

# The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria

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**ABSTRACT** *The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) operates under the names of the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units in Syria. The PKK is registered as a terrorist group by most western governments, the European Union and Turkey, where it originated as a separatist organization. Nonetheless, the YPG has been the partner of the United States-led coalition in Syria against the ISIS. The strengthening of the YPG/PKK and its political messaging has brought in a flow of western foreign fighters. Some of these fighters are now returning to their homelands with indications that they are bringing security problems with them.*

**T**he movement of citizens to join Islamist groups in Syria has been a serious security concern for western governments. This has been especially so since late 2015, when 130 people were slaughtered in one evening in Paris by operatives of ISIS, “nearly all” of whom were European citizens who re-entered Europe with forged Syrian passports, having “infiltrated the refugee flow.”<sup>1</sup> There was considerable fear that the collapse of ISIS’s territorial holdings, its so-called caliphate, would result in a renewed wave of returnee jihadists causing havoc on European streets, though this has not so far materialized.<sup>2</sup>

The stretching of European security agencies by ISIS’s networks,<sup>3</sup> the subsequent political focus on the jihadists, and geopolitical developments as the western states mobilized to attack ISIS at its core was the context in which a flow of western citizens joining another terrorist organization in Syria, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), was de-prioritized. As Syria’s war moves into a new phase, those decisions begin to look more questionable.

## Background

The PKK originates in Turkey as part of the radical movements of the 1960s, its ideology a mixture of Marxism-Leninism, Kurdish nationalism-sepa-

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ley and became an instrument in the foreign policy of the Assad regime and the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> The repressiveness of the military junta, in combination with later amnesties for PKK cadres, who had been hardened and indoctrinated in Turkish jails, helped shape the political environment favorably for the PKK.<sup>5</sup> Further outreach established robust relations for the PKK with the Islamic Republic of Iran, providing a crucial logistics hub, and a relationship was struck with Saddam Hussein that allowed the PKK to create the bases in northern Iraq from which they would launch their insurgency against Turkey in 1984.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1992 and 1996, the war between the Turkish state and the PKK was at its height.<sup>7</sup> The PKK's insurgent-terrorist tactics – a vast, centrally-directed campaign of systematic atrocities against Kurds who resisted their program and anyone else identified as a “state agent” – amounted to crimes against humanity.<sup>8</sup> The military-dominated Turkish government fought back in a manner that trampled human rights laws, displacing Kurds *en masse* in an attempt to physically drain away the PKK's support base,<sup>9</sup> and shadowy elements of the state struck down hundreds of Kurdish activists, fifty Kurdish politicians, and a dozen Kurdish journalists.<sup>10</sup> About 15,000 people were killed in this period, three-quarters of all those who would die in the first part of the war, which lasted from 1984 to 1999.<sup>11</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union removed important support from the PKK, and Turkey's evolving military tactics in the late 1990s brought the PKK under tremendous pressure. Öcalan's autocratic leadership prevented adaptation when the PKK needed it most and competent commanders were eliminated in internal purges as Öcalan saw them as threats to his position. With the tide turning inside Turkey, the government was able to issue a believable threat to the Syrian government that it either expel Öcalan or face military consequences. Damascus acceded to Ankara's demands and Öcalan was soon arrested by Turkish intelligence in an operation that included the United States (and, so the PKK believes, Israel). From prison, Öcalan ordered a ceasefire and the

ratism, and a cult of personality around its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Having spent most of the 1970s battling other Kurdish and Leftist organizations to try to monopolize that political constituency, the PKK was expelled from Turkey by the coup d'état in September 1980. Regrouping in Syria, the PKK was trained by Palestinian militants in the terrorist training camps of the then-Syrian occupied Bekaa Valley

withdrawal of his forces into the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq in August 1999. The PKK had been militarily defeated, though it would live politically to fight another day.<sup>12</sup>

While recuperating in northern Iraq, the world was changed by al-Qaeda's assault on the United States on September 11, 2001. The PKK had been designated a terrorist organization by Germany in 1993,<sup>13</sup> the U.S. State Department in 1997,<sup>14</sup> and Britain in March 2001.<sup>15</sup> With the onset of the war on terror, the PKK needed to dissociate from its past.

