

# PKK'S REGIONAL FRANCHISE OF TERROR



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Photograph: Two PKK militants take refuge from DEASH gunfire in an abandoned building in Sinjar, Iraq. April 2015. (Erin Trieb)

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## ■ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Several terrorism experts nowadays warn that Al Qaeda is carving out a foothold in Syria through its 'affiliates' and enablers on the ground.
- However, Al Qaeda is not the only international terror organization that seeks to acquire a secure foothold through its franchises such as al-Nusrah Front in the Middle East.
- PKK, which both the US and EU recognize as international terrorist organization for more than a decade, has established regional franchises such as not only the PYD, PJAK, TAK, which, in fact, even predate the onset of Syrian revolt as PKK's franchises, but also the DHKP-C, also listed as a terrorist organization by the US, and MLKP, another radical leftist terrorist group.
- KCK, founded by the PKK in a steady but gradual process after Öcalan's capture in 1999, has become a complex umbrella structure up and above several terror franchises in the region.
- The PKK has therefore been able to reinvent itself into a complex terror franchise with several branches in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey in large part because it had already operated in and from these countries.
- The Syrian regime's exclusive support for the PKK had been constant with limited intervals of diminishing or less visible support. The Assad family had adopted it as a state policy to allow the PKK to recruit from northern Syria under Syrian security's close watch. When the PYD was founded by the PKK in Syria in 2003, the Syrian terrain had already, therefore, been a playground for the terrorist group.
- The PKK-PYD relationship has not been momentary. The former provided the strategy, militancy, and logistics to the latter all along. Terrorists themselves acknowledge no difference between the PKK, PYD, YPG, YPJ, or PJAK. As a western journalist reported from the ground in 2015, "It is quite apparent from here that the YPG and PKK differ in little other than a name."



- Despite public relations campaign organized by several western state and non-state actors in major Western capitals on behalf of PKK's regional franchises, several observers remain unconvinced that the PKK changed in any meaningful sense. As an observer pointed out, "the Rojava experiment, for all its proclaimed anarchism and grass-roots mobilization, reproduces both the PKK's Leninist party vanguardism, and its Stalinist personality cult." In other words, if PKK went through anything, it is transfiguration than metamorphosis.
- In particular, similar to sustained importance of 'Al-Qaeda Central' after Bin Laden's death, there is still a strong "PKK-Central". Today's PKK is the same old PKK, which has always been an authoritarian terrorist organization intolerant of dissent and plurality. It is no wonder that Bashar Al-Assad's picture was removed to be replaced by Öcalan's in areas in northern Syria.
- Scores of Marxists and anarchists of all stripes have found a refuge by association with the PKK and its regional franchises in the name of fighting DAESH. When the West has extended economic, diplomatic, and military assistance to branches in PKK's regional terror network, it automatically embraces 'Marxist allies' but ignores many ramifications that will follow in the short and mid-term.
- This is largely because the PKK has never restricted its destructive vision to Turkish or Middle Eastern boundaries but always looked far beyond. "[For the PKK] the foundation of a Kurdish state was never an ultimate goal in itself, but rather a means to spread socialism." The so-called 'democratic autonomy' or 'democratic confederalism' project, which are contradicted by PKK's practices on the ground everywhere, may be a 'portable ideology' to undermine the mainstream, disrupt the middle way, or upset status quo in and beyond the Middle East.
- The anarchists, socialists, and Marxist revolutionaries fighting alongside the PKK and its franchises at the moment will sooner or later return Europe and the US with many criminal connections, acquaintances, tools, and dangerous ideas in their minds and backpacks.
- It should not be forgotten that the PKK, 'a criminal syndicate', has long been well-connected to extreme leftist circles in Europe. This will aggravate the risk and danger anarchist or Marxist foreign fighter returnees will pose to Europe as much as radical 'Islamist' returnees.
- When dark clouds loom large over the liberal international order and the 'middle way' dissipates, we should think twice if supporting a totalitarian organization with a vision of stateless society is the right path to follow.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent policy-guided report, several experts in terrorism and Salafism warned the incoming Trump Administration that al-Qaeda is carving out a foothold in Syria through its 'affiliates' and enablers on the ground. This analysis departs from the understanding that though al-Qaeda's central leadership still matters, the organization lives on and exerts influence through its local and regional 'brands' and 'franchises' around the world from South Asia and Maghreb to the Middle East. Thus, the American emphasis has gradually shifted from ambiguously and hesitantly supporting the revolution in Syria to denying al-Qaeda a permanent bastion there.<sup>1</sup> However, al-Qaeda is not the only international terrorist organization that try to hijack the revolution by re-establishing itself in the region through franchises. The PKK, listed as an international terrorist organization by the US and the EU, has also exploited the vacuum left by the revolution and tried to consolidate its franchises on the ground such as PYD, YPG, YPJ and others. In order to lay bare what is known and undeservedly praised in the West as PYD, YPG, and YPJ are in fact 'of the PKK, by the PKK, and for the PKK', this article discusses how the PKK gradually reinvented itself after Ocalan's capture in 1999 and therefore, undergone a neglected or ignored process of organizational restructuring. As Khalaf argued, "the KCK [The Union of Communities in Kurdistan] has since become an institutionalized umbrella structure overseeing its member organizations: the PKK in Turkey, the PYD in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq."<sup>2</sup> We show how the PKK has now become an umbrella organization, bringing under it not only PYD and YPG but also several radical left-oriented terrorist groups from Turkey such as DHKP-C, which the US also lists as a 'terrorist group', MLKP, and several others ideologically and organizationally. We do so by using a wide variety of material from primary and secondary sources as well as interviews with Turkish security officials on the subject.

In order to clarify how these groups, though under different names, are part of PKK's overarching strategy and products of its restructuring, this article starts with the concept of 'terror franchising'. We eventually argue that if it is feared by a possible al-Qaeda foothold in Syria that "the Salafi-jihadi movement has ambitions to make its ideology the guiding principle and normative experience of millions of people in the Levant, situated in the heart of the most important geography in the Muslim world,"<sup>3</sup> the PKK's



territorial chunks in Syria through PYD must be feared for the identical reason. We argue that notwithstanding claims of ideological transformation from Marxist-Leninist line to much-touted ideas of 'democratic confederalism' and 'democratic autonomy', which has never matched the hegemonic and authoritarian PKK/PYD practices on the

ground, what is out there is still the old PKK. "Despite stated ideological shifts and some autonomy by necessity—the three cantons in northern Syria are geographically dispersed—the old tendencies of exclusivism, centralization (especially in the social sphere, notably in education), and a deep authoritarianism remain the order of the day with the PKK."<sup>4</sup> The only difference however, with the romanticized legitimacy bestowed by the West upon its regional project, the PKK is playing a long game and will likely turn their gaze elsewhere beyond the Middle East.

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## TERROR FRANCHISING

In the American-led fight against al-Qaeda after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, a heated debate emerged on the relevance of al-Qaeda membership. By 2006-7, prominent scholars in the field debated whether then-elusive leader of al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, still mattered for the organization, or if terror was becoming leaderless.<sup>5</sup> One of the protagonists in this debate, Bruce Hoffman thought in 2006 that “The current al-Qaeda thus exists more as an ideology than as an identifiable, unitary terrorist organization. It has become a vast enterprise” but he quickly noted that this did not mean “al-Qaeda does not still retain some important characteristics or aspects of a more organized entity with a central command and control structure, however weakened and reduced.”<sup>6</sup>

For others however, especially thanks to the internet and communications technology, al-Qaeda was no longer a hierarchical organization, thus not only allowing but encouraging local ownership and supply of terrorist acts without seeking approval from the centre. For instance, Farrall argued, “al-Qaeda today is not a traditional hierarchical terrorist organization, with a pyramid-style organizational structure, and it does not exercise full command and control over its branch and franchises. Due to its dispersed structure, al-Qaeda operates as a devolved network hierarchy, in which levels of command authority are not always clear.”<sup>7</sup> With tightening global security measures and hunt, al-Qaeda sought to establish regional brands and franchises to expand its global reach and continue to survive.<sup>8</sup> Thus wrote Farrall, “al-Qaeda has founded a regional branch in the Arabian Peninsula and acquired franchises in Iraq and the Maghreb. Today, it has more members, greater geographic reach, and a level of ideological sophistication and influence it lacked ten years ago.”<sup>9</sup>

This was why Abu Musab al-Zarkawi’s group in Iraq, *al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, joined al-Qaeda and took the name ‘Al Qaeda Iraq’ although the former was much stronger than the latter in terms of men and resources, thus making Zarkawi’s group Al Qaeda’s Iraqi branch. ‘Salafist group for Preaching and Combat’ also joined in Al Qaeda the same way, allowing Al-Qaeda a franchise in the Maghreb.<sup>10</sup> After Osama Bin Laden was killed in 2011, the debate concerning ‘decentralized structure vs. central leadership’ flared once again. Now the defenders of ‘central leadership’ gained upper hand as the evidence supposedly seized from Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad showed that he was very much involved in almost all dimensions of many terrorist attacks and plots from target selection to preparation and

execution even as late as 2010.<sup>11</sup> With the rise of DAESH and Al Qaeda's real chance to acquire a foothold in the Middle East through its 'affiliates' on the ground as well as its 'enablers', it is again argued that "the franchise model has been essential to the group's survival, even if that means affiliated groups are often left to their own devices and focus more on local struggles than on attacking the West."<sup>12</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to take Al Qaeda as an exceptional international terrorist group that *can* do organizational restructuring to reinvent itself, thus survive and maintain influence. The PKK, another international terrorist organization, has undergone a significant and yet little understood evolution in terms of both ideology and organizational structure.



