

THE PYD/YPG IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Aspirations for Autonomy in
North-eastern Syria

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ABSTRACT

The Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD) and its military wings, the YPG/YPJ, are the dominant political and military entities in north-eastern Syria. At present, the declared objectives of the PYD are twofold: the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights, and democratic autonomy in which local communes govern within the unity of Syria. For Ankara and Damascus, the PYD and its aspirations for autonomy are considered as threatening the unity and territorial integrity of Turkey and Syria. Against this background, this paper explores the PYD's positioning in north-eastern Syria, its long-term objectives in the territories under its control and the way its administrative model is perceived by Turkey. Until now, the European Union has held back from officially engaging with the PYD/YPG. A more active EU role in north-eastern Syria may help realise durable peace or at least protect the fragile situation and the human rights on the ground in the north-east. This necessitates increased political engagement with all the conflicting actors in the region, the continuation of support at the humanitarian level and addressing Turkey's concerns about the YPG's links with the PKK, while supporting the Kurdish people's democratic struggle to achieve better political, cultural and social rights in both Syria and Turkey.

Keywords: Democratic Union Party, Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Syrian Democratic Forces, People's Protection Units, Syrian crisis, European Union.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD) and its military wings the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and the Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ)¹ have emerged as dominant political and military entities in north and eastern Syria since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011. This has primarily been the result of a pragmatic stance in which the political party, the PYD, managed to broker a tolerance on the part of the Syrian government, benefited from transnational support and gained some international legitimacy, especially following the fight of the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces² (SDF) against ISIS (Netjes and van Veen 2021).

At present, the PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) comprises nearly 20 to 30 percent of the Syrian territory, and its declared objectives in Syria remain twofold: the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and the installation of democratic autonomy (Netjes and van Veen 2021; (Carnegie Middle East 2012) . While these aspirations do not differ from the goals of other Kurdish parties in Syria, the second objective has provoked considerable discussion. Especially, the different aspired governance models of the PYD and its allied parties, on the one hand, and Kurdish parties which are unified under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), on the other, hinder Kurdish political unity. Whereas the KNC advocates an autonomous solution inspired by the top-down model in Iraq, the PYD and its allied parties aspire to a bottom-up approach in which local communes govern within the unity of Syria.

Meanwhile, the hostile territorial patchwork both within and around the AANES has been raising the question of whether the SDF will be able to survive and retain its role in providing security in north-eastern Syria. In particular, the position of Turkey and its proxy armed groups,³ relations/tensions with the Syrian army and the threat of ISIS remain focal points of attention.

1 The YPJ is the female counterweight of the YPG. It was created in 2013 after the numbers of female fighters had significantly increased since the beginning of the civil war. Along with the YPG, the YPJ has been crucial in the fight against ISIS. Turkey considers the YPG/YPJ as terrorist entities due to their links with the PKK.

2 The SDF is an alliance established during the Syrian war and led militarily by the People's Protection Units (YPG), a predominantly Kurdish militia.

3 Such as the Syrian National Army, which is a coalition of opposition armed groups backed by Turkey.

Moreover, the positioning of the United States and Russia and the support received from the US remain crucial for the SDF/YPG to survive.

This research report aims to shed light on the PYD's positioning in north-eastern Syria, its long-term objectives in the territories under its control and the way its administrative model is perceived by Ankara. The report will also explain the implications of the PYD's long-term objectives for the EU's policies towards Syria. Following an introduction on the emergence of the PYD and the AANES, the report will discuss the PYD/YPG's rule in north and eastern Syria and explore the challenges and opportunities for its administrative model by benefitting from the semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists and regional experts who are familiar with the developments on the ground. Following the sections on the PYD's relations/tensions with Damascus and Ankara, the paper will then delve into the current relations between the PYD-led AANES and the EU. To conclude, the report will offer concrete policy proposals for decision-makers in Brussels.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF THE PYD AND THE AANES IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The origins of the PYD can be traced back to 1979, when the leader of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, had to escape to Syria after the Turkish state expelled him from the country. As a result of Turkey's enormous political pressure, he had to leave Syria in October 1998. A couple of weeks thereafter, the Adana Agreement was signed and diplomatic relations between the Syrian government and Ankara were renewed, resulting in the PKK's being ousted from Syria with majority of its members facing increased repression by the Syrian government (International Crisis Group 2014).

Still, this repression was never an isolated phenomenon. In fact, the Kurdish struggle has always played a significant role in Syria, as no equal rights in education, language, politics or culture have been granted to the Kurds, nor have they been recognised as a distinct ethnic group within the sphere of Arab nationalism (Sary 2016). It is within this context that the Kurds have organised themselves under different political groups since 1957, and that the PKK sought to establish influence in Syria by founding the PYD in 2003 (Lowe 2006; Gunes and Lowe 2015).

One year after the formation of the PYD, the party came to prominence during the uprisings that followed the riot in Qamishli in March 2004. Still, it did not take long before the Syrian government re-established security in the city. In those days, the party did not yet have a large base of support. Knowing that the Kurdish youth were not satisfied with the traditional Kurdish parties, the PYD saw the 2004 uprisings as an opportunity to gain wider influence in Syria and therefore openly backed the protestors (International Crisis Group 2019). Nonetheless, continued repression and suspicion by the Syrian state, the negative stance of other Kurdish parties and Turkey's hostility based on its links to the PKK, ensured that the PYD's footprint in Syria remained rather small.