Öcalan claimed to change his ideology away from the Stalinism of the past to "Democratic Confederalism," an admixture of anarchism, ecological themes, feminism, and stateless direct democracy. "The construction of a democratic nation based on multi-national identities is the ideal solution when faced with the dead-end street nation-state," Öcalan explained. "The emerging entity could become a blueprint for the entire Middle East and expand dynamically into neighboring countries."<sup>16</sup>

The PKK would also adopt a "confederal model" to implement this new, ostensibly decentralized doctrine. In each of the four states where the PKK operates, the PKK created structures that were marketed as more localist: the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq; the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Syria; and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran. Even in theory, however, the PKK and its armed units, the People's Defense Forces (HPG), the PCDK, the PYD/YPG, and PJAK are components of a transnational umbrella organization, the Kurdistan Communities' Union (KCK), which is under the command of Öcalan.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between the PKK on the one side, and PJAK and particularly the PYD/YPG on the other, has now become a subject of political controversy, as will be discussed below. But before there were incentives to obfuscate the point, there was no dispute. The U.S. designated PJAK as a terrorist entity in 2009, noting that the PKK had created PJAK to "portray itself as independent from but allied" to the PKK, yet the reality was that the PKK "controlled" PJAK and micromanaged it down to the selection of field commanders.<sup>18</sup> Likewise with the PYD, American intelligence was clear that it was the PKK in Syria – and has now reverted to this analysis.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of command structure, ideology, and resources, the PKK, PYD, PJAK, and PCDK are one organization. People who have traveled with the PKK in southeastern Turkey have seen its members change to YPG patches as they cross the Syrian border.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, as a study for a NATO think tank concluded, "the PKK truly has no affiliates," merely a series of names and fronts

MLKP, one of the main components of the Internationalist Freedom Battalions which was formed in June 2015, contributed to the vetting process for foreign fighters to the YPG.

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that are shifted around “like a shell game” to obscure the reality, while the PKK leadership in Qandil retains “direct command and control.”<sup>21</sup>

## The Structure of the PKK in Syria

After Öcalan’s expulsion from Syria in 1998 and the Assad regime’s signing of the Adana Treaty with Turkey, the PKK’s operations in the country were constrained. But by 2003, PYD/YPG was allowed to establish itself, a reflagging of the PKK’s extensive presence in the Kurdish areas of Syria, a result of the PKK’s long integration with the Assad regime.

While most Kurdish groups were repressed by the Assad regime, the PKK was allowed to indoctrinate and recruit freely because it deflected from demands for rights in Syria and steered Syrian Kurds into the war with Turkey. Öcalan denied “the existence of a Kurdish problem in Syria,” saying “most Syrian Kurds are immigrants” from Turkey who should “return them to their original homeland.”<sup>22</sup> This complemented the Assad’s regime policy of stripping citizenship from Kurds on the grounds that they were “alien infiltrators” from Turkey.<sup>23</sup> The collusion was so extensive that those who joined the PKK were exempt from Assad’s policy of universal conscription: Assad’s state considered those who joined the PKK to have done their military service. For this reason, the PKK has always had a considerable number of Syrian nationals in its ranks, including at senior levels.<sup>24</sup>

Between 2003 and 2011, the Assad regime would alternate a general policy of tolerance and even coordination with intermittent crackdowns on the PYD/PKK in Syria, as it did with the ISIS movement in the same period.<sup>25</sup> From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2011, the PYD retained a cordial relationship with Bashar al-Assad's regime,<sup>26</sup> and there is a wide-spread assessment –from regional intelligence agencies, independent analysts, and within Syria's Kurdish community itself– that Assad at this point recommenced active support to the PYD.<sup>27</sup>