The PKK, recognized as an international terrorist organization by the US and EU, has undergone a significant and yet little understood evolution in terms of both ideology and organizational structure.

## ■ PKK'S SELF-REINVENTION AS AN UMBRELLA TERROR GROUP

In such ethno-nationalist separatist terrorist groups as the IRA, ETA, and the PKK, it may be unexpected to see an effort to establish 'franchises' in other countries. It may make sense for IRA or ETA to establish franchises in a territory far away from Spain or Ireland if these organizations are also treated as 'criminal organizations'. However, it would not make sense at the same time because these terrorist organizations have claims and stakes on a particular territorial chunk in a particular country. They also depend on support of particular local communities for survival, which foreign populations can rarely provide.

However, owing to the distinct nature of 'Kurdish geography' cross-cutting Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian national boundaries, the PKK has been uniquely positioned to deliver franchises in an entirely new political opportunity structure due to the Syrian revolt in 2011. Similar to al-Qaeda, PKK's affiliates in Syria have exploited the vacuum left by the revolt for their own narrow ideological purposes and project in apparent collision with the Assad regime.<sup>13</sup> The way the PKK has created these franchises has also been a unique process, which precedes the Syrian uprising in 2011 by many years.

Though there are insiders to the PKK who claim that the PKK flirted with the idea of establishing franchises as early as 1999,<sup>14</sup> it is more credible to claim that reorganization process for the PKK started a few years after Öcalan was captured in 1999. His incarceration and trial in Turkey sent shockwaves to PKK militants and sympathizers in Europe as well as members of the terror group elsewhere. With its listing as an international terrorist organization by both the US and the EU and later slighted by the US after the invasion of Iraq, during which Northern Iraqi Kurds came to the fore, the group showed signs of internal turmoil and fracture.<sup>15</sup> The PKK had experienced "one of the most serious organizational crisis in its history."<sup>16</sup> An eminent expert in the field wrote in 2002 that

“.....  
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.....”

similar to weakening and later disappearance of Shining Path in Peru after its leader Abimael Guzman was captured, the PKK showed the same telltale signs after Öcalan's capture.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of seeking an independent Kurdish state in Turkey, in accordance with its new ideological position and policy objectives, the PKK now changed its strategy by the early 2000s towards developing a confederated struggle involving the whole Kurds in the region going beyond Turkish borders. The KCK Contract, which was promulgated by the PKK leadership in 2005, aimed at bringing the Kurds of the region together within the same social, political, judicial and cultural governmental framework to be organized on a non-hierarchical model of "democratic autonomy". The model was expected to work as a pan-Kurdish political project as it was to be designed without regarding physical borders created by the nation states of the region the Kurds have inhabited.<sup>18</sup> The new approach reflected itself initially in the organizational structure of the PKK, which was accordingly redesigned to give it an image of political movement of the regional Kurds against its long-established legacy of being an armed terrorist organization. As Akkaya and Jongerden pointed out:

In January 2000 an extraordinary congress was held. This seventh congress sought official acceptance of the new party line based on Öcalan's project for a democratic republic. In addition to the political-ideological change, the Congress decided on important organizational restructuring. . . On the basis of this congress, the PKK was radically reorganized. . . The eighth congress of the PKK was held two years later, in 2002. With this Congress, the PKK ceased its activities in all areas and a new organization, Kongreya Azadiya u Demokrasiya Kurdistan (KADEK; the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress) was founded. . . The change presumed that the transformation process which the party complex had been undergoing since the seventh congress had reached a new level. A pioneer party, the PKK, which controlled all fields of activities, was replaced by a congress organization that was to coordinate, not rule, the different parties and organizations in the party complex. Within this framework, the different parties for different parts of Kurdistan were founded. . .<sup>19</sup>

The PKK leadership also stated in its 8<sup>th</sup> congress that there was a need to establish a political arm in Syria. Having given even the name of PKK's new franchise in Syria, the Congress decided to ". . . create a Democratic Union Movement of Syria or Democratic Union Party, and support it as part of our movement in coming days".<sup>20</sup> When the PKK was now riven with defections, disagreements, loss of 'faith' and therefore, serious risk of fracture was at stake, Öcalan called in 2004 for "the formation of a 'Preparatory Rebuilding Committee' which would aim to reinvent the PKK as a distinct party. According to Akkaya and Jongerden, "this 'new' PKK was not designated as a pioneer party in the old mold of classical Leninist terminology, but as an ideological and philosophical power grouping, mainly concerned with membership. . . Political and military activities were left to the control of the KKK/KCK, in coordination with other military and political organizations such as the HPG, HRK and political parties in each part of Kurdistan."<sup>21</sup> This started the process where "the KCK has since become an institutionalized umbrella structure overseeing its member organizations: the PKK in Turkey, the PYD in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq."<sup>22</sup> The PKK has since become the name of a party complex:

When the PKK was established as a political party in 1978, it had the classical organizational structure of communist parties, with a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations. The highest executive institution was the Central Committee, and the Party Congress was the highest decision-making body of the party. . . Today, the organization has grown even more complex, and what we refer to as the PKK is actually a party complex, a complex of parties and organizations comprising several parties (including the PKK as a party) and sister parties in Iraq, Syria and Iran, the co-party which separately organizes women.<sup>23</sup>

In this new restructure, however, Öcalan keeps its relevancy more than ever. He keeps a “Wizard-of-Oz-like presence.”<sup>24</sup> This has been helped by the fact that since his arrest, Öcalan could routinely connect and communicate with his constituents from his jail cell.<sup>25</sup> Similar to sustained importance of ‘al-Qaeda Central’ after Bin Laden’s death<sup>26</sup>, there is still a strong “PKK-Central”. According to Akkaya and Jongerden, “although there have been considerable changes in the organizational structure, the devoted militant body as a group of ‘professional full-time revolutionaries’ continues to occupy the central role.”<sup>27</sup> This is why Öcalan is portrayed over the PYD-controlled areas as an unquestionable leader today. His writings are given the treatment of a ‘sacred text.’ From city centers, streets to classrooms, political offices, kitchens and bedrooms, portraits of ‘Assad the dictator’ have been replaced by images of Öcalan in PKK uniforms.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the fact that the PKK underwent a process of reorganisation, the longstanding authoritarian underpinnings of the PKK organization has remained intact. “The PKK’s transnational structure is deliberately designed to be confusing. This is partly to avoid Western terrorism designations. It is also partly as a political strategy with its own Kurdish constituency.”<sup>29</sup> As an analyst points out “since the beginning, the PKK has been Marxist-Leninist in its ideology, Stalinist in its leadership style, and Maoist in its strategy for the conquest of power.”<sup>30</sup> Though the PKK has become an umbrella organization with a more complex organizational structure, its core features as a terrorist organization remained the same. “The Rojava experiment, for all its proclaimed anarchism and grass-roots mobilization, reproduces both the PKK’s Leninist party vanguardism, and its Stalinist personality cult.”<sup>31</sup>

The connection between the ‘PKK central’ and its local franchises in Syria, Iran, and Iraq has been facilitated by the fact that with the region in disarray and border protection in collapse between states in the region, communication and coordination between the core and branches have become too easy. This enabled the PKK to establish a (yet) *regional network* upon already existing political and social infrastructure in Syria and Iraq.