The Syrian crisis and the PYD

When the uprisings turned into a civil war in Syria almost a decade ago, the Syrian government decided to unilaterally withdraw its security forces from the Kurdish-majority regions in the north and the PYD's co-leader Saleh Muslim was allowed to return to Syria after years of exile (Netjes and van Veen 2021). In such favourable conditions, the PYD deployed its YPG militia to the predominantly Kurdish areas of Al-Hasakah⁴ governorate, Afrin and Kobane in July 2012 (Khaddour 2017).

In January 2014, the PYD and other Kurdish parties established three autonomous cantons under the name of Rojava, which means 'west' in Kurdish (referring to Western Kurdistan): Afrin in the west, Kobane in the centre and Jazira in the east, bordering Iraq. Three months later, the PYD declared a 'Social Contract' which would act as the provisional constitution of the separate cantons (Acun and Keskin 2017).

The rise of ISIS created a significant threat to security in the PYD's self-declared cantons. For instance, the PYD/YPG was on the verge of permanently losing territorial control in Kobane in late 2014. With intensive international military support, the YPG/YPJ and its allied forces managed to regain control of Kobane in January 2015, which provided significant prominence to the group worldwide. The YPG/YPJ became thus legitimised as a key non-state armed actor

4 The government retained a presence in the cities of al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli (Khaddour 2017).

in the war against ISIS in the eyes of major international powers, the United States in particular (Koontz 2019). Nevertheless, for Ankara, the PKK/PYD was using the fight against ISIS as a pretext to justify its ‘violence’ and enlarge its territorial control in non-Kurdish parts of Syria. In the view of Turkish officials, the media and the politicians in the West were easily manipulated by the ‘PKK’s dirty war and in its propaganda machine’ (Kalin 2015).

As a matter of fact, the fight against ISIS and other armed groups enabled the PYD to gradually broaden its territorial control in non-Kurdish parts of northern Syria (Netjes and van Veen 2021). The PYD’s growth along the Turkish-Syrian border raised fears in Ankara, and Turkish officials did not want to see the formation of a ‘terror corridor’ at their border, as President Erdogan termed it (Presidency of Turkish Republic 2016). In an attempt to alleviate Turkey’s concerns, the YPG became rebranded towards a multi-ethnic (armed) group, which would eventually become the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Despite Turkey’s unease, the SDF continued its march towards Arab-majority towns and captured Manbij, Al-Tabqa and Al-Raqqa from ISIS (Rojava Information Center 2019). After gaining control in ethnically diverse lands, in December 2016 the PYD decided to rebrand ‘Rojava’ and named the territories and their established system the ‘Democratic Federation of North-Eastern Syria’. In parallel, the PYD tried to reflect a positive image by emphasising the principles of democratic self-rule, empowerment of local communities and inclusive governance (International Crisis Group 2014). As a matter of fact, the group has increasingly become uneasy with the term ‘PYD’ and instead prefers to be called ‘a self-rule administration’.⁵

After multiple revisions to the name and the administrative structure, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was established in September 2018. The Administration is responsible for coordination between the separate cantons, which are built on local communes and multi-ethnic councils. Additionally, the Administration interacts with the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which includes different political parties and organisations, and the Democratic Society Movement which represents the civil society (Rojava Information Center 2019).

Following Turkish military operations in 2018 and 2019, the SDF/YPG lost control of Afrin,

5 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

Ras al Ayn and Tel Abyad. Meanwhile, Russia brokered a deal between the SDF and Damascus to jointly control some districts or border regions in the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqah and Ha-sakah (Manbij, Kobane, Ain Issa, Al-Tabqa, Al-Raqqah, Tall Tamr, Al-Thawrah and Amudah). In 2019, the SDF established a foothold in Deir-ez Zor after expelling ISIS from the region. All in all, at present the AANES governs a small portion of territory in north-eastern Aleppo plus several villages and towns in the governorates of Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah (Netjes and van Veen 2021).

3. THE PYD-LED AANES RULE IN SYRIA: OBJECTIVES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Political recognition and a new (democratic) governance system for Syria

The declared objectives of the PYD are twofold: achieving the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and realising autonomous rule (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012). On the first goal, the PYD does not differ from other Kurdish parties in Syria which are unified under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council – the PYD’s main political rival. All Syrian Kurds share some common demands which includes the recognition of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group that should enjoy political and cultural rights. They want to see a country with strong institutions that will guarantee equal rights for all citizens.⁶

On the second objective, the installation of a democratic autonomy, the PYD differs from the KNC, which has adopted the ‘Barzani approach’ that foresees a power transition from the clans to the state in line with the liberal nationalist principles (Abdulssattar Ibrahim 2020). The KNC is thus more nationalistic and is striving for a solution such as in Iraq.⁷ This stands in sharp contrast to the goal of the PYD, which follows a bottom-up approach whereby local communes govern within the unity of Syria. In other words, the PYD pushes for a decentralised Syria where decisions are taken at the bottom levels by the local communities and then coordinated with and reported to the top levels in the system.⁸

6 Interview with Bassam Al-Ahmad, co-founder and Executive Director at Syrians for Truth & Justice.

7 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

8 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink and Mutlu Civiroglu.