## The initial waves of non-Kurdish western foreign fighters to join the YPG tended to be largely apolitical military veterans

At least three key events are suggestive of renewed coordination between the PKK and the Assad/Iran system in Syria against the western allies in the region.<sup>28</sup> In September 2011, PJAK declared a ceasefire and the PKK's assets in Iran were moved into Syria, almost certainly under a deal with the Islamic Republic.<sup>29</sup> In July 2012, in a crucial development in Syria's war, Assad pulled out of the Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria, along Turkey's border, in a manner that specifically weakened rivals to the PYD/PKK and left the territory in the hands of the PYD.<sup>30</sup> And a year later, in July 2013, at the PKK's Ninth Congress, the PKK's de facto leader with Öcalan in jail, Murat Karayılan, someone known to be more open to compromise and more favorable to genuine decentralization of the KCK departments, was replaced as KCK executive by Cemil Bayık and Bese Hozat (Hülya Oran),<sup>31</sup> Turkey-centric radicals with connections to Assad and Iran stretching back decades.<sup>32</sup> Bayık personally is known to be close to the Iranian Intelligence Ministry (VEVAK).<sup>33</sup> One of Bayık's most powerful deputies, and a key PKK operative in Syria from 2011-2012 onwards, Fehman Husayn (Dr. Bahoz Erdal), a Syrian by background, has extensive ties to Assad's intelligence services.<sup>34</sup>

“Qandilians,” as the PKK veterans trained at the camps in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq are called,<sup>35</sup> hold virtually every position of significance within the YPG: the entirety of the senior levels that are hidden from view, 80 percent of the visible YPG commanders, and about half of the command positions in other security agencies like the *asayish* (the PKK secret police). Only at the very lowest levels are the majority Syrian, and even there the YPG operatives operate under the command of Qandilians, their capacity wholly reliant on the PKK's logistics and largesse.<sup>36</sup> This is a willful policy. As the YPG/PKK expanded the “Rojava” area under its control to include Arab-majority zones, it had the choice of recruiting local leaders and instead imported Qandilians from Turkey and Iran.<sup>37</sup>

Nurettin Halef al-Muhammed (Nurettin Sofi), a Syrian member of the PKK/KCK executive committee, handled the Syria file until May 2015 when he was

replaced as part of the regular rotation by Sabri Ok, another KCK executive official, a Turkish citizen.<sup>38</sup> Ferhat Abdi Şahin (Şahin Cilo) replaced Fehman Husayn as effective YPG deputy, though both of these men, Syrians in origin, remain influential,<sup>39</sup> as does Ahmad Abdulqadir Abdi (Polat Can), another Syrian, and Duran Kalkan, a Kurd with Turkish citizenship –all of them on the PKK most-wanted list for decades. Every other notable Rojava commander who has been in the spotlight, whether on the military side like Mahmud Muhammad (Xebat Derik), or the political side –such as Ilham Ahmed (Ronahi Efrin), Walid Fahim Khalil (Aldar Khalil), and Hediya Yusef– are PKK operatives and have been for a very long time.<sup>40</sup>

## The Anti-ISIS Operation and the PKK Recruitment Drive

The PKK has always enjoyed considerable support from the western far left and has many sympathizers even among the mainstream left. Over the years this has manifested in western volunteers to the PKK cause. One such example is Eva Juhnke (Kani), a German citizen arrested in Southeastern Turkey in 1997.<sup>41</sup> Another case is Andrea Wolf (Şehit Ronahi), a former member of the Soviet-backed Red Army Faction (a.k.a. Baader-Meinhof Gang),<sup>42</sup> who was suspected of involvement in a terrorist attack in Germany.<sup>43</sup> Wolf was killed in Turkey while fighting for the PKK in 1998.

