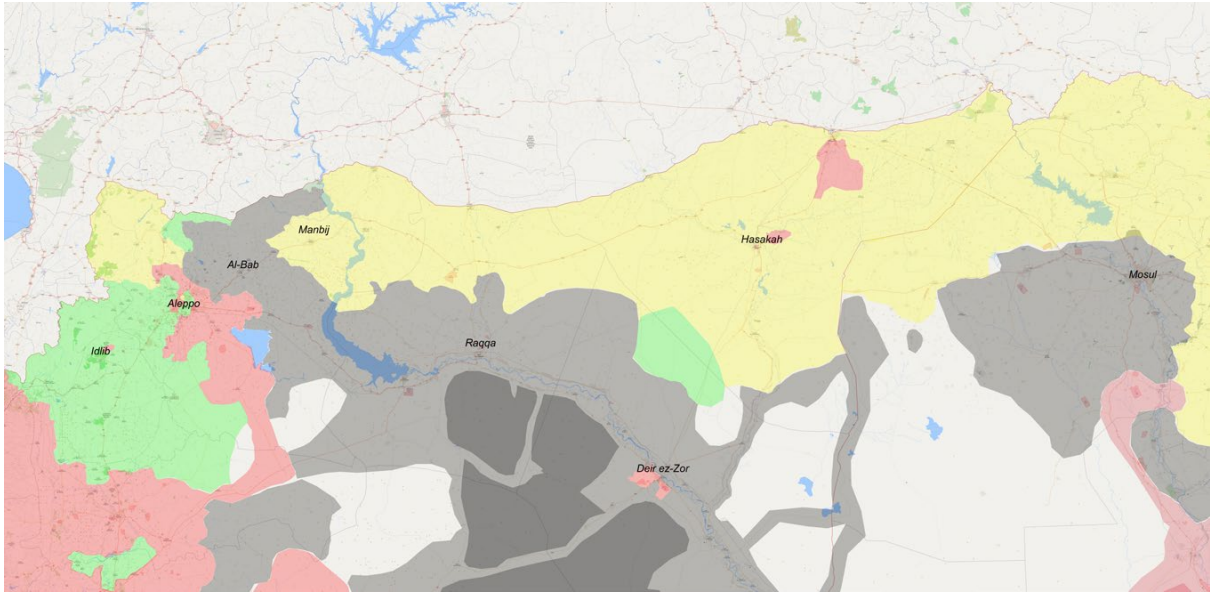
38 'Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq' U.S. Department of Defense, October 21, 2015. <http://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/625158/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-warren-via-teleconference-from-baghdad>

39 'Remarks by Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk Before the Daily Press Briefing' The U.S. Department of State, January 5, 2016 <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/250976.htm>

40 Barfi (2016), p. 3

41 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk' The White House, February 23, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/23/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-special-presidential>

42 *ibid.* p. 12



**Figure 1: Map of Kurdish control in northern Syria and part of Iraq as of 23 August 2016 –** Kurdish dominated areas are represented in yellow. This includes the YPG/SDF controlled territory in Syria as well as most of the primarily KRG held territory in northern Iraq. The Syrian regime forces' and the Iraqi armed force's territory is in red, ISIL held territory is in black, while the Syrian opposition's territory is in light green.<sup>43</sup>

## Ramifications of the PKK's Terrorist Designation

The PKK's terrorist label has been a major obstacle to the anti-ISIL campaign as they are integrated with some of most powerful local actors fighting ISIL in the region. This has been particularly challenging to the United States as the PYD's links to the PKK makes it difficult for Washington to fully support their armed forces because of the restrictions on providing material and financial support to an FTO. For instance, Gunter described how the PKK's terrorist designation complicated the US-led coalition's efforts to aid YPG forces as they fought ISIL in Kobane. The Turkish military initially prevented Turkish Kurds from crossing into Syria since they feared that if they opened the border they would make the PKK's presence stronger in Syria after saving their PYD brethren in Kobane.<sup>44</sup> At one point during the siege on October 20th, 2014, then US Secretary of State John Kerry even acknowledged that the PYD was an offshoot of the PKK in an effort to win the YPG much needed support.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, later that same day, another State Department official contradicted the Secretary of State's earlier claim by stressing that the PYD and PKK were distinct factions under US law.<sup>46</sup>