In its governance model the PYD claims to provide equity and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, several analysts are sceptical about it. On the one hand, numerous reports indicate the AANES system as being undemocratic, imposing the agenda of PYD/YPG leadership (Sary 2016). Netjes and van Veen (2021) stress that all key decisions are taken by the PYD and, due to its international links, also by the PKK. Although there are many other political parties in the AANES, they are either excluded or their roles in the Administration are marginal – such as the parties that united themselves under the Peace and Freedom Front⁹ (Sary 2016; van Wilgenburg 2020 b).

Critics of the PYD/YPG also draw attention to the failure to respect freedom of speech as well as human rights violations in the regions administered by the AANES. For instance, a recent report of Syrians for Truth & Justice documented the arrests of 30 teachers who were using the Syrian government curriculum instead of the one developed by the AANES. The same report also indicated the detention of a media and civil activist in January 2021 (Syrians for Truth & Justice 2021). In fact, there are many other reports indicating arbitrary detentions, child recruitment and abuses of power by the PYD and the Asayesh, the internal security forces of the PYD. Primary targets of PYD/YPG oppression are reported to be the political opponents of the group as well as journalists and individuals who refuse to cooperate with the PYD (EASO 2019; Syrians for Truth & Justice 2021).

Despite these criticisms, several other analysts share a positive view on the inclusive intentions of the PYD/YPG. For example, Frédérique Geerdink stresses that the Arab tribes are not marginalised in the AANES: ‘What I saw as a big difference between Raqqa and the other more majority Kurdish lands, was that in Raqqa, the tribes were much more important in the daily administration, because the tribes are stronger and more influential there, so the local administration is built more on tribal traditions, a lot more than in the predominantly Kurdish parts’.¹⁰ Likewise, Mutlu Civiroglu stresses that in the AANES, different ethnic and religious cultures co-exist: ‘Although Kurds have been controlling the area, it shares power with Arabs, Chris-

9 The Peace and Freedom Front was established in July 2020 as a counterweight to the Syrian Democratic Council. The political alliance includes the parties united under the KNC, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, Syria’s Tomorrow Movement and the Arab Council of Jazira and Euphrates. They all seek a decentralised system in Syria (van Wilgenburg 2020 b).

10 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

tians, etc. and smaller identities, like Yezidis who are all protected in the social agreement'. He adds that the AANES is more advanced than the regime or opposition-controlled regions when it comes to inclusiveness and gender equality.¹¹

In addition, Mutlu Civiroglu points to other positive developments under the AANES, saying that journalists can travel, visit the region, attend conferences and talk to the people, political leaders and activists. He thereby stresses that this is not the case in opposition-controlled areas.¹² Although he admits that human rights are being violated, he stresses that the AANES is at least open to Western society and to human rights organisations: women are protected, domestic violence is prevented and identities are preserved. In other words, in his view, what they have on the ground in the AANES is a very good model for the rest of Syria.¹³

Bassam Al Ahmad tries to find the middle ground between the critics and supporters of the PYD: 'It is not perfect, but also not the worst [. . .] compared to other areas under the rule of the government or Turkish backed militias, there is a space you can build on and invest in'.¹⁴ He also mentions the role of the AANES-led towns and cities in providing home and security to thousands of displaced Syrians. Pointing to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the SDF-controlled areas, he says, 'If they do not feel safe, they will not stay'. Similarly, Mutlu Civiroglu stresses that the region under SDF control is protected militarily and there is also an internal police force, the Asayesh, which provides security in city centres, protecting people from threats.¹⁵

Surrounded by its 'enemies'

A key challenge for the PYD/YPG to survive and preserve the governance model in the AANES is that they are surrounded by 'enemies'.¹⁶ Military-wise, Turkey has eyes for the towns of Ain Issa and Tell Tamr, as they are critically located on the southern edges of the Turkish-controlled region and the M-4 highway connecting Aleppo to Al-Hasakah (al-Hamdan 2021). This has led

11 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu, Kurdish Affairs analyst.

12 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

13 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

14 Interview with Bassam al Ahmad.

15 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

16 Interview with Bassam al Ahmad.

to sporadic clashes between Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF in recent months. The Turkish army also established small bases near the town of Ain Issa in March 2021 (Hardan 2021 b). In the short term, Turkey appears determined to cut the PYD/YPG's connection between the so-called Kobane and Jazeera cantons. In the medium to long term, however, Turkey aspires to destroy the unity of the SDF and to permanently eliminate the PYD/YPG.

In addition, the territorial patchwork of the region under the (joint) control of the SDF and the Syrian government/Russia/Iran witnesses limited clashes between both sides and mutually imposed embargos continue to characterise the region (Kajjo 2021). Recently, this has been visible in the city of Qamishli where clashes erupted between Assad-aligned tribal troops¹⁷/ National Defence Forces (NDF)¹⁸ and the SDF, after a local member of Asayesh was shot at a checkpoint (Sulaimani 2021). In response, the SDF besieged the parts controlled by the NDF.¹⁹ According to SDF officials, 'the pro-government force should completely leave Qamishli', which did not occur after the latest violence in spring 2021 (Lucente 2021). Meanwhile, Russia has been using the Turkish presence at the border in the Aleppo governorate and further in the north-east to weaken the SDF, by pushing the latter into concessions towards Damascus (Kajjo 2021). In parts of the north-east, such as Ain Issa and Tell Tamr, this has been creating tensions that eventually led to limited clashes between the SDF and the Russians in March 2021 (*ibid.*).