After the YPG/PKK began governing territory in Syria in 2012, there were westerners who joined almost immediately, like Kevin Joachim, who was killed in July 2015, the seventh YPG foreign fighter fatality.<sup>44</sup> But in the main the spur to recruitment began in 2014, first over the summer as ISIS besieged the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar and even more so in the autumn as ISIS surrounded Kobani in northern Syria,<sup>45</sup> a battle that became an international event when the U.S.-led Coalition intervened, after some hesitation, to assist the YPG in defense of the town.<sup>46</sup>

The initial waves of non-Kurdish western foreign fighters to join the YPG tended to be largely apolitical military veterans. The most prominent such figure was the American Jordan Matson, who was involved in the early recruitment efforts, notably through the “Lions of Rojava” *Facebook* page that gave instructions on how to join the YPG.<sup>47</sup>

The motives of these men, various and overlapping as they were, can be broken down into a few categories.<sup>48</sup> The military veterans had a sense that they could provide needed skills in defense of persecuted populations and the desire to fight the evil of ISIS often went hand-in-hand with this. The anti-ISIS motive was also particularly acute among some veterans of the Iraq war, who had a personal sense that it was their responsibility to vindicate the sacrific-

es of their comrades and “finish the job” against ISIS.<sup>49</sup> There were also veterans who joined the YPG, having missed out on the post-9/11 wars, because they had the sense, as one put it, that “we haven’t done enough.”<sup>50</sup> For some veterans, the YPG offered a return to a life they felt better-suited them, the mission and the camaraderie, as opposed to a civilian life they had had trouble mastering.<sup>51</sup>

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While joining the YPG was somewhat incidental for many of the military veterans who saw it as a vehicle to combat ISIS, in 2014 and early 2015, there were people who joined the YPG for wholly personal reasons, primarily to gain access to the Syrian environment of those days. This took roughly three forms.

First, there were those who wished to secure personal gain, either money or fame or both, from time spent in Syria. The case of James Hughes and Jamie Read, two British citizens who joined the YPG in order to gain footage that could be used to assist careers back home, is an instructive example.<sup>52</sup>

Second and far more concerning were the “drifters and lunatics” that made their way into the YPG’s ranks.<sup>53</sup> Many of these men were suffering from mental illnesses. For some, this was mostly a problem because it meant they did not understand the gravity of entering a war zone and looking after them became a strain on the YPG’s then-limited manpower.<sup>54</sup> For others, the allure of the Rojava area was the space it gave them to kill. A notorious case was “Tim the Cannibal,” so named because he had been observed eating the remains of a recently-deceased comrade and drinking blood from the wound of an injured man.<sup>55</sup>

Third were the adventurers, motivated by an attempt for self-actualization. This motive is often hidden, even from the volunteers themselves, who will claim moral or ideological reasons for joining the YPG, and often adventure is part of a constellation of reasons for their recruitment. There are those who are aware, and honest about, this motivation, however.

Patrick Maxwell has stated that while he served the U.S. government when he was a soldier, “As a private citizen, I’m going to have an adventure ... and that’s my own business.”<sup>56</sup> Even more striking is Evgeny Semenov, a lawyer from Russia, who conceded that it had not mattered to him which fighting group he had joined; it could as easily have been the Assad regime.<sup>57</sup> The ascetic rule of



A group of international foreign fighters, mostly from Western countries, pose for a photo on April 16, 2015, in the outskirts of the northwestern Syrian town of Tal Tamr, as they fight alongside YPG.

