

THE KURDS OF NORTHERN SYRIA IN WESTERN MEDIA:  
THE BBC AND VOA COVERAGE (2014-2018)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
OF  
MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN  
THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

JANUARY 2020

Approval of the Graduate School of Social Sciences

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE KURDS OF NORTHERN SYRIA IN WESTERN MEDIA: THE BBC AND VOA COVERAGE (2014-2018)**

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January 2020, 211 pages

This study seeks to analyze the Western media coverage, the BBC and VOA in particular, of the Kurds of Northern Syria from September 2014 to March 2018. While doing so, a special emphasis is placed on the analysis of the political and military context of the Syrian crisis as well as the historical Kurdish representation in the West. With the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) as a serious security threat to Western citizens, Syrian Kurds and the Kurdish groups fighting against the jihadist organization in Syria have become important actors for Western governments who wanted to employ them in the anti-IS fight. In accordance with their growing profile in the West, Western media networks began to report on them extensively in their coverage. It is argued in this thesis that the Kurds of Northern Syria were covered by Western media in a positive light with the objective of promoting the legitimacy of the Kurdish organizations operating there and with the intention of garnering international support and sympathy for Syrian Kurds.

**Key Words:** Syria, Syrian Kurds, Western Media, PYD/YPG, BBC, VOA.

## ÖZ

### BATI MEDYASINDA SURIYE’NİN KUZEYİNDEKİ KÜRTLER: BBC VE VOA YAYINI (2014-2018)

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Yüksek Lisans, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

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Ocak 2020, 211 sayfa

Bu çalışma Eylül 2014’ten Mart 2018’e kadar olan süreçte Suriye’nin kuzeyindeki Kürtlerin Batı medyasında, özellikle de BBC ve Amerika’nın Sesi (VOA) yayın kuruluşlarında nasıl ele alındığını incelemiştir. Bunu yaparken, Suriye krizinin siyasi ve askeri bağlamının ve Batı’daki tarihsel Kürt temsilinin analizine özel bir önem verilmiştir. İslam Devleti’nin (İD) Batılı vatandaşlar için ciddi bir güvenlik tehdidi olarak ortaya çıkmasıyla birlikte, Suriyeli Kürtler ve Suriye’deki cihatçı örgütlere karşı mücadele eden Kürt gruplar, kendilerini İD karşıtı savaşta kullanmak isteyen Batılı hükümetler için önemli aktörler haline geldi. Batılı medya kuruluşları Suriyeli Kürtlere, Batı nazarında artan önemlerine koşut olarak medya platformlarında geniş bir şekilde yer vermeye başladı. Bu çalışma Suriye’nin kuzeyindeki Kürtlerin Batı medyası tarafından, Suriye’de faaliyet gösteren Kürt örgütlerin meşruiyetini artırmak ve Suriyeli Kürtlere uluslararası sempati ve destek kazandırmak amacıyla olumlu bir şekilde ele alındığını ileri sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriye, Suriyeli Kürtler, Batı Medyası, PYD/YPG, BBC, VOA.

*To my family and friends who have always been there for me...*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Ebru Boyar for her invaluable guidance, advice, and criticism throughout the whole research process. It was with her patience, understanding and boundless support that I have written this thesis successfully.

I am also grateful to my family for always being there for me through thick and thin. They never spared me their love, kindness, prayers, and thankfully their money. And I would like to specifically thank my nephew Ali Efe for always taking an interest in my work albeit by just asking if it was done yet. Yes, it is finally done and I hope that you will be able to read it sometime in the future.

It would be unfair of me not to express my appreciation to my friends for it was with their support and encouragement that I came through the hardest times while writing this thesis. It has always given me comfort to know that I am loved and cared for by Ali Ercan, Derya, Devrim, Muammer, Nejdet Alperen, and Tuğrul. Thank you all!

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) granted me a scholarship via the 2210 Master's Thesis Scholarship Program during my graduate education.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFP	Agence France-Presse
AI	Amnesty International
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPS	Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
PDFLP	Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PJAK	Party of Free Life of Kurdistan
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Coalition
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
TAF	Turkish Armed Forces

UK	United Kingdom
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
VOA	Voice of America
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units
YRA	Union of Free Media