Finally, there is still a presence of ISIS in the east and north-east of Syria, where the group attacks SDF positions to weaken it and to terrorise the local population into non-cooperation with the officials of the AANES (International Crisis Group 2020). The SDF has not been able to control the presence of ISIS and to contain the group in the region. In police or military operations, several ISIS militants are captured or detained but there is not an effective judiciary system. The region lacks proper mechanisms to deal with ISIS prisoners and their families.²⁰ Moreover, the terrorist group has its roots in the society and if people's economic and security situation continues to worsen, an ISIS comeback is a strong possibility.²¹

17 Tweet by Nicholas A Heras, senior analyst and program head for state resilience and fragility at the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy.

18 Tweet by Navvar Saban, conflict analyst at Omran Dirasat and nonresident researcher at Orsam.

19 Interview anonymous.

20 Interview with Bassam al Ahmad.

21 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

The deteriorating economic situation in Syria

The region under SDF/YPG control in north-eastern Syria is rich in natural resources, such as wheat and oil. In 2020, over 70 percent of Syrian wheat was planted in the region administered by the AANES (Tsurkov and Jukhadar 2021). Moreover, in the same year, north-east Syria did not suffer from the fuel shortage as materialised in the Damascus-controlled regions in central and western Syria – which caused a shortage of bread since the state bakeries could not function properly (Tsurkov and Jukhadar 2021). This has left the PYD in a more comfortable position, as obtaining these basic necessities is extremely important for the Syrian government in order to ensure the continuation of the population's loyalty.

Amidst the current economic crises, some Syrians once loyal to Damascus are reported to be moving into SDF-controlled areas – some joining the SDF/YPG army as it provides higher salaries to security personnel (Tsurkov and Jukhadar 2021). Besides that, the opening of Symalka-Faysh Khabur, Al-Waleed and Al-Faw border crossings with Iraq has been giving the AANES economic leverage in the sense that it still allows food and other essentials to enter the AANES, despite the closure of the officially recognised Rabia-Yarubiyeh border crossing since 2013 (van Wilgenburg 2020 a; Hasan and Khaddour 2021).

In spite of this rather positive picture of the SDF-controlled regions, there exist serious challenges for the long-term economic sustainability of the AANES. First of all, the north-east of Syria has always been the least developed region in terms of infrastructure and services.²² Second, during the civil war, the PYD has not managed to establish control over large sectors of the economy that were once heavily regulated by the government (Sary 2016). Instead, importers, merchants and those benefitting from the war economy have become the decisive power in the market, with the PYD or the AANES lacking the means or the expertise to govern the regional economy (Sary 2016). Furthermore, the continuous depreciation of the Syrian lira has increased the cost of living all over in Syria, including in the north-east. Recently, the economic distress and mismanagement already caused several protests in villages and towns in the countryside of Hasakah, Manbij and Deir-ez Zor (Al-Kassab 2021). Finally, the displaced people living in camps are pressuring the AANES as well.²³ The IDP camps do not have access

22 Interview anonymous.

23 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

to external official aid since the official border crossing is closed due to Russian veto at the UN Security Council.²⁴ The same applies to the Fish Khabur, Al-Waleed and Al-Faw crossings which are not officially recognised and therefore cannot be used for international assistance.²⁵

Intra-Kurdish division

Under US guidance, the SDF hoped to bring the PYD's key political rival, the KNC, inside the Administration.²⁶ This was mainly a game plan adopted in the aftermath of the large-scale military operation of Turkey in October 2019 (Cengiz 2021). Until now, this strategy has (largely) failed and a unity between the PYD and the KNC has not been fully achieved. The PYD does not trust the KNC, considering it to be an instrument of Turkey to destabilise the region.²⁷ Moreover, the two parties differ on the way they view the Syrian government and its President Bashar al-Assad. While the KNC is more anti-Assad, the PYD has always acted pragmatically in its relations with Damascus (Netjes 2020).

In June 2020, after two rounds of talks, the PYD and the KNC reached an understanding to establish a 'Supreme Kurdish Reference', which according PYD spokesperson Sama Bekdash included an agreement on the formation of a unified strategy in order to guarantee the representation of Kurds in Syria and the protection of the achievements made during the civil war (Cengiz 2021; van Wilgenburg 2020 e). In reality, however, a unity between the PYD and the KNC does not seem to be on the horizon. A third round of unity negotiations started in February 2021 (Mohamed 2021). Here, the KNC's participation in the AANES and the status of the Rojava Peshmergas, the KNC's paramilitary wing, have been discussed (Cengiz 2021). The talks continued with extreme difficulty and much quarrelling. In a recent example, the KNC insisted that a high-level PYD figure apologise for a statement in which he called Roj Peshmerga Turkish 'mercenaries', in order for the talks to re-open (News Agency Kurdpress 2021). As a matter of fact, fixing the intra-Kurdish rivalry even under US sponsorship is not easy and will require much time. In particular, it will be quite difficult for the SDF to integrate the Rojava Peshmerga into its forces.²⁸

24 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

25 Interview anonymous.

26 Interview with Bassam Al-Ahmad.

27 Interview with Bassam Al-Ahmad.

28 Email correspondence with Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a freelance journalist based in the Netherlands and Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.