UYGAR ÖNDER  
ŞİMŞEK / AFP /  
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the YPG/PKK irked Semenov, who complained they “talked so often about Mr. bees’ knees Öcalan and the revolution that it could drive you insane.” “As a bonus,” said Semenov, “we had Turkish Stalinists in our detachment, which was just complete hell.”<sup>58</sup> Evgeny explained his motives plainly: “In my conception, everything is very simple: we must drive the evil from Rojava and open night-clubs and party at raves. I’m defending what I care about. Hardcore techno is the audible translation of freedom.”<sup>59</sup>

A more innocuous version of the self-centered and self-actualization motives occurs with those who have joined the YPG as a form of redemption and/or to find a purpose. Matson is an example of this, having gotten to a suicidal point in his life and then found the YPG as a cause that provided meaning.<sup>60</sup> Brace Belden, one of the most high-profile YPG volunteers, a former florist from California, found the YPG as a path out of drug-dependency and criminality –and over time was radicalized by the PKK’s ideology.<sup>61</sup> Another example is Gillian Rosenberg, a Canadian-Israeli dual citizen once imprisoned for a vast conspiracy to defraud the elderly.<sup>62</sup>

The YPG foreign fighters were and are of questionable military value. Indeed, to the extent possible, the YPG keeps them away from front lines.<sup>63</sup> The value of the foreign fighters is as propagandists, reaching western audiences in targeted, vernacular forms, with the credibility of experience, to sway western publics and thereby western governments in the YPG’s favor. The YPG, therefore, accommodates western members whose doctrinal purity falls short with

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the implicit bargain that the foreign fighters will assist the YPG's messaging, and the YPG will allow them to play out whatever it was that brought them to Rojava in the first place.

### **The Rise of the Ideologues**

After the siege of Kobani was broken, the Coalition retained its ad hoc alliance with the YPG and helped them push out from the city to begin clearing ISIS positions in the countryside and, ultimately, northern Syria<sup>64</sup> and large parts of the east.<sup>65</sup> In the moment of peril in late 2014, the YPG had found foreigners to be useful means of transmitting their message in search of western support.<sup>66</sup> When the immediate threat passed, due to western support being granted, and the YPG began to stabilize its governance, there began a sorting out. Those, specifically the Christians, who had joined the YPG's ranks unaware of its extreme-Left politics, began to leave.<sup>67</sup> And the YPG eliminated the most troublesome elements from its ranks.

The founding of the “Internationalist Freedom Battalions” (EOT) in June 2015 can be regarded as the formalization of the vetting process for foreign fighters to the YPG.<sup>68</sup> An umbrella organization, the EOT contained: the Turkish-origin Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), a violent communist outfit that is doctrinally loyal to Enver Hoxha, the former dictator of Albania; the Communist Reconstruction (RC), a Spanish party closely tied, ideologically and organizationally, to the MLKP; The Liberation Army of the Workers and Peasants of Turkey (TIKKO), a Maoist insurgent group in Turkey since the 1970s; and the United Freedom Forces (BOG), also from Turkey, itself a coalition of hard-left groups, the largest two being the Revolutionary Communist Party (DKP) and the Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Corps-Revolutionary Front (MLSPB-DC).

EOT has been expanded since then. The Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity, a Greek anarcho-communist group, joined EOT shortly after

its founding.<sup>69</sup> The Bob Crow Brigade, named after the believing communist who used to run the National Union of Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers (RMT), joined EOT; it contains British, Scottish, Irish, and Canadian radicals.<sup>70</sup> EOT has also come to include a French unit, emulating the Bob Crow Brigade by naming itself after a famous trade unionist, the Henri Krasucki Brigade (BHK).<sup>71</sup> Nearly two years passed before the EOT added another unit: the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), an entity that messages in English. It was IRPGF that orchestrated the publicity stunt of forming The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA) in July 2017, a militarily irrelevant formation intended as outreach to the West that ended up creating further tensions with populations the YPG rules over.<sup>72</sup> In February 2018, a new YPG foreign fighter unit was created, the Antifascist Forces in Afrin (AFFA),<sup>73</sup> which appears to be French-dominated. The AFFA's formal relationship with EOT isn't clear.