## ■ PKK'S SYRIAN FRANCHISES AND THE ASSAD CONNECTION

Academic analyses, policy reports or commentaries have defined the PYD in close relation to the PKK.<sup>32</sup> They have unveiled the YPG's PKK-affiliated nature in various forms and with various connotations which included, among others, PKK's "wholly owned subsidiary"<sup>33</sup>, PKK's "Syrian affiliate" or "sister party"<sup>34</sup> or just PKK's "Syrian arm."<sup>35</sup> Almost no document has ever referred the PYD as an independent political organization representing Kurdish aspirations in Syria. Compatible with the emergence of the PYD as an extension of the organizational reconfiguration of the PKK that aimed at institutionally infusing into Kurdish populated areas through a system of franchising, it was more directly depicted as the "Syrian branch of the PKK".<sup>36</sup>

The bare truth remains that it was the PKK that founded the PYD in Syria in 2003. According to a veteran Kurdish leader from Syria, "two new movements emerged in Syrian Kurdistan. One was "The Democratic Union Party-PYD" that was founded in 2003 by PKK affiliated members in Syria, after many years of difficult relations with the Assad regime in the aftermath of Abdullah Öcalan's expulsion from Syria in 1998."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the KCK Executive Council, co-chaired by the prominent PKK members Cemil Bayık and Bese Hozat, released a statement in 2006 and admitted that the PYD was established as an arm of the KCK in the Northern Syria as it is called Western Kurdistan (Rojava).<sup>38</sup> Today, though Saleh Muslim appears to be the co-leader of the PYD, it is still considered to have effectively been controlled by one of the senior most PKK figures, Cemil Bayık.<sup>39</sup>

This organic linkage should not come as a surprise because the Syrian territory had long been a familiar territory to the PKK,<sup>40</sup> which historically drew significant percentage of its militants from Syria with the full knowledge and consent of the Assad family. It is estimated that Syrians in the PKK amounted to 20 percent of the total number of PKK terrorists.<sup>41</sup> To another source, PKK recruited around 17 percent of its militants from inside Syria until 2004, and the percentage of Syrians among the killed PKK terrorists oscillated between 10 to 20 percent between the years 2004 and 2008.<sup>42</sup> "In the course of the past 30 years some 5,000 Syrians have died fighting for the PKK" stated KaniXulam, the director of the Washington D.C.-based American Kurdish Information Network, and confirmed that "For close to 20 years, Syrian Kurds played a major role in the ranks of the PKK."<sup>43</sup>

This was incontrovertibly allowed by Assad family's exclusive support for the terrorist group for many years. "Part of the [Syrian] regime's rationale for this tacit support was based on the conclusion that the PKK was defined by its struggle against the Turkish state and avoided domestic Syrian issues. Other Kurdish parties, the majority of which were descended from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S), were not afforded such room to maneuver."<sup>44</sup> On the place of Syrian Kurds in PKK, Scheller states:

The Syrian regime not only tolerated PKK activism in its territory but also recruited members in the Syrian Kurdish community. As Omar Sheikmous, a researcher and long-time observer of Syrian policy vis-à-vis the Kurds, recounts: "They [the PKK in Syria] had very good recruiters, especially among students and women. They were clever in recruiting youngsters, who were sent to Lebanon first and then to Turkey. For Syrian Kurds, the PKK was very attractive because the Syrian Kurdish community was corrupt and factionalized, and Syrian security had infiltrated it. . . About 30-35% were recruited by government organs. It was mainly "amn ad-dawle" (state security) that worked as an initiator and organizer. They had a number of contacts in the Kurdish community, mainly in Ifrin, Damascus, Qamishli and Aleppo. There was a clear agreement: "You'll be sent to fight in Turkey and therefore you'll not be asked for military service, and after several years you can come back." This worked through professional people who were influential in the Kurdish community, e.g. doctors. When the recruits left Syria, security kept their identity cards. There were two considerations behind this: First of all, they could not easily return but needed permission of security to do so. Second, if they were killed or tracked in Turkey, there would be no reflection on Syria." This strategy worked well for the Syrian regime: it provided a useful means for getting rid of Kurdish activists, while indirectly fighting Turkey.<sup>45</sup>

Supporting dissidents from every country and keeping them weak for the ultimate purpose of covering its own weak spots has been the hallmark of Syrian foreign policy, especially after the collapse of the Soviets. Two American diplomats recalled how Assad family supported the PKK in addition to many other groups as a card to play against Turkey. According to David Michael Ransom, who was Deputy Chief of Mission in Syria from 1985 to 1988, "The Turks believed that the Syrians were supporting it. The fact is that they were. But they were doing it in a typical Syrian fashion. The Syrian view of such activity inside their neighbors' borders was that "We are weak, you are strong, and we will therefore do things that make your life miserable and eventually force you to come to us to ask for our help. Then we will extract our pound of flesh but not give you everything that you want in the way of expulsion, etc. of terrorist elements."<sup>46</sup> Former US Ambassador to Turkey, Richard Barkley (1991-1994) too said that Syria was supporting the PKK.<sup>47</sup> Syrian support for the PKK is something the PKK itself repeatedly admitted.<sup>48</sup>

It means that the seeds or nuclei of what were to become PKK's franchises in Syria were already in place in Syria. When it was founded in 2003, the PYD positioned itself on a ready-made demographic, social and political groundwork left behind by the PKK. In other words, the PYD did not replace the PKK in the region as a separate party or political

organization but grafted itself on to ranks, militants, ideology and objectives of the PKK without using the name PKK. In this sense, it is reasonable to suggest that the PKK and the PYD displayed a very clearly observable affinity in many aspects including human resources. Thus, the PYD's emergence should not be treated as a phoenix rising from the ashes; "Its [YPG's] close relations with the PKK also provided the group with the necessary training, manpower, and arms supplies to solidify its current position. Thanks in part to this PKK support, the YPG—now numbering roughly fifty thousand members—has become one of the strongest armed actors in northern Syria."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps because of this fact that local people have frequently used the brands of PKK and the PYD interchangeably. When criticizing Turkish operations on Syrian border, a Kurdish critic of the PYD, for example, demanded that not only Turkey but also PKK should leave the Syrian lands because, for him, Turkish operations were a logical consequence of the presence of the PYD in Syria.<sup>50</sup>

## ■ PKK's PYD AND YPG

Evidence documenting that the PYD and YPG are PKK's Syrian franchises have become too plenty. As stated before, the PKK established the PYD as its political branch in Syria in 2003.<sup>51</sup> The PKK's initiative behind the establishment of the PYD reflected itself in the clauses of the party's original statute as well. The 2<sup>nd</sup> article of the statute laid it down that "the PYD considers Abdullah Öcalan as its leader and KONGRA-GEL as the supreme legislative body of the people of Kurdistan and KCK-Rojava as its system of democracy for Kurdish people in Syria".<sup>52</sup> The PYD has never refrained from portraying Öcalan as the leader of the movement and his thoughts as the ideology of the party. The PYD has not changed this ideological position and its view about the PKK leader Öcalan. The significant point in the statute showing organizational links between the PKK and the PYD was its reference to the KONGRA-GEL which was regarded as the supreme legislative body or decision-making authority of the party. The wording, in so doing, clearly branded the PYD as a sub-branch of the KCK compatible with its policy of franchising model. Yet, as the PYD grew stronger and involved in international cooperation, especially with the US, against DAESH, there appeared a need to gain legitimacy by eliminating, at least formally, accusations about its linkages with the PKK since the latter is listed as a terrorist organization by the US and the EU. For this reason, to cover up its true nature, PYD issued a new statute in 2015 and removed all references to the KCK or KONGRA-GEL from its official documents.