The PYD/YPG leadership is also not in agreement on unification with the KNC. Although the SDF's leader, Mazloum Abdi, often supports a US-led negotiation process and does not oppose the KNC's involvement in the governance of the Autonomous Administration, the hardliners²⁹ oppose the negotiation. They object to sharing power with the KNC and they believe that unification with the KNC may decrease Qandil's authority and further deviate the YPG from the 'Apoist' line of thought – referencing the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan (Al-Ghazi 2021; Güngör 2021).

All things considered, for the PYD, achieving common ground with the KNC would be a great opportunity in the legitimisation of the governance model established under the AANES (Cengiz 2021). It would increase their claims for inclusiveness and without involving non-PYD Kurdish voices,³⁰ the AANES risks being labelled as authoritative (Netjes and van Veen 2021). It would also strengthen the YPG's thesis that it is different from the PKK. Finally, a reconciliation between the two camps is believed to make them stronger in their relations with or confrontation against Damascus.³¹

4. RELATIONS WITH DAMASCUS

Since the beginning of the uprisings, the relationship between the PYD and Damascus has been twofold (Koontz 2019). On the one hand, there have been signs of cooperation. For instance, Damascus offered weapons to the YPG after extremist forces and other rebel factions drove the governmental troops from Ras al Ayn in November 2012 (International Crisis Group 2014). The Syrian government also transferred oil and gas fields in Rumeilan, Sweidiya and Jebeisa to the YPG/PYD, and trade between government and PYD-controlled areas has continued (Netjes and van Veen 2021). Moreover, the Syrian army has not carried out large-scale operations against the YPG/SDF (Kizilkaya et al. 2021). In fact, the YPG has even provided military support to the Syrian army, ensuring a victory for the Syrian government in Aleppo in 2016 (Balanche 2016).

29 Such as Alder Halil, who has had political roles in the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM).

30 Interview anonymous.

31 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

On the other hand, the YPG/SDF has occasionally clashed with the Syrian army. This has been most visible in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah. According to the PYD's co-leader Saleh Muslim, tensions and ensuing violence were always initiated by the regime and Russia to create chaos and destabilise north-east Syria (Sulaimani 2021). At the same time, the SDF/YPG has also pressured the pro-regime forces in Qamishli as a response to what Russia and the Syrian government have been doing in the Aleppo governorate (Tel Rifat and Manbij).³² Here, Russia has been using the presence of Turkey to threaten the SDF/YPG and push the group into concessions towards Damascus. Further east, in Ain Issa and Tell Tamr, Russia has also been using the same tactic, i.e., the proximity of the Turkish army and the Turkish-backed groups in the region between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn is used by Russia as a tool to force concessions from the SDF/YPG.

It is most likely that these kind of tactics on the ground will characterise the region in the near future (al-Hamdan 2021). Especially along the Turkish-Syrian border, this leaves the SDF/YPG in a dilemma. On the one hand, if the Turkish army/Turkish-backed armed groups conduct additional offensives, the SDF/YPG will have to make concessions towards Damascus and retreat.³³ On the other hand, it is not easy for the SDF/YPG to compromise with the Syrian government as they do not want to go back to pre-civil war conditions where the Kurds lacked proper political representation. Facing this dilemma, the SDF/YPG will most likely prefer a joined regime control over a Turkish one, considering the historic ties between the government in Damascus and the PKK/YPG.³⁴ Nevertheless, the SDF/YPG will not likely adopt a rigid stance. If Russia agrees with Turkey on a certain trade-off between the status of Idlib and some SDF/YPG-controlled towns like Tel Rifat, Manbij, Ain Issa or Tel Tamr, the SDF/YPG will probably adopt a pragmatic approach and adjust to the new territorial reality.

The SDF/YPG has some demands of the Syrian government. Frédérique Geerink explains: 'The SDF says it can be part of the Syrian army, but only if it becomes an army that protects the people and that is the army of a democratic Syria'. In other words, the SDF wants to integrate

32 Interview anonymous.

33 Email correspondence with Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a freelance journalist based in the Netherlands and Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.

34 Interview anonymous.

into the official Syrian army, as long as it enjoys some degree of autonomy and when Kurds are recognised as a distinct ethnic group. Moreover, the leaders of the SDF/YPG are not happy with the unitary state system in Syria. Their goal is break down the centralised structures and strengthen local administration.³⁵

Until now, it seems that Damascus is not conceding, as it wants to restore full governmental control in the totality of Syria. This is not viewed as either feasible or favourable for the PYD. In addition, both sides, the Syrian government and the PYD, have conflicting interests and lack cooperation in the day-to-day management of the north-east. For example, in Al-Tabqa, they wanted to repair a non-functioning dam and negotiated about installing services, which did not bear fruit and led absolutely nowhere.³⁶

Despite conflicting positions and interests, contacts between Damascus and the PYD continue. Russia mediates between the two. Future relations between them and the status of the security forces, the SDF, the YPG or the Asayesh will all depend on how much Russia can pressure the sides towards some kind of an agreement. Until now, many Russian initiatives have failed, excluding some partial agreements on oil, bread or trade.³⁷ According to Hamza Hasil, in August 2020 Russia informed the PYD that a political solution in Syria will need to include a federal government and Russia may allow autonomy for the PYD: ‘One day, under Russian supervision, the PYD and Damascus can come together and may have a deal on the future of Syria where the PYD achieves some kind of autonomy – outside the frameworks of the Astana and Geneva processes. The US will probably not oppose such an agreement since the PYD plays a key role in serving US interests in the region’.³⁸ Everything considered, the survival of the SDF/YPG and the sustainability of the AANES governance model depend on the position of two superpowers, the US and Russia. The former will likely continue to support the PYD/YPG politically and militarily. The latter, however, needs to ensure that it balances the PYD/YPG’s actions and requests with those of the governments in Damascus and Ankara.