Alongside the message that it was against ISIS and political Islam, the YPG/PKK had always had a message of what it was *for*, disseminated through a sophisticated media apparatus, encompassing both the old and new (social) media, running from the Middle East to Russia and Europe. The YPG appealed to international, specifically western audiences, via universalist liberal ideas like “women's rights, democracy, pluralism, diversity, economic justice and even environmental sustainability,” while trading on Kurdish nationalism within Rojava. Managing these discrepant messages to their various audiences is among the reasons the YPG regime has been so harshly authoritarian towards the media.<sup>74</sup>

The creation of EOT and the mechanisms for screening foreign fighters to the YPG involved a retrospective clean-up of the ranks; it also marked a different trajectory of future recruits. Rather than relying on a common interest (against ISIS) and a sense of common values, however vague, those who joined the YPG thereafter would tend to be more politically compatible with the YPG, coming from the hard-left, even if they did not adhere to the PKK's ideology directly.<sup>75</sup> A clear indicator of this is the precipitate decline of military veterans as a proportion of YPG volunteers from 2015 onwards.<sup>76</sup>

## Leftist Extremists and Internal Security Concerns

The YPG has gone to great lengths to deny to western audiences its nature as an integral component of the PKK,<sup>77</sup> though its actions and propaganda in Syria have hardly made this a difficult deception to see through.<sup>78</sup> The claims of an organizational distinction between the YPG and PKK have been supported by western governments because it was convenient: it allowed the YPG –rebranded as the “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF), while still wholly dom-

inated by the PKK— to be utilized against ISIS.<sup>79</sup> With the end of the so-called caliphate, some western governments are beginning to look more closely at the decisions that were made in the name of exigency against ISIS.<sup>80</sup> A lot of the second-order effects of the West having empowered the PKK in Syria are already set in place, however.

The possibility that damaged individuals who joined the YPG and received military training will be drawn into another extremist organization has to be faced.<sup>81</sup> The greater likelihood is that some portion of the YPG operatives will remain engaged with the PKK's vast infrastructure in Europe, an organized crime-based enterprise that seeks to generate revenue and recruits for the PKK's war against Turkey, and to influence political opinion in the West.<sup>82</sup>

When western states began designating the PKK as a terrorist entity, they did so not only as an act of fidelity to an ally but to protect their own interests. The PKK has kidnapped<sup>83</sup> and killed<sup>84</sup> western tourists, and the use of internal space in the West as a PKK base has been a long-running problem to which few good answers have yet been found.

The PKK's European division was begun in 1981 and led by Çetin Güngör (Semir). Güngör absorbed influences from his surrounding about democracy and individual rights, and he also became convinced that the PKK would need internal democracy and decentralization just to function effectively; having to wait for approval from Öcalan in Damascus for simple day-to-day decisions was inefficient. This ran afoul of the absolute authoritarianism of the PKK and its leader, and Güngör was first chased out of the PKK and then pursued through three countries until he was assassinated in Sweden in November 1985.<sup>85</sup>

There have been hundreds of internal executions by the PKK. Sometimes this has been in the form of purges of ideological dissidents; other times it was popular and prestigious figures seen as rivals to Öcalan who were killed, notably Mehmet Cahit Şener, who was murdered in collaboration with the Syrian regime's secret police.<sup>86</sup> In many other cases, such as the dozens of students killed on suspicion of being Turkish moles at the PKK camps in the Bekaa in the late 1980s, Öcalan's paranoia was the only reason people died.<sup>87</sup> The scale

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of the internal killings in the mid-1990s was one of the reasons the PKK was defeated in 1999. Öcalan was making mistake after mistake in the military campaign and nobody dared tell him for fear of being marked as disloyal.<sup>88</sup> The assassinations of PKK defectors in Europe, as well as a general level of violence and intimidation against elements of the Kurdish diaspora seen to oppose the PKK, has continued to be a problem.<sup>89</sup>