Nevertheless, YPG's denial of its linkages with the PKK needs to be taken as more a tactical maneuver. After all, the prominent founding members of the party were at the same time among the members of the PKK's armed wing, the HPG, that organizationally extended the PKK into Syria making the YPG as its Syrian arm. The names included Şilan Kobani (Meysa Baqi), Zekeriya (Zekeriya İbrahim), Fuat (Hikmet Tokmak), Cemil (Nebo Ali) and Ciwan (Hacı Cuma Ali) who are all counted among the founding fathers of the PYD but also listed as the members of the PKK/HPG, which has commemorated them as its martyrs since they were assassinated in Mosul in 2004.<sup>53</sup> Though not included in this list, in an interview given in 2013, Abdullah Öcalan's bother Osman Öcalan also stated that he was the leading figure in the establishment of the PYD. He clearly noted "I found the PYD as I did the PJAK"...The PYD is connected to the PKK and acts upon on PKK orders.<sup>54</sup> Another source claimed that the decision to form the PYD was not made on the free will

of its founders but the PKK affiliates including the YPG, HPG and the PJAK, all were established upon a central directive which were sent by Öcalan from his jail in 2005.<sup>55</sup>

The fact that this is still a regional franchise network with the PKK Central on top, there is far visible *interoperability* and *permeability*.<sup>56</sup> In addition to founding cadres, the profile of the ruling ranks within the PYD proves the existence of an ongoing organic linkage between the PKK and the PYD. Its co-chair Salih Muslim, who took refuge and served in Qandil for years, is known as member of the PKK since the time that the PKK operated its terror activities from Syrian lands. Besides this top ranking leadership, the power to make political and military decisions within the PYD and its armed wing YPG has been in the hands of the PKK members, who were sent from Qandil to Syria. According to a Kurdwatch report, among some notable examples to the cadres shared between the PYD and the PKK we can mention the names of Nazir Hajji Mansur, who is the territorial authority of Jazirah; an Iranian Kurd Jamshid Uthman, who is the military authority in Jazirah and Tall Abyad; Haval Kemal, the military authority in Afrin; Zuhaf Kobani responsible from the diplomatic relations in Europe; Nawaf Khalil, who is the European representative in Brussels; Shahin Jallo (Sahin Cilo), who was for years PKK authority in Europe and a member of the PKK Central Committee, is the supreme commander of all military units in the areas under PYD control; Umar Husayn Alush in the political authority of Ayn al-Arab; the position of military authorities has been occupied by PKK members from Turkey and, when the report was being drafted, a PKK commander from Turkey, Shiyar, was holding the position.

“Both Western and Turkish foreign fighters fighting with PKK’s Syrian franchises as well as non-Western militants of the YPG and YPJ admit openly that they are of the PKK, from the PKK and for the PKK.”

Moreover, Aldar Khalil and İlhan Ahmad, who were PKK militants and former members of the KCK, now occupy high seats within the PYD organization. Finally, it is also reported that Redur Khalil, who was then the speaker of the YPG had fought for years in the PKK ranks.<sup>57</sup> To complete the picture, reports from foreign sympathizers in Rojava state that the main language of instruction particularly in military training and ideological indoctrination has accordingly been Turkish rather than Kurdish or Arabic. This suggests not only that the formulation and communication of PYD ideology are as highly centralized around Öcalan as among PKK sympathizers in Turkey; it also suggests that a substantial part of the PYD cadre and YPG troops originate from Turkey rather than Syria.”<sup>58</sup>

Reports from Syria have documented many cases of violence and fighting in which PKK militants took active roles. Among many others, a PYD militant, who was killed in a street fight in Qamishli, was identified by the *Kurdwatch* as “a PYD member from Derik who, until recently, had fought for the PKK.”<sup>59</sup> In the same vein, an eyewitness from local Kurds, who was an ex-member of the YPG, asserted that more than four hundred new PKK military personnel from Iran and Turkey joined the YPG in the year 2014.<sup>60</sup> According to an Atlantic Council report, the YPG casualty data confirms that Turkey-born Kurds form approximately 50 percent (49.24) of the YPG self-reported casualties between January 2015 and January 2016.<sup>61</sup>

Turkish security officials too stated that several detainees arrested for charges of belonging to the outlawed PKK confessed that the PKK sent soldiers, militants and provided all

logistical support to the YPG.<sup>62</sup> Thus, when decided to join the PYD, the militants knew that they in fact join a group which is a part of the PKK. Both western and Turkish foreign fighters fighting with PKK's Syrian franchises as well as non-Western militants of the YPG and YPJ admit openly that they are of the PKK, from the PKK and for the PKK. For instance, "One reason the preponderance of these fighters have joined the YPG is because if they joined the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, they would then be in violation of U.S. law."<sup>63</sup> Other western foreign fighters reportedly noted that "There often seemed little to distinguish the 'terrorist' PKK and America's YPG friends" and "PKK militants would become YPG fighters by changing fatigues."<sup>64</sup> The defectors from the PKK themselves recently acknowledged that the PKK headquarters are in control of the Syrian theatre.<sup>65</sup>

PKK militants themselves are perfectly aware that the PKK got stronger with YPG's gains in Syria.<sup>66</sup> YPG's gains in turn have been largely allowed by the PKK militants and terrorist cadres. "Following the Rojava uprising, thousands of Kurdish men and women enlisted in military units. The commanders who trained the new members were veterans of the Kurdistan Workers' Party – hardened fighters and staunch ideologues that had spent years fighting the Turkish state in their main base on Mount Qandil, in the North of Iraq. Arriving in Syria they brought a radical ideology, which they publicly advertised with the aim of bringing security and stability to Rojava. Soon, their membership soared."<sup>67</sup> Thus, "Aldar Xelil from TEV-DEM noted: 'We do not receive military support, but some of us, like myself, were cadres or fighters with the PKK but left to join the effort in Rojava, thus we possess a lot of military experience.'"<sup>68</sup> According to Sheikmous, it initially took "two thousand and five hundred guerrilla men of PKK from Qandil Mountains to join and boost PYD forces in Syria"<sup>69</sup> This is something the PYD itself does not try to hide.<sup>70</sup> PYD therefore uses the PKK's military, economic, and media infrastructure as well as political connections. For instance, "Rojava also benefits from the PKK's established media institutions; Med TV started broadcasting in 1995. It later changed its name to Roj TV and has now been succeeded by other individual TV stations."<sup>71</sup>



## ■ PERMEABILITY DOWN THE RANKS

The same level of permeability is apparent in the lower ranks and ordinary militants. Especially after the PJAK, the Iranian branch of the PKK, abandoned its military operations in Iran in order to concentrate its forces on the PYD struggle in Syria, it is stated that over more than two hundred PKK militants were moved into Syria to fight for the YPG.<sup>72</sup> The PKK can flood its Syrian operations with the PJAK militants because the latter is its Iranian branch. “The [U.S.] Treasury Department noted that PJAK was established by Kongra-Gel leaders in 2004 expressly to expand the group’s appeal to Iranian Kurds. Treasury reported further that, as of April 2008, Kongra-Gel still selected and appointed PJAK’s senior leadership, as well as its forty-person central committee.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus, a thirty-one-year-old female militant could easily come down from the Mount Qandil to now fight in northeastern Syria, and still talk about the appeal in Öcalan’s ideology.<sup>74</sup> Some teenagers in northern Syria were “...inspired by her female Kurdish language teacher, Vian, 29, a fighter with the Kurdistan Workers’ party, PKK.”<sup>75</sup> “I did not want my daughter to go to war,” explains her mother, Nasiba . . . “She was only thirteen. She met a YPG member at her brother’s house and he started brainwashing her. And before we knew it, she left home and went to Mount Qandil. She was seventeen when she was killed.”<sup>76</sup> A western journalist who visited the PKK camps in 2015 report that “It is quite apparent from here that the YPG and PKK differ in little other than a name. Brusk is a fighter from Syria. He fought with the YPG before coming to join the PKK in Iraq, and is soon to be deployed back to Syria with the YPG. He says that Kurdish forces in Syria follow the PKK leader Mr. Ocalan.”<sup>77</sup> This is not simply a case of different groups with different aims but inspiring from the same person. “It’s all PKK but different branches” as one YPG militant confessed freely. “Sometimes I’m a PKK, sometimes I’m a PJAK, sometimes I’m a YPG. It doesn’t really matter. They are all members of the PKK.”<sup>78</sup> Because the PYD, YPG and PKK are seen as one and the same, parents of a terrorist killed in action in Kobane admit that they raised their child in the ideology of Öcalan and raised her not only for Syrian Kurds but all Kurds everywhere.<sup>79</sup>

Such transfer of militants from one branch of the PKK to another on the calculations of strategic and operational priorities is not an exemption to the given cases nor does it happen on the will of the free-floating militants. Rather it has been retained as the strategy of the new armed struggle rested on a franchised system of organization administered from a single center which is the PKK headquarters based in Qandil mountains. This fact

is evident in the following words of Self and Ferris that were drawn from their analyses of killed-in-action data reported by the PKK branches:

...distinctions between PKK and affiliate personnel are largely superficial with individual fighters repeatedly being shifted between units and fronts to meet strategic organisational needs. The PKK's relationship with its affiliates is not only one of a sponsor giving birth to regional sister organisations, but also one of an inseparable strategic leadership body exercising direct command and control over only nominally distinguishable units. Rather than being separate conflicts, the Syrian and Iranian conflicts represent different military fronts in a unified regional campaign for Kurdish autonomy in which the PKK is overtly involved. Like a Shell game, the PKK leadership in Kandil shifts personnel between its affiliates and fronts, attempting to obscure the true nature of the organisation and circumvent international terrorist labels. In this sense, the PKK has no true affiliates, but rather three fronts and three names corresponding to those fronts, consisting of the same personalities, leadership, ideology, and history of terrorism.<sup>80</sup>