35 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

36 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

37 Interview with Hamza Hasil, Levant Research Assistant at ORSAM.

38 Interview with Hamza Hasil.

5. CONFRONTING TURKEY

Turkey considers the PYD/YPG as an extension of the PKK, and thus considers them all as terrorist entities. Despite the ideological similarity with the PKK, PYD representatives have always denied being a local branch of the PKK (International Crisis Group 2013). A senior member of the PYD, Ilham Mohammed, stresses this: ‘Our movement benefitted from Öcalan’s ideology, but physically and organizationally, we are independent from the PKK’ (International Crisis Group 2014). At the same time, as a KCK member explains, there has always been a natural link between the PKK and the PYD, because it has become their duty to back the ‘PYD’s revolution in Syria’ now, as many Kurds in Syria did the same during the PKK’s conflict with Turkey in the past (International Crisis Group 2014).

There are strong indicators that point to the assumption that the PKK retains a supervisory role in strategic decision-making processes of the PYD and the YPG. First, the leadership appointment remains in the hands of the PKK through its leading role in the KCK (International Crisis Group 2019). Second, there are links between PKK cadres in Qandil (Iraq) and Syrian commanders and fighters of the PYD/YPG. Many Syrians fighting within the ranks of the YPG were once trained by the PKK in Qandil during the 1990s and early 2000s (International Crisis Group 2019). Moreover, the PKK militias of Syrian origin founded the PYD/YPG and still exert significant influence on local administrations, political bodies and security forces (Acun and Keskin 2017; Balanche 2018 a).

In the official discourse, the PYD/YPG leadership express that they are open to dialogue with Turkey. For instance, former PYD leader Saleh Muslim said that the PYD is always willing to negotiate with Turkey on the condition that its army leaves Syria.³⁹ Likewise, the SDF’s leader Mazloum Abdi stresses the SDF/YPG’s willingness to engage with Turkey, if Ankara is ready to provide real solutions to the problem of the Syrians who live under the rule of the Autonomous Administration (Syrian Democratic Times 2020). Mutlu Civiroglu adds: ‘I haven’t seen any Syrian Kurd that wants to have trouble with Turkey, on the contrary, they want to have good

39 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink.

relations, not only politically but also economically, socially and culturally'.⁴⁰ He thereby sees some opportunities for both sides: 'The Syrian Kurds want the border to become and remain open, they want Turkish [construction] companies to come to the market in north and eastern Syria. It will be mutually beneficial for both sides, as now Turkey has problems with almost all of its neighbours'.

On the Turkish side, a change in the current antagonistic policies against the PYD/YPG is rather unlikely. Ankara does not see a difference between the SDF, the YPG or the PKK. Having long suffered from the PKK's terrorist attacks within Turkey, Ankara sees the bombs and explosions targeting the Turkish-controlled cities of Afrin, Azaz or Al-Bab as the work of the YPG. As Omer Ozkizilcik (2021) mentions: 'The YPG has 40 years of PKK's experience plus a safe territory to plan and organize these attacks.' Moreover, Turkey pays utmost importance to preserving its territorial integrity and political unity. Accordingly, the PKK/SDF/PYD are considered as separatist groups and the autonomous rule in the AANES is perceived as a threat to Turkey's national security.

Finally, on the military front, both the SDF/YPG and the Turkish-backed armed groups want to preserve their achieved gains in the Syrian civil war. If and when conditions permit, both sides will try to enlarge their areas of control. Turkey wants to totally eliminate the SDF/YPG and desires to have a friendly belt along its border with Syria, running mostly parallel to the M-4 highway and extending up to 30 to 35 km deep within Syrian territory. On the other side, the SDF/YPG desires to avoid any further territorial loss as happened in Afrin in the beginning of 2018. In the north-east, in Qamishli, Hasakah, Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor, the proximity of US troops provides some kind of relief to the SDF/YPG to prevent any pro-regime or Turkish offensive. Further west, in the vicinity of Manbij, Tel Rifat or Kobane, however, if Turkey attacks again the SDF may be forced to make more concessions, especially because the US forces are no longer in these areas.⁴¹ In such a setting, the PYD/YPG needs to ensure the continuation of support from the West in general and the US in particular.

40 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

41 Email correspondence with Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a freelance journalist based in the Netherlands and Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan.

6. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PYD/AANES AND THE EU

Until now, the EU has limited its official stance on the AANES by stressing that it ‘remains committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state’ (European Council 2019). In fact, no foreign government has officially recognised the AANES and when engaging with Kurdish political actors such as the PYD, the EU has avoided confronting Turkey. Here, the EU seems to take a balanced approach. On the one hand, it condemns Turkish operations against the PYD/YPG, viewing them as distracting the focus from the real fight, the conflict against the radical groups (Del Torre 2019). On the other hand, it shares Ankara’s concerns on the PKK and the threat it poses to Turkey’s domestic and border security.