The PKK's model of a diaspora-funded insurgency is hardly unique, whether among its ideological kin on the extreme-left, for example the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)<sup>90</sup> and the Shining Path in Peru,<sup>91</sup> or jihadist organizations like the Taliban<sup>92</sup> and Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>93</sup> All of these organizations overlap with organized crime to varying degrees in pursuit of both their ends –firearms and explosives– and means: drug trading, people trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering. The PKK's entanglement with figures from Russian organized crime has also brought them into contact with figures close to the Russian special services.<sup>94</sup> To this repertoire of criminality,<sup>95</sup> the PKK adds a “revolutionary tax” (extortion).<sup>96</sup> The Kurdish diaspora is both the victim and the instrument for the PKK's revenue-generating infrastructure.<sup>97</sup>

The PKK is estimated to take in up to \$100 million dollars from its European network each year,<sup>98</sup> about a fifth from a web of semi-legal front-organizations –newspapers, publishing houses, and television stations– that double as a propaganda-recruitment apparatus.<sup>99</sup> Narcotics are believed to be the largest single component of the PKK's income. The group is involved in the trade from the picking of poppies in south Asia to the distribution of heroin on the streets of Europe,<sup>100</sup> activity that has provoked American sanctions<sup>101</sup> against leaders as senior as Karayılan.<sup>102</sup> Human trafficking is the next largest revenue stream.<sup>103</sup> The PKK is involved in the black market for legal items, particularly cigarettes.<sup>104</sup> And the laundering this money, and counterfeiting further currency, brings the PKK additional funds.<sup>105</sup>

Demonstrating again that there is no organizational distinction between the PKK and the PYD/YPG, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), the nascent federal law-enforcement body that deals with serious transnational crime, documented as recently as 2016 that the “proceeds [from the PKK's European network] ... fund the group's armed wing [in Turkey, the] HPG (Hezen Parastina Gel, People's Defence Forces) as well as the group's counterpart in Syria, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), and its armed wing YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units).”<sup>106</sup>

The returnees' interactions with this infrastructure could present a range of challenges to European security, from terrorism and terrorist finance to public order problems and more “ordinary” street-level criminality, and signs of such are already beginning to appear.

There was a sharp increase in terrorist activity from Leftist extremists in Europe in 2017. This phenomenon is, for now, largely localized to Italy, Spain, and Greece,<sup>107</sup> the state where left wing terrorism is most powerful,<sup>108</sup> and which has been a primary PKK logistics hub for decades.<sup>109</sup> Left wing terrorist attacks

generally take the form of improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against property. This is not dissimilar to the activities of the PKK, which focuses on Turkish state facilities, but the PKK –operating in Belgium, France, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, and above all Germany– also engages in violent attacks on individuals.<sup>110</sup> A developing trend is the ties between the various left wing extremists. There has been “close contact” between anarchists in Greece, Italy, and Spain for some time,<sup>111</sup> and the movement of Spanish left wing terrorists into Rojava has been particularly notable.<sup>112</sup> These groups have received training in urban warfare, firearms, and the use of explosives from the PKK and forged stronger transnational links. As EUROPOL has noted, “It remains to be seen how their participation in the [Syrian] conflict will affect their activities [at home].”<sup>113</sup>

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An early episode of the public order-cum-terrorism problem from the PKK in Europe was in July 2017, when the PKK was involved in –and claimed to “spearhead”–<sup>114</sup> the hooliganism and rioting outside the G-20 meeting that caused millions of dollars’ worth of damage and ended with 100 people being arrested.<sup>115</sup> Since the Turkish incursion into Afrin, the PKK-held area of north-western Syria, in January 2018, this problem has become increasingly salient, as has the involvement of foreign fighters.