Another insightful look into the continued issue of whether the US publicly recognizes the PKK as synonymous with the PYD's armed forces was Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's March 30th, 2017

<sup>43</sup> *Liveuamaps*, 23 August 2016, 'ISIS', <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>. Accessed 27 July 2017

<sup>44</sup> Gunter (2015)

<sup>45</sup> 'Remarks [by John Kerry] with Philippine Foreign Secretary del Rosario before their Meeting,' *US Department of State*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/10/233148.htm>

<sup>46</sup> 'Daily Press Briefing', *US Department of State*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/233166.htm>

statement alongside the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. After a reporter directly asked Secretary Tillerson to confirm whether he had in fact acknowledged that there was no difference between the YPG and PKK, as Minister Cavusoglu had previously claimed Tillerson deflected the question.<sup>47</sup>

Yet despite the PKK's terrorist designation and reported links to the Syrian Kurds, the YPG and SDF have continued to succeed on the battlefield since the siege of Kobane was lifted in March of 2015.<sup>48</sup> The Obama administration appeared determined not to stress the PKK and PYD's commonalities in an attempt to avoid accusations that it was supporting a terrorist organization. President Erdogan continues to add pressure on the US by repeatedly stating that Washington must choose between either supporting their NATO ally or backing the PYD.<sup>49</sup> Yet despite Turkey's resistance, the US has gradually provided more intelligence sharing and weapons to the PYD's forces. US military advisors work closely with the YPG and SDF fighters by upholding the fiction that they are substantially different from the PKK militants.<sup>50</sup>

The new administration, despite President Trump's promises of support for Turkey's campaign against the PKK,<sup>51</sup> has actually bolstered support for the SDF including sending four hundred Marines to aid in their encirclement of Raqqa.<sup>52</sup> The US government appears to have recognized the value of the PKK and their affiliates in the fight against ISIL and they are willing to damage their relations with Turkey in order support them. How Ankara has responded to this seeming betrayal and existential threat is the topic of the following section.

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47 "Press Availability with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu," *US Department of State*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269318.htm>

48 Barfi (2016), p. 9

49 'Erdogan: US Should Choose Between Turkey, Kurdish Forces', *U.S. News*, 8 February 2016.

50 Barfi (2016), p. 10

51 'Trump promised Turkey's Erdogan close cooperation on Syria, Iraq, PKK: Turkish sources', *Reuters*, 18 April 2017.

52 'IS conflict: US sends Marines to support Raqqa assault', *BBC News*, 9 March 2017.

# Erdogan Strikes Back

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As the PKK and their proxies have gathered their strength in Syria and Iraq, Ankara has grown increasingly restless. From launching a brutal offensive in the predominately Kurdish southeast of Turkey in December of 2015,<sup>53</sup> an armed intervention in northern Syria,<sup>54</sup> and conducting airstrikes in both countries against YPG, PYD, and PKK positions, President Erdogan seems to be on the war path. Even more concerning is that the situation is becoming even direr. On May 9th, 2017 President Trump approved a plan to provide the “Kurdish” elements of the SDF with heavy machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, and armored cars for their assault on Raqqa.<sup>55</sup> The United States received a withering response from Turkey’s deputy prime minister who claimed that the move was “unacceptable” and served as “support to a terror organization”.<sup>56</sup> This only compounded Ankara’s longstanding fears that weapons supplied by NATO countries to the YPG would continue to be used by PKK militants against their security forces in Turkey.<sup>57</sup> While the United States has tried to reassure the Turks that the weapons will be monitored and will not be turned against them, Ankara remains unconvinced.<sup>58</sup> As policy experts prepare for what appears to be a new uncertain chapter in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, understanding and anticipating Turkey’s responses to the PKK’s advances is vitally important.