What keeps this branched system of organization together and coordinates movement of the militants between the fronts under the PKK concern, as was put before, is the existence of a behind-the-doors organizational and operational unity represented by the PKK leadership at Qandil. Political, strategic or operational decisions are made by the Qandil leadership or in İmralı and implemented in Syria or elsewhere by the PKK cadres in the field.<sup>81</sup> Transfer of the protection of oil fields in Northern Syria from the Assad regime to the PYD presents a good example to the PKK

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control over PYD initiatives. On September 2012, a meeting takes place between PKK and the representatives of the Syrian Ministry for Crude Oil and Natural Resources where the PKK demands to receive the transfer of the protection of the oil fields in the Kurdish region. The protection and control is ceded to the PKK/PYD because the PKK threatens the regime to attack the oil fields in the Kurdish regions should it be denied control.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, the PKK has created a franchised system of organization to keep the control in its own hands over the Kurdish populated regions of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. This model was a strategy adopted by the PKK after Öcalan was deported from Syria in 1998 and subsequently arrested by the Turkish authorities in Kenya in the following year. In accordance with its new ideological position and policy objectives, the PKK shifted its attempts towards developing a confederated struggle involving whole of the Kurds of the region going beyond Turkish borders. The emergence of the PYD as its Syrian branch with overlapping organic, strategic and operational links between the two is just one of the consequences of this region-wide PKK concern. The evolving cooptation and coordination between the PKK and the Turkish radical left, concerning its armed struggle in the region, have been the other face of the PKK franchising policy.

## ■ TURKISH FRANCHISES OF THE PKK

This does not mean the PKK left the Turkish soil unattended by its franchises. Its chief terror sprout in Turkey has been TAK (*Teyrebazen Azadiya Kurdistan* or Kurdistan Freedom Falcons), which was founded in 2004 and has assumed responsibility for several attacks since 2006 in Turkey, including the most recent attacks in Istanbul and Ankara in 2016. Even an otherwise sympathetic expert on the PKK described TAK as “an ostensibly independent, but in fact PKK-linked, Kurdish group.”<sup>83</sup> As opposed to desperate efforts to deny the link between TAK and the PKK to absolve the latter from TAK’s atrocities, external observers argue unambiguously that “the PKK does not allow rivals for Kurdish allegiance to operate in its areas of influence, and murders its own dissidents, even when they flee abroad. TAK is clearly not independent of the PKK, and is quite possibly directly controlled by [Fehman] Husayn [Bahoz Erdal].”<sup>84</sup> Another commentator also confirmed this organic linkage between the PKK and TAK and added that the TAK has performed two basic functions for the PKK: Since TAK has concentrated its activities in urban areas, it has given the PKK an opportunity to deny responsibility for the civilian casualties caused by TAK attacks that would have otherwise led to a loss of credibility in the eyes of the general public as well as among its own sympathizers, while the same opportunity has served to blocking international criticisms in a time when it was seeking international legitimacy.<sup>85</sup> And most importantly, as the Ankara terror attack on 17 February 2016 showed clearly, TAK uses PKK’s Syrian personnel for attacks on the Turkish soil. “...the personnel the PKK uses in its branches—the PYD/YPG in Syria, the Kurdistan Life Party (PJAK) in Iran—are all the same people just operating under different banners.”<sup>86</sup>

PKK’s Turkish franchises are not restricted to the TAK though. The PKK has now become an umbrella organization not only for its organically-linked affiliates such as PYD, TAK, YPG, YPJ, and PJAK but also Turkey’s little-known, underestimated radical leftist terrorist groups such as DHKP-C and MLKP. Indeed, the PKK has a checkered history with these extreme leftist groups. In a sense the PKK and these terror groups have long been natural bedfellows. Not only did PKK’s personnel emerge from the revolutionary left in Turkey (and Ankara particular), but it was also crucially informed by the discourse of the revolutionary left in Turkey, which played a central role in the processes of group formation.<sup>87</sup>

Since the 1970s the PKK and many leftist radical groups have defended and expressed an ideological program around the ‘liberation’ of Kurdistan, destruction of capitalism in

Turkey, and the construction of a regime based on Marxist-Leninist principles with an alliance of workers, peasants and intellectuals.<sup>88</sup> Initially period from the 1970s to 1980s, some Kurdish fractions such as Kürdistan İşçi Partisi (KİP; the Labour Party of Kurdistan), and Kürdistan Ulusal Kurtuluşçuları (KUK; the National Liberators of Kurdistan), Rizgarî and its break-away Ala Rizgarî; TKSP; (the Socialist Party of Kurdistan Turkey) and the PKK were in competition over taking control of the TKDP (Türkiye Kürdistan Demokratik Partisi- the Turkey Kurdistan Democratic Party).<sup>89</sup> The PKK had declared war against the other Kurdish and leftist fractions and reached success in 1980s.<sup>90</sup> The other groups mentioned above had legal platforms in political areas whereas the core group of PKK was neither active in these Kurdish associations nor attempted to establish their own. They were rather active in Ankara Yüksek Öğretim Derneği (ADYÖD; Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association), which was an association closely linked to the revolutionary left in Turkey. In other words, the PKK did not emerge from Kurdish political stream but placed itself on the fringes from the start.<sup>91</sup>

The PKK's core structure of ADYÖD was inspired by both the Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu (THKO; the People's Liberation Army of Turkey), and Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi Cephesi (THKP-C; the People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey), both of which were politico-military organizations. The ADYÖD leader of Öcalan consciously affiliated himself with the THKP-C and its leaders.<sup>92</sup> The PKK and other radical leftist groups cooperated in the 1980s under some united political and military fronts. For instance, PKK, Dev Yol (Devrimci Yol, Revolutionary Path), Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi (TKEP; the Communist Labor Party of Turkey), Türkiye Emekçi Partisi (TEP; the Labour Party of Turkey), Devrimci Savaş (Revolutionary War), THKP-C-Acilciler (People's Revolutionary Party-Front of Turkey), Sosyalist Vatan Partisi (SVP; the Socialist Fatherland Party) and Türkiye Komünist Partisi/İşçinin Sesi (TKP/İS; the Communist Party of Turkey/Workers' Voice) came together to form Faşizme Karşı Birleşik Direniş Cephesi (FKBDC; United Resistance Front Against Fascism) in 1982.

After these initiatives, the PKK sought to find newly emerging radical secular leftist groups in Turkey in the 1990s. In the middle of the 1990s, the Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi (DHKP-C; the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front), and the Marksist Leninist Komünist Parti (MLKP; the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party) were the new emerging alliance. DHKP/C, which can be treated as the umbrella organization for all violent Marxist groups, traces its history back to the kidnap of British and Canadian radar technicians from their monitoring post near Sinop on the Black Sea coast.<sup>93</sup> In 1996, the PKK and the DHKP-C signed a cooperation protocol for establishing a military and political front to penetrate Black Sea region. According to protocol, the DHKP-C let the PKK set up new bases in the Black Sea region on condition that the DHKP-C would take arms.<sup>94</sup>

However, the DHKP-C accused the PKK of preferring collaboration with so called "reformist parties" such as the ÖDP<sup>95</sup> and cancelled its collaboration with the PKK in 1998. In those days, some Marxist and Leninist military front, Devrimci Halk Partisi (DHP; Revolutionary People's Party) and the Türkiye Devrim Partisi (TDP; Revolutionary Party Turkey), did close collaboration with the PKK. This new alliance platform was called as Devrimci Birleşik Güçler (DBG; United Revolutionary Forces), and its military wing was Birleşik Kuvvetler (United Forces) which were operating in the Black Sea coast area, including the mountains South Region of Ordu, Giresun and Tokat provinces.

The alliance between the PKK and leftist partners was not restricted to shared political goals but rather many radical leftist groups learnt guerilla fighting from the PKK's military wings. DHKP-C and the ADYÖD/PKK militants were both trained together in the Beka'a Valley in Palestinian training camps. Both DHKP-C and the MLKP's current military operational level was heavily influenced and boosted by the PKK's doctrine. In 1984, the PKK aligned with the Mucadele Birlik/Emeğin Birliği (Unity in Struggle/Labor Unity), a party which had its roots in the THKO, which was followed by participation of increasing number of Turkish radical leftists in the PKK.