In March 2018, there was a wave of disruptive PKK activity in Europe in the name of protesting against Operation Olive Branch. The PKK firebombed two mosques in Germany,<sup>116</sup> disseminating footage of the blaze from one of the attacks on its official media channels,<sup>117</sup> and a violent demonstration outside Düsseldorf airport resulted in several injuries and arrests.<sup>118</sup> Turkish diplomats at the consulate in France were attacked with petrol bombs,<sup>119</sup> and once again PKK media channels displayed the footage of their “success.” The PKK laid specific claim to the consulate attack, justifying it as retribution against an “agent” of Turkey’s intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT).<sup>120</sup> In Britain, pro-PKK protesters stormed Manchester Piccadilly railway station and occupied the lines, bringing the north-south rail network to a standstill.<sup>121</sup>

The PKK and its allies also attacked a series of European security institutions.<sup>122</sup> In Germany, PKK supporters burned out at least two vehicles at a

## Recent developments in Munbij suggest that the U.S. and the broader West might yet find a path forward in Syria that restores the relations with Turkey that has been so badly damaged by the alliance with the YPG/PKK and brings a measure of stability to at least part of the country

in Thessaloniki were struck with Molotov cocktails as they tried to protect the Turkish consulate.<sup>125</sup>

In May 2017, the Revolutionary Union for International Solidarity, a Greek anarchist brigade within the YPG/PKK, made a little-noticed statement threatening to “spill blood” from Rojava to Athens in its quest to impose its ideology.<sup>126</sup> This year, the PKK has become more brazen in broadcasting its intentions to escalate violence against European governments it perceives as enabling Turkey’s anti-terrorism operations against it in Syria and elsewhere. A statement from a PKK-linked group in March said it was “time to... bring the war to Europe’s streets.”<sup>127</sup> An American foreign fighter echoed this message, tweeting that “the time for peaceful protests are over,” encouraging supporters to “burn them all down” in reference to Turkish diplomatic facilities.<sup>128</sup> This culminated in April 2018 with the AFFA issuing a statement that openly threatened France with war:

Macron, the new monarch of France, cannot tolerate the slightest dissent in his Empire. ... It is good that this is the problem: there are two worlds, theirs and ours, which collide and cannot coexist. ...

We fought the Islamic State and the Turkish state. We will fight the French state with the same determination. ... We want diffuse guerrilla warfare, intense and without pause.

For now, our priority targets are the Turkish state and the French state ... Their flank is exposed. Their official representations [i.e. diplomats], their economic support and their political support, those who work and collaborate with them—all are targets within our reach. ... Let’s open new fronts, launch offensives and destroy our targets.<sup>129</sup>

NATO site in Soltau, attacked elected politicians, vandalizing their offices in Celle and Hamburg, and vandalized the offices of Commerzbank bank in Hamburg because of its links to defense companies that have assisted Turkey’s military.<sup>123</sup> In Turin, PKK supporters burned a replica warplane in front of the Leonardo-Finmeccanica defense company, citing as their justification the provision of surveillance and radar equipment, weapons, and helicopters by Italy to the Turkish government.<sup>124</sup> In Greece, police



PKK/YPG supporters demonstrating in the streets of Munich, Germany, on April 21, 2018. Getty Images

## Conclusion

Recent developments in Munbij suggest that the U.S. and the broader West might yet find a path forward in Syria that restores the relations with Turkey that has been so badly damaged by the alliance with the YPG/PKK and brings a measure of stability to at least part of the country.<sup>130</sup> The available evidence suggests that dealing with the internal fallout of this alliance might take somewhat longer for Europe.

Some states, Britain and Denmark for example, have begun prosecuting citizens who went to fight for the YPG. This belated step is not comprehensively applied even in states that have decided to take legal action against citizens who joined the YPG. Moreover, the deterrent effect is minimized by the fact that most of those who wish to join the YPG have already gone and the political environment in the West has already been altered in the PKK's favor, creating resistance to further measures against YPG foreign fighters and providing an even freer operating environment for PKK front groups than existed prior to the Syrian war.

Reversing this trend would take time and effort from western governments, to bring the intelligence and legal apparatus of the state to bear on the PKK and to legitimize this by educating the public about the PKK's nature. This could help curb the emerging security problems. It is unclear, however, that there is an incentive to make such a campaign a priority at present. ■

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