## Crackdown in the Southeast

Turkey’s responses to the PKK’s growing strength in Iraq and Syria is underpinned by their own domestic instability. Violence and political repression against the Kurds in Turkey’s predominately Kurdish southeast has only raised the stakes. Following the breakdown of their two-year ceasefire in July of 2015, more than 10,000 Turkish policemen and troops engaged in an offensive against the PKK throughout the southeast in December of 2015. Hundreds of PKK militants and civilians have reportedly been killed as urban warfare levels cities and towns across the region; Human Rights Watch estimated that between January and May of 2016 alone security operations in southeastern Turkey had displaced over 400,000 people.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey’s media blackout in the securitized region, catalyzed by their poor journalist rights record, makes accurate assessments of the true extent of the destruction unknown.<sup>60</sup>

Political repression is also rampant. Dozens of members of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (HDP) had their parliamentary immunity stripped away so that they could be investigated on terrorism charges. Appointed trustees have replaced elected mayors and council

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53 ‘Turkish offensive kills over 100 Kurdish fighters’, *Al Jazeera*, 20 December 2015.

54 ‘Turkey “ends” Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria’, *BBC News*, 30 March 2017.

55 ‘Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects’, *New York Times*, 9 May 2017.

56 ‘The latest: Kurdish fighters welcome US aid’, *ABC News*, 10 May 2017.

57 ‘Why cooperation between UK and Turkey is important, why it has to be further enhanced,’ *Written submission by Turkish Embassy in London*, October 2016, p. 18, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/uks-relations-with-turkey/written/41373.pdf>

58 ‘IS conflict: US arming Syrian Kurds unacceptable’, *BBC News*, 10 May 2017.

59 ‘Turkey – Events of 2016’, *Human Rights Watch*

60 ‘Press struggles to cover conflict in southeast Turkey’, *DW*, 9 February 2016.

members in the southeast. The repeated extension of the state of emergency, which was declared shortly after the failed military coup attempt on the 15th of July 2016, has stifled attempts to get up to date information about the scale of oppression.<sup>61</sup>

Turkey's recent political upheaval with an increasingly authoritarian government<sup>62</sup>, nearly three million Syrian refugees<sup>63</sup>, and several brutal terrorist attacks blamed on ISIL and the PKK<sup>64</sup>, has forced Ankara to monitor the developing conflicts in neighboring Iraq and Syria extremely closely. Turkey's struggle against the PKK and their partners in Iraq and Syria should be seen as an extension of the battlegrounds in southeastern Turkey.

## The Iraqi Theatre

Since the PKK was granted their Qandil safe haven by the KRG government in 1983 in response to Turkish incursions, Turkey has struggled to eliminate their presence in Iraq. Ankara has engaged in massive cross border offensives<sup>65</sup> along with repeated airstrikes in attempts to weaken the PKK's grip over the region to little avail.<sup>66</sup> As the offensive against ISIL continues and the KRG consolidates their control in northern Iraq, Turkey has been presented with an opportunity to strengthen their position against their adversaries.

Ankara's longstanding partnership with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and particularly the ruling KDP, serves as a useful counterweight against PKK interests. Turkey's ties with the KRG, dating back to the 1990s, helped alleviate the humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq following the first Gulf War. Despite the PUK's historically closer ties with Iran, the PKK, and the YPG, they have intermittently joined the KDP and Turkey to fight the PKK in the past. High profile state visits along with deepening economic linkages and military cooperation has strengthened old bonds. The KRG likely believes that cooperating with such a militarily strong NATO member, one that is guaranteed to have longstanding interests in the region unlike the United States, is a valuable ally.<sup>67</sup> Moreover the PKK represents a challenger for the leadership of the Kurdish people and risks diluting the KRG's authority in the region. The KRG's opposition to PKK, PYD, and YPG influence in Iraq therefore aligns with Ankara's concerns.

Turkey's relationship with the Iraqi central government on the other hand has become increasingly adversarial as a result. Turkish forces have challenged Baghdad by moving hundreds of its special forces to a base near the town of Bashiqa, northwest of Mosul, in December of 2015. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has repeatedly demanded that Turkish troops leave Bashiqa declaring the deployment a violation of sovereignty. Turkey has pointed to their longstanding and ongoing cooperation with the KRG to justify their presence. They insist that they remain there to train Sunni Arab fighters to participate in the fight against ISIL and to prevent the ISIL held Turkoman town of Tal Afar from falling to the Shiite militias. However, according to an *AI Monitor*

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61 'Turkey – Events of 2016', *Human Rights Watch*

62 'Turkey referendum: Erdogan hails "clear" win in vote on new powers', *BBC News*, 16 April 2017.