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“It would be irresponsible of us, as well as morally very difficult, to turn your back on a community fighting ISIL.”<sup>1</sup> These remarks uttered by the former United States (US) Secretary of State John Kerry in October 2014 during the Islamic State (IS) offensive on Ayn al-Arab (Kobane)<sup>2</sup> symbolizes the change of heart of the US administration towards the Kurds of Northern Syria who were formerly isolated by the international community. There was an effective blockade of particularly Western governments against the Kurdish groups present in Northern Syria because of their connection with a US-designated terrorist organization (PKK) and close relationship with the Syrian regime. However, with IS posing a serious security threat to Western citizens, Syrian Kurds and the Kurdish groups fighting against the jihadist organization in Syria have become important actors for Western governments who wanted to employ them in the anti-IS struggle. In accordance with their growing profile in the West, Western media networks began to report on them extensively in their coverage. That’s exactly what this thesis will seek to understand: How Western media, the BBC and VOA in particular, covered the Kurds of Northern Syria between September 2014 and March 2018. After a detailed and lengthy analysis, the study will

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<sup>1</sup> “Remarks [of John Kerry] with Philippine Foreign Secretary del Rosario Before Their Meeting”, *U.S. Department of State*, 20 October 2014, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/10/233148.htm>, access date: 15 November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Kobane or officially Ayn al-Arab is a Kurdish-majority town in the Aleppo Governorate in Northern Syria in the south of the border with Turkey. The town passed under the control of Kurdish groups in July 2012 after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime.

argue that since the battle of Kobane, the Kurds of Northern Syria were covered by Western media in a positive light with the objective of promoting the legitimacy of the Kurdish organizations operating there and with the intention of garnering international support and sympathy for Syrian Kurds. The ultimate purpose of such coverage was to successfully conduct the anti-IS fight in Syria without suffering legitimacy problems.

Before discussing the main components of the research subject, it is important to give further background information about the chain of events that rendered the Kurds of Northern Syria crucial actors in the eyes of the West and Western media. The emergence of IS as a powerful and vicious actor in the Middle East as a result of the power vacuum created by the civil war in Syria<sup>3</sup> would prove to be yet another episode of violence in the history of the Middle East. Even though the jihadist organization was also fighting the Assad regime in Syria as the Western-backed moderate opposition fighters do, their murderous acts in the region, the beheadings of Western journalists and the suicide attacks targeting civilians quickly made it the common enemy of humanity, a terror group “unique in their brutality”<sup>4</sup> and a terrorist organization unlike those dealt with before.<sup>5</sup> In its discourse, IS specifically targeted the West, calling on its supporters around the world to “attack citizens of Western states such as the US, France, and the UK.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Western governments started to ponder on the best strategy to counter the organization’s rising influence in Iraq and Syria, and eventually put an end to its existence once and for all.

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<sup>3</sup> Gerges, Fawaz A., “ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism”, *Current History*, 113/767 (2014): pp. 339-340.

<sup>4</sup> “Obama, in Speech on ISIS, Promises Sustained Effort to Rout Militants”, *The New York Times*, 10 September 2014, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middleeast/obama-speech-isis.html>, access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> “MPs’ Iraq Vote: Cameron Warns ISIS Air Strikes not Enough to Defeat Bunch of Psychopathic Terrorists”, *The Independent*, 26 September 2014, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/mps-iraq-vote-cameron-warns-isis-air-strikes-not-enough-to-defeat-bunch-of-psychopathic-terrorists-9757715.html>, access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>6</sup> “ISIS Urges more Attacks on Western ‘Disbelievers’”, *The Independent*, 22 September 2014, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-urges-more-attacks-on-western-disbelievers-9749512.html>, access date: 17 July 2019.



The US spearheaded the fight against IS under the leadership of President Barack Obama who vowed in an address to the American public on 10 September 2014 to “degrade, and ultimately destroy ISIL [another acronym for IS] through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”<sup>7</sup> Obama’s strategy was plain and simple: to support the local forces on the ground and to assist them with a campaign of airstrikes with a “broad coalition of partners”<sup>8</sup> lined up behind the US under the ‘Global Coalition’<sup>9</sup> against IS. On 15 September 2014, just five days after the address of the American President, IS started its offensive on Kobane, with the Kurdish groups in defense of the town, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, or PYD), and its military wing the People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, or YPG).

After just a short while, the international community was bombarded with shocking images of Syrian Kurdish civilians fleeing the IS onslaught “in fear of being massacred by the advancing militants,”<sup>10</sup> Kurds flocking to the border gates with children on their backs, notorious IS pickup trucks carrying militants near the Turkish-Syrian frontier and attractive Kurdish female fighters wearing colorful scarves with AK-47 in their hands and smile on their faces. These all made up the perfect ingredients of a CNN effect that would ultimately prompt a Western intervention. Even CNN itself broadcasted live coverage from the Turkish side of the border of the IS militants engaging in clashes with what were thought to be YPG fighters.<sup>11</sup> Western media networks including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) reported extensively the battle of Kobane to

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<sup>7</sup> “Statement by the President on ISIL”, *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, 10 September 2014, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>, access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>8</sup> “Statement by the President”, *The White House*.