DAESH's assault on Kobane carried the affinity between the PKK and its radical leftist brethren into a whole new level. Hundreds of MLKP and DHKPC militants flocked into Kobane and, once they pushed back DAESH, started training with the PKK and target Turkey since then. One can easily read this voluntary acceptance of 'franchise' position from some outlets belonging to these radical leftist organizations. For instance, Kerim Gökdeniz, who is the current general secretary of MLKP said in the latest issue of the 'Marxist Theory' in the last month of the 2016 that the MLKP and its military wing, Armed Forces of the Poor and the Oppressed (FESK) partook in the Rojava fight with YPG in Syria. He stressed that the MLKP is a party of both Turkish and Kurdish proletariat. The MLKP is important partner of the PKK in the Syrian and Turkish territory. In the MLKP's 5th Congress, MLKP rearranged urban Kurdistan organization that interests particularly with Rojava events. According to Karadeniz, the MLKP and FESK follow a revolutionary mission in both Rojava and Sincar Mountains.

On the other hand, in March 2016, approximately ten Marxist and Leninist illegal leftist organizations set up alliances against Turkey under the name People's United Revolutionary Movement (PURM). Not surprisingly, the united front was declared by PKK's Duran Kalkan. The PURM aims to overthrow the Turkish Government and is comprised of Communist Labor Party of Turkey/Leninist (TKEP/L), Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist (TKP/ML), Revolutionary Headquarters (DK), PKK, Maoist Communist Party (MKP), MLKP, People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (THKP-C/MLSPB), Revolutionary Communist Party (DKP), Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey (TİKB), and The Coordination of Revolutionary Proletarians (PDK).

The Revolutionary Headquarters (DK) had been activated by Orhan Yılmazkaya in 2005 upon Marxist-Leninist ideas. Orhan Yılmazkaya had a radical leftist background and he began political life in the Socialist Power Party (SİP) which was closed in 1994. After that he joined the Bedrettin Movement which was a pro-communist and nationalist Kurdish political platform. Yılmazkaya was trained in PKK military camps in Iraq and Iran from 2000 to 2009.<sup>96</sup> He was killed in 2009. Following his death, the DK announced that Orhan Yılmazkaya Battalion would form the party's military wing which is today fighting under the roof of BÖG PURM in Syria.<sup>97</sup>

Turkish far-left movements in Kobane won visibility under the name of 'International Freedom Battalion' (IFB).<sup>98</sup> The IFB is an armed group consisting of non-Syrian leftist organization fighting DAESH together with the PKK's Syrian affiliate of the YPG. When we look at the IFB's structure, Turkey-based leftist terrorist organizations claim a dominant role: MLKP, TKP/ML and its military wing Liberation Army of the Workers and Peasant of Turkey (TİKKO), the United Freedom Forces (BÖG), which consists of the Turkish Leftist Organizations such as DKP, Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Union-Revolutionary

Front (MLSBP-DC), Revolutionary Party of Turkey (TDP), Social Insurrection (Sİ), and Proletariat Revolutionary Liberation Organization (PDKÖ). One may also add the TKEP/L and Revolutionary Headquarters to this list. These groups have recruited western foreign fighters in the name of fighting against DAESH.<sup>99</sup> The 1936 Spanish Civil War and partisan discourse have been strategically used by BÖG frequently. This allowed and fed the discourse around replicating 1936 Spanish Civil War as foreign organizations such as Spanish Communist Reconstruction, Greek Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity, British and Irish Bob Crow Bridge, French Henri Krasucki Bridge, and finally, Italian Antifascist Internationalist Tabor joined the IFB.



## ■ WESTERN SUPPORT AND DORMANT THREAT TO THE WEST

Hoffman said that success to defeat al Qaeda hinged on countering Al Qaeda's ideological appeal and tackle three elements of terrorist group's strategy. These elements are: 'the continued resonance of their message', 'their continued ability to attract recruits replenishing their ranks', and 'their capacity for continual regeneration and renewal'<sup>100</sup>. The Western support for the content of PKK's ideological appeal, first and foremost 'gender equality' and appalling eulogies for under-aged YPJ and YPG militants, boosted the resonance of PKK's message and multiplied its ability to attract new recruits from a widest pool ever possible.<sup>101</sup> The Western support was all done in the name of fighting DAESH.<sup>102</sup> More visibly since DAESH's onslaught against Kobane in 2014, the US worked with PKK's franchises in Syria.<sup>103</sup> The U.S. has delivered many rounds of weapons, including heavy weapons, to YPG for the last few years. The latest batch of US military aid to PKK's Syrian franchise included armored vehicles.<sup>104</sup> While Obama Administration found PKK franchises in Syria 'useful' and 'effective' in fighting against DAESH<sup>105</sup>, "the U.S. has become the YPG's air force and the YPG has become the U.S.'s ground force in Syria."<sup>106</sup>

While the US government(s) so far directly supported the YPG militarily, economically and diplomatically, it also supported it indirectly through US-based organizations such as *Sons of Liberty International (SOLI)* and *Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA)*. While HDA is registered with the Internal Revenue Service, a bureau of the U.S. Department of Treasury as a 'public charity', SOLI passes as limited liability company that operates on a not-for-profit basis.<sup>107</sup> These two so-called charities have directly supported the PKK's Syrian franchise.

"HDA prepared a research paper for a YPG commander on how to better use and combine field intelligence with the analysis of online social media platforms... HDA has also taught Kurdish groups how to improve their operational security. For example, it has encouraged Kurdish operatives and observers in Islamic State territory not to send their reports through Facebook. Instead, it has taught them to use Telegram, SureSpot and other heavily encrypted services. It has shown Kurdish groups many apps that can be deployed for intelligence gathering or to help secure a combat outpost. When local resources and HDA resources are

insufficient, HDA teaches local groups and commanders how to use crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe to bolster their funds. This is a simple and effective way of garnering financial support from Kurdish expatriates and other individuals.”<sup>108</sup>

Though not clarified, it is not unreasonable to suggest that YPG is likely among ‘anti-ISIS Kurdish units’ that HDA supports with ‘volunteers’ drawn from among “former members of the U.S. military” and “non-U.S. veterans as well as civilians who have never served in the military but possess abilities that are valued in the battlefield, such as medical skills”.<sup>109</sup> YPG is also very likely to be a beneficiary of “volunteers who can act as force multipliers, including snipers, medics, intelligence officers” and “even a Milan missile system operator” that HDA supplies Kurdish units with.<sup>110</sup>

The European response has been no different. PKK’s franchises had been operational in Europe for so many years already but its recent activity went beyond imaginable levels and the PYD was allowed to open offices in Europe,<sup>111</sup> picked up money donated to it to fund its activities<sup>112</sup>, and propagated freely and openly to recruit western foreign fighters to Syria.<sup>113</sup> For instance, a member of Britain’s House of Lords, a Dutch professor, and David Graeber, a founder of Occupy Wall Street, joined the uncritical chorus, praising the Rojava experiment.<sup>114</sup>

The Western attitude to the PKK and its franchises in Syria has amounted to a schizophrenic act. On the one hand, the Obama Administration knew very well that YPG and PYD meant the PKK, which both the US and the EU recognize as a terrorist organization, but continued to deny it to work with these groups in the name of fighting a ‘worse’ enemy.<sup>115</sup> In doing so, however, the US has been working with Marxist allies, and thus strengthening Marxist revolutionaries. “In Syria the U.S. has backed an actor that, for all its claims of Democratic Confederalism, a utopian vision devoid of separatism or a state at all, is in practice not only separatist *within* Syria but harbors transnational designs.”<sup>116</sup> It is clearly stated that “A Kurdish movement that subscribes to an ideology at odds with stated U.S. policy has become America’s closest ally against the extremists. The People’s Protection Units, or YPG, is the military wing of a political movement... seeking to apply the Marxist-inspired visions of Ocalan to the majority Kurdish areas vacated by the Syrian government during the war.”<sup>117</sup> This active western support means in some cases supporting western-originated Marxist International revolutionaries and “a ragtag legion of leftist internationals”<sup>118</sup>, all fighting in the ranks of YPG.<sup>119</sup> For instance, Spanish foreign fighters of YPG are from a far-left group called *Reconstrucion Comunista* (Communist Reconstruction).<sup>120</sup>

“.....  
The point is that “The PKK has resorted to a cornucopia of organized criminal activities, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling, robbery and extortion, smuggling of illegal workers, smuggling of other goods, and money laundering.”