The EU labels the PKK as a terrorist organisation but the same does not hold true for the PYD/YPG or the SDF (Official Journal of the European Union 2021). The EU views the PYD/YPG as a separate entity which achieved some success in the fight against ISIS and other radical groups (Ergun et al. 2018). To strengthen this view and gain sympathy in the West, the PYD-led Administration reflects a modern image in governing the AANES. According to Mutlu Civiroglu, the PYD succeeded in its efforts and in many European countries ‘people value the SDF and the Administration, because they see that women are represented, weaker communities are not repressed, and different religions are recognised [. . .] this is very close to the European system’.⁴²

The continuation of its achieved legitimacy is extremely critical for the PYD. Accordingly, the group tries hard to improve its public relations (International Crisis Group 2014). The party maintains an official website in English, Arabic and Kurdish, including its statements and activities, an explanation of its internal system and a variety of Kurdish/PYD-related news (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat 2021 b). Several conferences have also been held around Europe by PYD party members and partisans (*ibid.*). The PYD has also opened several foreign offices in European countries, such as Stockholm, Berlin or Paris (Suriye Gündemi 2018).

Delegations from several EU member states have visited north-eastern Syria and talked to political representatives of the AANES, the SDF and the Syrian Democratic Council. For example,

42 Interview with Mutlu Civiroglu.

a European delegation including a member of the European Parliament visited the AANES in May 2019 and discussed issues related to the region (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat 2019 a). Unofficial delegations from various European countries, such as parliamentarians of the UK, have also visited the AANES (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat 2019 b). Yet, Sweden was the first country to send an official governmental delegation to engage in a ‘protracted, official and wide-ranging’ visit in October 2020 (van Wilgenburg 2020 d). Sweden also expressed support for involving the AANES in UN meetings regarding the political process in Syria (Aslan 2020). Following the Swedish visit, delegations from other countries such as Finland, Austria and Belgium went to north-east Syria to meet with AANES representatives (ANF News 2020; Peres 2020; Syrian Democratic Council 2020).

A more recent visit came from France which wants to increase its influence in north-eastern Syria. A French envoy and a delegation from the Foreign Ministry of France visited the region in April 2021 and invited the representatives of the AANES to visit Paris to ‘discuss the Syrian situation’ (Hardan 2021 a). It seems that France wants to publicly support the political project that is in place in north-east Syria (Hardan 2021 a). According to an AANES representative in France, the position of Paris has been very supportive because France considers the AANES the most suitable political alternative for Syria (Youssef 2021). As a matter of fact, France ‘has no place in Damascus or other regime-controlled areas’ due to its anti-Assad stance from the start of the conflict and because of its tensions with Turkey, ‘it cannot set foot in northwest Syria’, leaving the AANES region as the only option to invest in (Hardan 2021 a).

Germany follows a more cautious approach in engaging with the AANES, limiting its support mostly to the SDF’s fight against ISIS and the provision of security in the IDP camps in north-eastern Syria. Parallel to the German approach, the EU institutions avoid increasing official contacts with the self-administration and reject accepting the AANES as an internationally recognised entity. There are four main reasons that contribute to this: the rigid position of Turkey on the status of the PYD/YPG; the fact that the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU; some human rights violations committed by the PYD/YPG; and the lack of clarity about the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the governance model established in the PYD-led AANES (van Wilgenburg 2020 c; van Wilgenburg n.d.). In fact, most of the European leaders

have doubts about the continuity of the autonomous rule and they believe that eventually the SDF/PYD will need to reach an agreement with Damascus (van Wilgenburg n.d.).

Accordingly, many European countries, such as Germany, prefer to work with humanitarian organisations instead of directly cooperating with the AANES (van Wilgenburg 2020 c; van Wilgenburg n.d.). Also, none of the PYD offices are formally recognised. For example, when the PYD opened its office in Prague in 2016, the Czech Republic's foreign ministry claimed that they did not recognise the PYD's territorial claims, and that they therefore do not recognise any of its political representations (Sahin 2018). Also, when the PYD opened an office in Stockholm, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that the office has not been in touch with the ministry, and that it holds no diplomatic status (Kart 2016). The same holds true for France and other countries in Europe (Rudaw 2016).

Finally, on the subject of the hundreds of European foreign fighters and their families detained in the camps and prisons in the north-east, the SDF proposed the establishment of an international court in Syria (van Wilgenburg 2019). However, this idea was not well received. The EU was concerned about the legality of supporting a non-state actor, and the US has opposed such an initiative (van Wilgenburg n.d.). Instead, the EU officially stressed the urgency for its member states to repatriate their citizens by giving priority to children and those in need of urgent medical assistance (European Parliament 2021). Meanwhile the EU emphasises the need to identify a 'humane solution' for the detainees in the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps, and other camps across Syria (European Parliament 2021).