63 'Turkey's Refugee Crisis: The Politics of Permanence', *International Crisis Group*

64 'Recent Terrorist Attacks in Turkey', *New York Times*, 31 December 2016.

65 'Turkey launches major land offensive into Northern Iraq', *Reuters*, 22 February 2008.

66 'Turkey air strikes on Kurds in Syria and Iraq spark US concern', *BBC News*, 25 April 2017.

67 'Why the Turkey-KRG alliance works for now', *Brookings Institution*, 8 November 2017.



article, a senior Turkish official acknowledges that the main reason for their presence is to ensure that the PKK does not establish a stronger foothold in Iraq, particularly in Sinjar.<sup>68</sup>

Tensions are at the boiling point over the PKK's presence in the predominately Yazidi town. Sinjar is strategically significant due to its proximity to the Syrian border as well as to the PKK's strongholds in the Qandil Mountains. Kamuran Mentik of the Political Sciences Faculty of Salahaddin University argues that Sinjar serves as rear support base for the PKK's Syrian operations. Nevertheless the region is also coveted by the KDP as well as the PUK; each faction views the control of Sinjar as a valuable opportunity to extend their influence in the broader region. Competing Yazidi defense forces aligned with the different political parties further complicates the political landscape.<sup>69</sup> Through their KDP partners, Turkey wants to isolate the PKK's Syrian possessions from their territory in Northern Iraq either directly or indirectly.<sup>70</sup> The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), a group deemed loyal to the PKK, have already skirmished with the KRG's affiliated fighters.<sup>71</sup> While the KRG wants the PKK out of Sinjar, it remains to be seen if they are willing to risk further intra-Kurdish violence in a more open confrontation. The trauma of the Kurdish civil war in the mid 90s still looms large.

On April 25th, Turkey took matters into its own hands by conducting intensive airstrikes in Sinjar and northeastern Syria which they claimed had killed 70 militants, including their intended YPG and PKK targets as well as several KRG soldiers.<sup>72</sup> The KRG's *peshmerga* were apparently killed by accident due to their proximity to the PKK's bases. While Baghdad protested what they considered a breach of sovereignty, Maj. Adrian J.T. Rankine-Galloway of the Counter-ISIL coalition condemned the Turkish airstrikes as being uncoordinated, "with the United States and the broader global coalition to defeat ISIS".<sup>73</sup> Turkey's general staff justified them on the grounds that they were conducting counter terrorism against the PKK, "within the scope of the international law" to prevent them from sending terrorists and arms to Turkey.<sup>74</sup> The contest for Sinjar will likely continue to increase in importance as the campaign against ISIL progresses.

## The Syrian Theatre

While the Qandil Mountains in Northern Iraq have long been a base for the PKK,<sup>75</sup> Ankara greatly fears an autonomous region developing under their control in northern Syria. They worry that such a zone would provide an unwelcome precedent for their own Kurdish population and would serve as a safe haven for PKK militants in the future. On August 24 2016, Erdogan announced that Turkish forces, along with their allied Syrian opposition fighters, had launched 'Operation Euphrates Shield' to drive out terrorists in northern Syria, allegedly against both ISIL and Kurdish militants. In reality, the intervention was principally triggered by the SDF's advance west of the Euphrates River. SDF forces had liberated Manbij and were advancing northwards towards the then ISIL

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68 'Kurds call on US to set up no-fly zone after Turkish attacks', *Al Monitor*, 25 April 2017.

69 'Yazidi fighting, disputes over Sinjar stall battle against Islamic State', *Al Monitor*, 18 August 2015.

70 'Who's fighting whom in Iraq's Sinjar?', *Al Monitor*, 9 January 2017.

71 'Rival Kurdish groups clash in Iraq's Sinjar region', *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2017.