Yet, PYD’s left-wing socialist ideology is so strong and repulsive that other foreign fighters fighting with the YPG against DAESH started to abandon it for that very reason.<sup>121</sup> An army veteran attracted by YPG’s ‘charm offensive’ to fight against DAESH called the YPG “a bunch of damn reds”<sup>122</sup>. For some Americans, this was exactly why the PKK and its franchises possessed an irresistible charm. For them “the redder the better. “They are

our comrades” one anarcho-communist told to a reporter.<sup>123</sup> By supporting the PKK’s franchising system, the West, first and foremost European countries, risks allowing a terrorist organization stretch its network as wide as possible. How dangerous this criminal-terrorist network gets may not be usefully forgotten but had been proven again and again before. As an analyst puts it:

the PKK represents a law and order problem for Europe. The organization’s aforementioned trans-European network functions as a criminal “PKK expressway,” providing easy access from Northern Iraq to Paris, Berlin, and London. This PKK expressway sustains violence, while threatening law and order in Europe. British security officials estimate that the PKK smuggles forty percent of the heroin going from the east into the EU annually, calculated to be worth five billion dollars by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime. François Haut, director of the Department for the Study of the Contemporary Criminal Menace in Paris, says that the PKK is responsible for up to 80 percent of narcotics trafficked into the Parisian suburbs. European intelligence analysts add that the PKK’s fund raising activities on its criminal expressway also include the trafficking of illegal immigrants, another major source of concern for Europe.<sup>124</sup>

The EU does support this same criminal network at a time when extreme left and right groups and streams are on the rise in Europe. Western support has also continued despite the fact that the extreme leftist terrain in Europe has long been very familiar to PKK and its ‘enablers’ in Europe. According to Casier, starting with the mid-1980s, in Europe “solidarity networks were built up with small, extreme leftist organizations that were ideologically close to the PKK.”<sup>125</sup> Chalk characterizes number of terrorist groups and intensity of terror attacks inside Europe in the 1970s and 80s as ‘machinery of terror’. For him, this owed to cooperation between terrorist groups. Provisional Irish Republican Army, Red Army Faction and Red Brigades returned the Palestinian training assistance by giving al-Fatah, PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. General Command) operational infrastructure. PKK was a player in this environment as well. “both LARF [Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction] and PKK developed ties with BR [Red Brigades], AD [Action Direct (Action Directe)] and RAF [Red Army Faction] for the purposes of aiding inter-terrorist group cooperation” (Brackets are added).<sup>126</sup> PKK continued to cooperate with other terrorist groups in the 1990s. Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka was one such organization. According to Jayasekara, “The LTTE maintained close relations with the Kurdish Support Group in France in the 1990s. The European network of the LTTE was modeled largely on the diaspora support networks operated by the Kurdish groups. The former head of the LTTE international office, Lawrence Thilagar received a special invitation to speak at the inauguration of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile (KPE) on 12 April 1995 in The Hague, Netherlands. It is reported that the close contact between the LTTE and PKK resulted in the LTTE acquiring 11 surface to air missiles of Greek origin from the PKK.”<sup>127</sup>

Radu said in 2001 that “He [Ocalan] also enjoyed the support of leftist parties in Italy, France, and Greece. The most insidious, if not necessarily surprising, support came from Germany’s and Italy’s Marxist terrorists, which supported and occasionally even joined PKK combat operations.”<sup>128</sup> PKK’s intimacy with such groups is at least partly enabled

by the fact that the PKK is also a criminal group operating in Europe and doing business with several other criminal groups there. For instance, in addition to place of marginal leftist terrorist groups of Turkey-origin in PKK's narcotics chain from the Middle East to Europe, relations were founded with the Shining Path of Peru in Britain as well.<sup>129</sup> PKK as a crime syndicate, is too easily forgotten. The point is that "The PKK has resorted to a cornucopia of organized criminal activities, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling, robbery and extortion, smuggling of illegal workers, smuggling of other goods, and money laundering."<sup>130</sup> Indeed, "In 2005, 80 percent of the European drug market reportedly came from the PKK-controlled Turkish narcotics sector. Interpol data reveal that the PKK also managed 80 percent of the European drug market in 1992 and, in 1994, between 60 and 70 percent."<sup>131</sup>

One must add to this the PKK's proven record as a 'destabilizing force' in Europe. The destabilizing impact of the PKK came to such an extent that in April 1990, the PKK rallied ten thousand Kurds to demonstrate in Cologne against Western support for Turkey's fight against it. Some eight thousand gathered on 9 December 1991 in Bremen to celebrate the PKK's thirteenth birthday. A 120-person hunger strike was begun simultaneously in Hamburg and Kiel, also in the early 1990s, at the same time as a 700-person hunger strike in Brussels.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, on 24 June 1993, pro-PKK Kurds (some of whom were heavily armed) stormed the Turkish consulates in Munich, Marseille and Bern, taking embassy personnel hostage. Simultaneously, many Turkish banks and travel agencies were attacked in major German cities, causing heavy damage. Perhaps realizing that it had gone too far, the PKK's front organization in Europe claimed that these actions had all occurred 'spontaneously'. Nevertheless, strong suspicions arose that these actions had been orchestrated by the PKK from outside Germany.<sup>133</sup> In an interview with Med TV on 24 March 1996, Öcalan warned Europe – especially Germany – of serious disturbances if Turkey's government did not respond positively to the PKK ceasefire in Turkey. Öcalan threatened to make an assault on Turkish holiday resorts, which are very much favored by German tourists. Claiming that 'Germany has launched a war against the PKK', he added ominously: 'Should Germany decide to stick to this policy, we can return the damage. Each and every Kurd can become a suicide bomber.'<sup>134</sup> It was not without a legitimate reason that "a German intelligence report (done under the previous government) estimated that the local PKK cadres at 10,000 with an additional 40,000 supporters, the PKK threat to domestic law and order is indeed serious."<sup>135</sup>

The PKK continues to have strong ability to mobilize large numbers of its supporters for violent actions at the heart of Western Europe. According to European Union's 2008 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, out of fifteen terrorist attacks in Germany, fourteen was claimed by PKK/Kongra-Gel. The PKK did not claim the other attack but German authorities attributed it to the PKK as well.<sup>136</sup> In February 2007, Belgian authorities arrested the EU leader of the PKK for suspicion of financing terrorism through drug trafficking.<sup>137</sup> The 2009 report revealed that all five arson attempts in Austria in 2008 were attributed to Kongra-Gel. The arrest of Kongra-Gel leaders and operatives in Germany, Italy, and Slovakia for terrorism-related is indicative of the PKK's wide network in Europe. Besides, nine Kongra-Gel members were detained in France for racketeering charges in October 2009. With these arrests, the total number of Kongra-Gel members arrested in France since June 2008 reached forty.<sup>138</sup> EUROPOL's Terrorism Situation and Trend Report said in 2014 that "The EU continues to serve as an area for financing, logistics, refuge and procurement for terrorist groups that conduct their main activities outside Europe. This applies in particular, but not exclusively, to the Turkish terrorist groups PKK and DHKP/C,

terrorist groups from the Northern Caucasus and the Lebanese Hezbollah”.<sup>139</sup> PKK’s illegal activities in Europe have continued uninterruptedly into 2016. In 2016, the same Europol report series admitted that ‘the funds PKK collected in Europe through all illegal means possible went into financing of HPG, PYD, and YPG.’<sup>140</sup> In other words, PKK funds its terror franchises in the region through revenues collected from illegal activities in Europe. With its hands historically and habitually deep in crime and yet now with a network of unprecedented reach after unimaginable Western support, the PKK may not even need anymore to bribe anyone anywhere in the region to move drugs and commit crimes.

## ■ AUTHORITARIAN CORE HIDDEN BEHIND DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY FAÇADE

In 1999 Radu noted “the Cold War is not dead as far as the PKK’s Maoists are concerned, and they may succeed where the European New Left never did — for they have learned to pick up a new vocabulary without setting aside an old program. They have discovered that their methods, goals, and ideology can all be forgotten, indeed sanctified in the name of “self-determination” and “human rights.””<sup>141</sup> The years since around 2013 have been the second period the PKK picked up a new vocabulary to sugarcoat an old, authoritarian, and violent program. Once again, they found out that their authoritarian methods, goals and ideology can be exalted with, now, ‘democratic confederalism’, libertarianism, ‘Rojava Revolution’ and ‘democratic autonomy’.

“.....  
PKK’s new vocabulary hides an ugly truth of PKK franchises’ war crimes and in tolerance towards dissent and nurtured a totalitarian ideology, which are well-documented.  
.....