However, most of the EU countries adopt a reluctant stance. So far only a few countries, such as France, Germany and Finland, have worked with the AANES to repatriate women and/or children to their homelands in 2020 (Al-Monitor 2021). Other countries, such as Belgium, have been engaged in talks with the AANES on the humanitarian situation, but no clear consequences have been visible to date (Syrian Democratic Council 2020). According to a report from the International Crisis Group, this passivity has mostly been the result of several security and political challenges: the difficulty of gathering evidence for crimes committed on a foreign battlefield; the fear of returnees acting as a catalyst for radicalisation in the European prisons; the fear of a political backlash in favour of far-right and populist parties; and the previously

mentioned dilemma of European countries when engaging directly with the PYD/AANES (International Crisis Group 2020 b).

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

In the last couple of years, the PYD and its military wings, the YPG/YPJ, have gained considerable international importance in the administration of north-eastern Syria. What contributed to their prominence and a certain level of legitimacy in the West was the fight against ISIS, which has been carried out under the banner of the SDF in the last couple of years. The declared objectives of the PYD in its governed territories – within the so-called Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – remain twofold: the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and the installation of democratic autonomy. The second objective, in particular, is viewed as a red line by both Damascus and Ankara, whose conflicting interests intersect on the objection to autonomous and separatist ambitions.

The links of the YPG/PYD to the PKK cannot be denied. Some members of PYD's leadership, such as Mazloum Abdi, have tried to take steps toward distancing the PYD from the PKK and presenting the PYD and the SDF as Syrian entities that seek the welfare of Syrians. These efforts are supplemented by the US mediation between the PYD and the KNC in order to provide some level of Kurdish unity. The success of these attempts and the long-term survival of the administration model led by the PYD in north-eastern Syria will mostly depend on the continuation of US military and political support, and on the position of Russia in balancing its relations with Ankara, Damascus and the PYD/AANES/SDF/YPG. Nevertheless, the achieved gains of the PYD/YPG do not appear to be easily undone. In other words, the PYD/YPG will survive in one form or another once the civil war slows down or comes to an end (Netjes and van Veen 2021, 6).

As previously mentioned, neither the EU nor any member state has officially recognised the AANES until now. As a result, and parallel to Turkey's insistence, the AANES is excluded from the negotiation table in the Geneva and Astana processes. The provision of large-scale international humanitarian assistance to the AANES-controlled region is also not possible (Apelblat

2019). This is primarily because of a Russian veto at the UN Security Council which closed the majority of the border crossings in Syria, including the official one in the north-east.⁴³ The EU is reported to have engaged with ‘Russia, Turkey, and even the Assad regime’ to open the Yarubiya border crossing between Syria and Iraq (NPA Syria 2021). Yet, this will likely fail considering the Russian position which has long been trying to centralise the provision of humanitarian aid in Damascus – within the supervision of the Syrian government.

Meanwhile, the other challenges mentioned in the third section of this paper may deteriorate the political, security-related and economic conditions in the AANES on top of the already unstable Syria. This, in turn, would entail **two major implications for Europe**. First, in terms of **migration**: when Syria becomes safer and more secure, the number of people who undertake the journey to Europe will remain reduced. Stability in the AANES region is a contributing factor to this. Second, concerning the **presence of ISIS and the threat of its re-emergence**: ISIS is good at benefitting from crises and as long as the fragile security situation persists in the north-east, an ISIS re-emergence cannot be ruled out.

In such a setting, the EU should consider the following policy recommendations: **First, with active political engagement, the EU has to ensure the protection of the fragile situation and the human rights on the ground in the north-east**. This necessitates continuous talks with Turkey, Russia and the US as the key actors with military presence. On the one hand, battlegrounds in northern Syria are geographically distant from each other as in the case of Idlib in the north-west and Qamishli or Ain Issa in the north-east. On the other hand, a major development in one conflict zone or the opening of a new front possesses the risk of violence spilling over to other regions. Accordingly, the EU needs to seek support at the UN/international level and push against any unilateral military action from the conflicting sides, including the SDF/YPG.

Second, in the north and east of Syria, the EU needs to consider options to mediate between the conflicting sides, if and when necessary. At present, Russia plays the role of mediator between the Syrian government and the PYD-led AANES. Likewise, Moscow intervenes when violence carries the risk of escalation between Turkey and the SDF/YPG in the regions of

43 Interview anonymous.

Tell Rifat, Ain Issa or Tell Tamr. At present, an immediate EU role is neither foreseen nor extremely necessary. Yet, Russia has its own stakes in the Syrian conflict and lacks the image of a neutral interlocutor. Likewise, the US is viewed as too pro-PYD by both Ankara and Damascus. In such a setting, the EU needs to leave communication channels open to all ethnic, religious and sectarian communities in the north-east and be always ready to play a more active political role if and when necessary.

Finally, a key challenge in the achievement of a long-term solution in the north-east is **addressing Turkey's concerns on the YPG's links with the PKK**. Ankara fears that the autonomous aspirations of the PYD may negatively affect the stability within Turkey by causing a threat to its unity and territorial integrity. In recent years, the US has increased its efforts to alleviate Ankara's fears and tried hard to distance the YPG from the PKK. Moreover, US officials seek to establish a unity between the PYD and the KNC, the latter having close ties to Turkey. Sharing a geographical border with Turkey and being affected by the conflict situation in its immediate neighbourhood, the EU needs to back these initiatives and address Turkey's concerns on the **PKK while supporting Kurdish people's democratic struggle to achieve better political, cultural and social rights in both Syria and Turkey.**

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