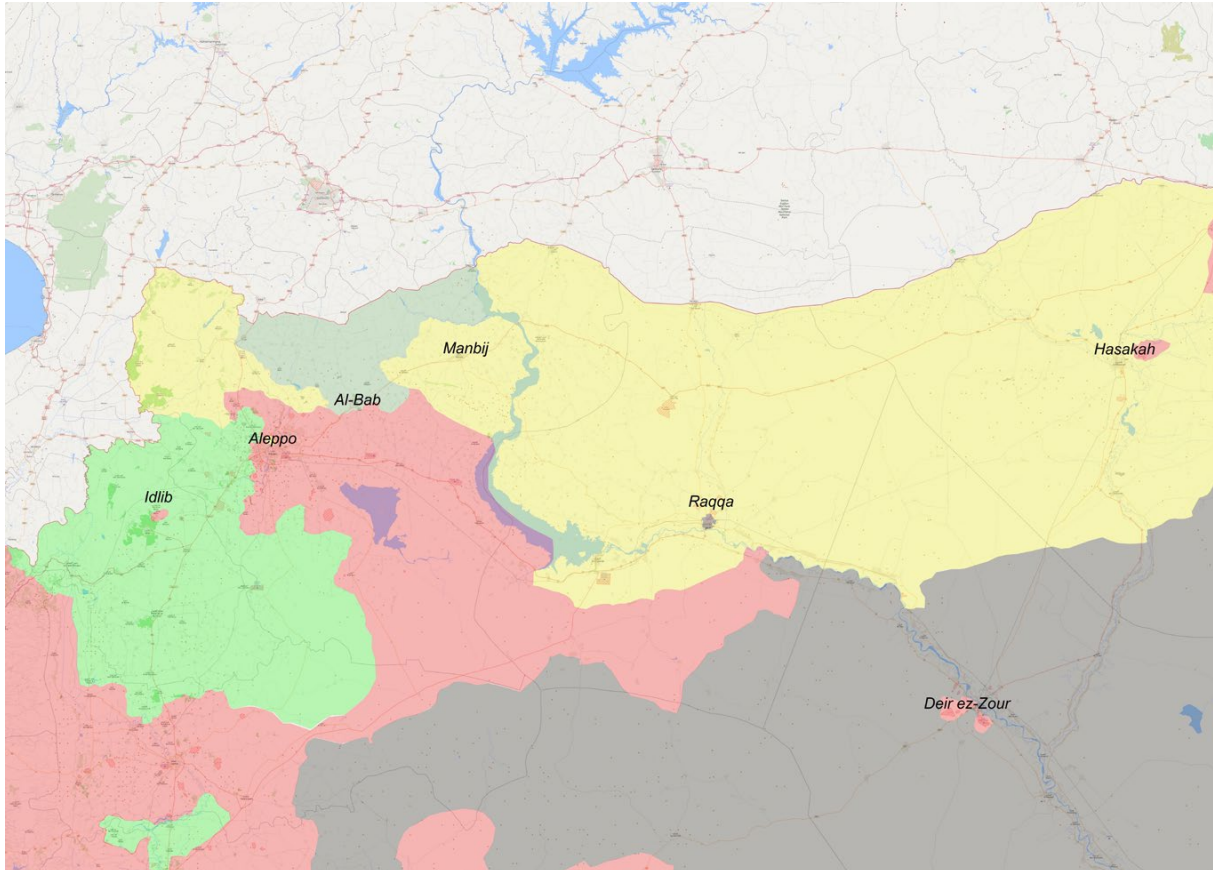
72 'Turkish Strikes Target Kurdish Allies of U.S. in Iraq and Syria', *The New York Times*, 25 April 2017.

73 'U.S. Slams Turkey for Bombing Pentagon's Kurdish Allies in Syria', *Bloomberg*, 25 April 2017.

74 'Turkish airstrikes kill US-backed Kurdish forces battling ISIS', *CNN*, 25 April 2017.

75 McDowall, D., 1996. *A Modern History of The Kurds*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 422

controlled Turkish border town of Jarabulus on the eve of the Turkish operation. In addition, Ankara had repeatedly stated that any YPG or SDF offensive west of the Euphrates would be unacceptable, crossing a 'red line' that would provoke Turkish military intervention.