However, PKK’s new vocabulary hides an ugly truth of PKK franchises’ war crimes<sup>142</sup> and intolerance towards dissent and totalitarian ideology, all of which are well-documented.<sup>143</sup> The PYD systematically hunted down all rival Kurdish factions in Northern Syria. For instance, the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria’s popular leader Mashaal Temmo was assassinated by the PYD in 2011. Temmo was deemed a dangerous person for the regime and the PYD because he was one of the leaders of pro-revolution Kurdish front. His assassination was a crucial turning point for the Kurdish movement in Syria, as the PYD silenced the Kurds critical of the Assad regime and clamped down all dissenting factions.<sup>144</sup> After Tammo was assassinated, the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria was not represented in the Kurdish National Council. the PYD and its mother party, the PKK also prevented any political and monetary assistance to the Kurdish National Council as well. The PYD’s authoritarianism extends to non-political areas such as art as well. Because of PYD and the PKK’s Marxist/Leninist devotion, artists can do only partisan portraits, only those figures with victory signs.

This is not only apparent from the fact that “Öcalan’s picture is ubiquitous in Rojava, even in children’s books” and that ‘Bashar Al-Assad’s picture was removed to be replaced by Öcalan’s’<sup>145</sup> but also the reports from the ground that “Rojava laboratory has resulted in something very much resembling a Leninist one-party statelet.”<sup>146</sup> As Malek Rasamny, a



Lebanese-American filmmaker, who had a first-hand experience of the YPG, warned “We can’t idealize them... they’re not running a vegan cookie store.”<sup>147</sup> While showered with eulogies from all corners in the West, the so-called Rojava revolution is basically “the building of a one-party state”.<sup>148</sup> Even an external observer otherwise sympathetic to the PKK said that “there is a strange tension between the current PKK discourse of democracy, autonomy and bottom-up grass-roots self-organization and the consistently hierarchical, centralistic and top-down organization that the PKK has maintained in practice.”<sup>149</sup> PKK’s implementation of its program of democratic autonomy in Syria (expectedly) mimicked its previous practice in Turkey. There the PKK had sought to carry out this vague program of democratic autonomy by maintaining its longstanding practice of silencing its critics through killings and intimidation.<sup>150</sup> It is no surprise at all that a high-level official in the Obama administration acknowledged that called the territory under YPG rule what it really is: “mini-totalitarian state.”<sup>151</sup>

We should not be mistaken by the yet-regional tone of what meaning the PKK has attributed to ‘Rojava Revolution’ either. PKK may have not (yet) aggressively targeted Europe as a strategic choice but its ideological baggage and project have never restricted itself to Kurds or Turks. When it espoused Marxist-Leninist ideology, the PKK saw itself as “vanguard of the global socialism movement, even though the Party has not yet come to power” and stressed its role in the progress of global socialism.<sup>152</sup> To that end, the “Fifth Victory Congress” of January 1995 stated that “the PKK from the very beginning tried to enlist support in other countries; that “a new phase of socialism” has begun; and that the PKK “is the embodiment of one of the most significant socialist movements during this new phase.”<sup>153</sup> Likewise, Radu says “[For the PKK] the foundation of a Kurdish state was never an ultimate goal in itself, but rather a means to spread socialism.”<sup>154</sup>

There are many Marxist revolutionaries or anarchists of all stripes, who now fight alongside the PKK but will sooner or later return Europe with many possibly criminal links and dangerous ideas in their baggage and minds.

A similar but disguised intent exists now. The anarcho-socialist political project of the PKK, which has been put in practice in Syria today, is considered by the PKK as the “starting point which will be extended to the Middle East first and then to the whole world” against the prevailing power structures and state forms.<sup>155</sup> It is for this reason that PKK sympathizers are happy to welcome Western anarcho-communists because “It is very important to see Americans next to Kurds to reach the goal of the universalism of the Rojava revolution”. They already started to nurture ideas that the Rojava model could be a model for future of humanity.<sup>156</sup> Another commentator points out that “The [American] military support has boosted the YPG’s confidence to move beyond Kurdish populated areas and grow their ambitions even beyond Syria, . . . It has huge political implications not only for Syria but also for neighboring countries.”<sup>157</sup> As a matter of fact, Turkish security officials interviewed for this article report that documents seized from YPG militants arrested in Turkey reveal high hopes the PKK had from Kobani events and developments in Rojava. The KCK thought that “if Kobani revolution achieves its aims, it will affect Urfa [Şanlıurfa]; before waves from Şanlıurfa and Suruç reached Kobani but now this direction is reversed. What is happening in Kobane now reach Urfa and Suruç.”<sup>158</sup> One must wisely add to this list Berlin, London and Vienna too because PKK’s anarcho-socialist ideology with an authoritarian bent in practice retains a potential to inspire worldwide radical leftist

movements with different agendas of anti-status quo claims. Thanks to Assad's tactical support for the PKK and Western complicity, "for the first time since the Spanish Civil War, anarchists controlled a nation-size territory, and Rojava soon became a celebrated cause of the international left."<sup>159</sup>

The political project of the PKK in Syria now came to be regarded as the laboratory of much wider liberation struggles.<sup>160</sup> But what if PKK's 'new' ideology becomes "a portable ideology"<sup>161</sup> à la Al Qaeda's? What if Rojava and democratic confederalism as "a mix of Marxism and the utopian dreams of a dead American leftist" which "seeks to abolish states and eliminate the need for governments by putting communities in charge of their own affairs"<sup>162</sup> becomes an ideology to further galvanize and destabilize Europe as well? It is not for nothing that a YPG supervisor of Arab recruits' ideological training confessed "We don't want confederalism just for Kurds, but for all Syria, and even all of the Middle East... We don't recognize geographical borders between this area and that."<sup>163</sup> This brings to the fore the fact that there are many Marxist revolutionaries or anarchists of all stripes, who now fight alongside the PKK but will sooner or later return Europe with many possibly criminal links and dangerous ideas in their baggage and minds. And anarchist or Marxist foreign fighter returnees to Europe offer no less danger than radical 'Islamist' returnees and they are as much threat to the Western 'mainstream' or 'middle way', which is under grave danger currently, as the radical Islamists. And not much has changed from the times when the PKK was correctly seen as an "internationalist" organization with an ideology and practice à la Khmer Rouge and Shining Path that are incompatible with democracy and therefore was a threat to free societies in Turkey and Europe.<sup>164</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The PKK, listed as an international terrorist organization by the US and EU, has undergone a significant process of organizational structuring by establishing a franchise system in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran with branches in Europe since the early 2000s. The level of permeability between PKK, YPG, PJAK, TAK, DHKP-C, and MLKP militants and their interoperable nature no longer allows any doubt that these are all one and the same organization. Particularly, given the fact that it was founded by and operated under the close control of the PKK central leadership, the PYD/YPG presence in Syria is of the PKK, by the PKK and for the PKK. As the adage goes, “If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck”.

Turkey's Western allies have hitherto backed PKK's 'secular' Syrian franchises in the name of fighting religious radicalism of DAESH. While political, military, diplomatic, economic, human and social capital and assistance flowed from the Western capitals all in the name of 'democratic autonomy' and 'Rojava revolution', PKK's authoritarian exercise among Syrian Kurds has been ignored. Several observers have, however, noted how the Rojava experiment is totalitarian in practice and the whole enterprise turned out to be an experiment in Soviet-style on party-state. While Öcalan's pictures replaced Assads', the PYD cracked down on dissent, opposition, and colluded with the Assads. Another hazard that may follow from the Western complicity in PKK's consolidation of its franchise system in the region is strengthening of western foreign fighters of Marxist, communist, anarchists, and anarcho-socialist persuasions.

Especially Europe is putting itself in real danger. Its multi-level support for the PKK fatally forgets that the PKK has long been a crime syndicate with hands in extortion, drugs, and assassinations inside Europe. Its criminal network may soon extend further afield with connections established with anarchists and Marxists fighting alongside it in northern Syria. And this is happening at a time of Russia's increasing ambitions as well the rising pattern of leftist and rightist radicalisms in Europe. The PKK and its franchises may not see Europe as 'enemy' at the moment but they are not stabilizing actors. Since their ideology is something they see as globally valid and good, they may try to export it by extending a hand to other more radical groupings in Europe. When clouds loom large over the liberal international order, populism is on seemingly inexorable rise, and the 'middle way' dissipates, one should think twice if supporting a totalitarian organization with a vision of stateless society is the way to go.

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