**Figure 2: Map showing the frontlines in northern Syria as of 25 July 2017** – Operation Euphrates Shield's territory is represented in dark green. YPG/SDF controlled areas are in yellow, the Syrian regime forces' territory is in red, ISIL held territory is in black, while the Syrian opposition's territory is in light green. Key cities in the ongoing conflict such as Manbij and Raqqa are also represented.<sup>76</sup>

Since 'Operation Euphrates Shield' was launched, fierce fighting has occurred between the SDF, YPG, and the Turkish security forces along with their allied FSA units killing hundreds. After seven months Turkish backed forces had carved out a 2,000 square mile foothold in northern Syria including the strategic cities of Jarabulus and Al-Bab.<sup>77</sup> While Ankara officially declared an end to 'Operation Euphrates Shield' in March of 2017, the announcement may have been used primarily as a political ploy; prematurely declaring victory could have been deemed suitable to bolster Erdogan's chances in Turkey's April 16th referendum on expanding the powers of the presidency. Some of the operation's stated goals remain unmet as Turkish attempts to advance on Raqqa and Manbij floundered while the Assad regime and SDF outmaneuvered

<sup>76</sup> Liveuamaps, 25 July 2017, 'Syria', <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>. Accessed 27 July 2017.

<sup>77</sup> 'Turkey ends "Euphrates Shield" operation in Syria', *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2017.

them. Nevertheless the Turks appear to have achieved their primary aim, which was to prevent the PYD from gaining a territorially unified enclave in northern Syria. The Turkish Prime Minister has also not ruled out future offensives. Skirmishes continue between Turkish security forces and their partners with YPG/SDF forces in northern Syria.<sup>78</sup> As a result, Turkish armed pressure against SDF/YPG positions is unlikely to cease.

While the SDF wants to exclude Turkey from being involved in the Raqqa offensive, Ankara has other plans. The Turkish government has repeatedly expressed its desire to take Raqqa with their FSA partners following the completion of the Mosul offensive. This rhetoric likely accelerated the SDF's launch of 'Euphrates Anger', an operation intended to surround and capture Raqqa, in order to preempt Ankara and gain favor with the anti-ISIL coalition. As the SDF continues to encircle and take parts of Raqqa, Turkey's chances of influencing the operation have dimmed significantly.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, 'Operation Euphrates Shield' has provided the Turkish forces with an ideal staging ground in northern Syria to harass the PYD and better check Kurdish advances in the future.<sup>80</sup>

Ankara's vehement hostility towards the PYD and PKK has also severely complicated attempts to develop diplomatic solutions to the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. Turkey's opposition effectively prevented the PYD's participation in Syrian peace talks in Geneva in February of 2016 despite the PYD's control over a significant proportion of Syrian territory and their powerful fighting forces.<sup>81</sup> Michael Gunter placed much of the blame for the failure of the Geneva II peace talks on the decision to exclude the PYD.<sup>82</sup> When the competing powers in Iraq divide up the spoils of the war torn country following the defeat of ISIL, Turkey intends to have its own say. Due to the recapture of Mosul, they will likely seek to strengthen the KRG, particularly the KDP's interests, and influence the fate of oil rich Kirkuk,<sup>83</sup> while striving to decrease the PKK's presence in Sinjar. How these interests clash or coincide with the many powers at play, such as Tehran, Washington, and Baghdad, will almost certainly complicate any future peace process in Iraq.

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78 'Turkey "ends" Euphrates Shield campaign', *BBC News*, 30 March 2017.

79 'The Latest: US-led coalition lauds capture of Syrian IS town', *ABC News*, 11 May 2017.

80 Holland-McCowan, J. (2016), 'Why the Kurdish-led SDF Will Struggle to Retake Raqqa', *ICSR*

81 Barfi (2016), p. 10

82 Gunter (2015)

83 'Turkey's New Maps are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire', *Foreign Policy*, 23 October 2016.

## Epilogue: Conflict at a Crossroads

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Both the Syrian Civil War and the campaign against ISIL in Iraq are at a crossroads. The so-called Caliphate is in dire straights as the Iraqi security forces have retaken Mosul and the SDF's noose around Raqqa grows tighter. With most of the Sunni opposition on the back foot in Idlib, the resurgent Syrian regime and their allies are pressing their advantage. This report has argued that the battle between the PKK and Turkey will have pivotal implications on both of these theatres as these conflicts enter a new chapter.

First, the PKK has achieved remarkable gains since the Syrian Civil War and the battle against ISIL began. If not in name, the PYD's armed groups, the YPG and the YPG-led SDF, trumpeted as the most effective forces against ISIL, are strongly rooted and dominated by the PKK. Meanwhile the PYD have established themselves as a dominant political force in northern Syria. Their fighters have been relied upon by the US-led coalition as their principle allies in the fight against ISIL in Syria despite fierce Turkish objections. While 'Operation Euphrates Shield' did prevent them from territorially linking their northern Syrian possessions, the SDF's enhanced degree of cooperation with the Assad regime, Russia, and the United States will likely constrain further Turkish advances against them. In addition, the PKK's presence in Sinjar has strengthened their hold over their territory from Qandil to 'Rojava'. Their refuge in the Qandil Mountains will become an increasingly critical refuge as Ankara continues its offensive in southeastern Turkey.

The key battleground today is Raqqa. Justifying President Trump's approval of a plan to redouble the US's commitment to their YPG partners, the administration's rhetoric posits that these Kurdish armed groups will be the ones that will take the city. Until recently, prior evidence did not appear to support that contention. The YPG and SDF had traditionally focused on liberating areas in Raqqa province which border predominately Kurdish regions – areas that could be more easily incorporated into Rojava or bartered away in the future to create a smaller Syrian Kurdish autonomous region. However in recent weeks the SDF has dramatically accelerated their advance by taking key terrain surrounding the city along with some of its suburbs.

Yet the US-led coalition should doubt whether the Kurdish dominated force can completely recapture, let alone hold Raqqa. The YPG is aware that even if they were to take Raqqa, it would likely be taken out of their hands in any future peace settlement. Furthermore the Arab dominated regions still under ISIL control could still bitterly resist any further Kurdish advances, buttressing ISIL's narrative as a defender of the Sunni Arabs. The ideal way forward would be for the United States to assemble and train Arab ground forces within the SDF to complete the capture of the city. Unfortunately these hopes seem unrealistic as no such effective Arab fighting force has yet to emerge in Syria. This accelerated Kurdish advance may have more to do with the implosion of the 'Islamic State' along with the increase of American support than any growing desire to take the city. The increasing

pressure the SDF is facing from Turkey may have also convinced them that Raqqa was a bargaining chip they couldn't do without. On April 25th SDF commanders demanded that the United States enforce a no-fly zone over their territory in order to protect them from future Turkish strikes.<sup>84</sup> How the United States responds to requests such as these going forward deserves careful attention. Ultimately it should be acknowledged that the SDF's focus lies in solidifying the foundations of a semi autonomous region in northern Syria, not on rescuing the Syrian state.

President Erdogan, following an attempted military coup and contested referendum, is unlikely to change his view that the PKK's growing strength in Iraq and Syria is unacceptable for Turkish national security interests. As Erdogan has struggled to bring the Kurds to heel in southeastern Turkey, the SDF and the Assad regime's military advances have effectively sealed the western road to Raqqa from Turkish forces in northern Syria. The Trump administration's recent decision to step up support for the YPG has only made the situation graver. Erdogan should be expected to continue to direct airstrikes against PKK affiliated targets across the region. Future Turkish ground operations can't be ruled out as cross border incursions in both Iraq and Syria have precedent. Turkish bases in northern Syria and Bashiqa serve as useful launching pads from which they can monitor and militarily respond to PKK activity. Turkey's support of their KDP partners in Iraqi Kurdistan will consequently increase as they seek to gain sufficient political leverage to extract the PKK's presence in contested areas such as Sinjar. Regional actors should be wary of this destabilized power that may resort to extreme and unexpected measures in an effort to knock their PKK opponents off balance.

The regional conflict, and accompanied near dismantlement of the Syrian and Iraqi states, has given the PKK and Turkey a unique opportunity to fill the void. One result has been that the possibility of international powers backing the prospect of an independent Kurdish state, or at least more Kurdish autonomy, has increased considerably. Despite their terrorist designation, the PKK's influence on the battlefield, and any future peace process in Syria and Iraq, should not be underestimated. The Turkish state meanwhile has the opportunity to reclaim some of the regional influence of its Ottoman predecessors at the expense of their enemies. Yet the greatest risk inherent in Turkey's clashes with the PKK is that both parties could make the conflicts in Iraq and Syria even more deadly. The diametrically opposed interests of these two adversaries render a sustainable peace in the region even more elusive. A greater appreciation of the political complexities spawned from this war of shadows is vital in order for policy makers to make more informed decisions in both Iraq and Syria going forward.

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84 'Kurds call on US to set up no-fly zone after Turkish attacks', *Al-Monitor*, 25 April 2017.





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