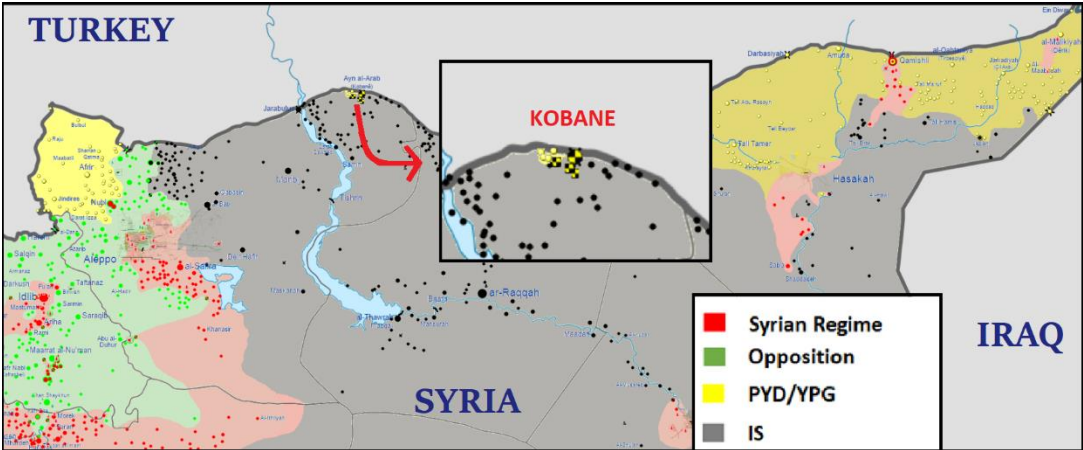
<sup>9</sup> The Global Coalition against Daesh (the acronym of ISIL in Arabic) was established in September 2014 with the US initiative to destroy the IS group in Iraq and Syria.

<sup>10</sup> “In Major Assault, IS Fighters Seize Kurdish Villages in Syria”, *VOA*, 18 September 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/major-assault-fighters-seize-kurdish-villages-syria](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/major-assault-fighters-seize-kurdish-villages-syria), access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>11</sup> “Britain Joins Fight Against IS Militants”, *VOA*, 26 September 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/britain-joins-fight-against-militants](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/britain-joins-fight-against-militants), access date: 17 July 2019.

their audiences with a view to muster sympathy for the suffering Syrian Kurdish victims and perhaps to pave the groundwork for an imminent campaign of coalition airstrikes.

Soon after, Western citizens, horrified by the images published by Western media, began pressuring their governments to take action against IS militants to save Kobane from “the most barbaric attack in its history.”<sup>12</sup> And before long, American aircrafts were bombing the IS positions in and around Kobane and helping the YPG fend off the attack.<sup>13</sup> Although at times Kobane was on the verge of being captured by IS,<sup>14</sup> and the US announced several times that it “could soon fall,”<sup>15</sup> the town resisted and after a four-month-long battle, the YPG declared its victory over IS militants.<sup>16</sup>



Map 1: The IS offensive on Kobane – The situation in November 2014, *Wikimedia Commons*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Syria Crisis: 66,000 Flee Islamic State into Turkey”, *BBC*, 20 September 2014, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29294656](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29294656), access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>13</sup> “Syria: US Begins Air Strikes on Islamic State Targets”, *BBC*, 23 September 2014, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29321136](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29321136), access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “ISIS Marches to a Massacre”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 October 2014, available at: [www.wsj.com/articles/isis-marches-to-a-massacre-1412724198](http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-marches-to-a-massacre-1412724198), access date: 18 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> “Fate of Kobani in Question Despite Airstrikes”, *VOA*, 16 October 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/fate-kobani-question-despite-airstrikes](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/fate-kobani-question-despite-airstrikes), access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>16</sup> “Monitor: Kurds Push IS out of Kobani”, *VOA*, 26 January 2015, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/monitor-kurds-push-out-kobani](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/monitor-kurds-push-out-kobani), access date: 18 July 2019.

<sup>17</sup> “File: Syrian Civil War, 24 November 2014”, *Wikimedia Commons*, 24 November 2014, available at: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian\\_civil\\_war\\_24-11-14.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_civil_war_24-11-14.png), access date: 18 November 2019.

From the very beginning of the battle of Kobane, the coalition spent extra effort for the defense of the town because it was considered “a major test of the US-led coalition’s strategy to combat IS in Syria with airstrikes.”<sup>18</sup> The battle of Kobane and the way it was conducted would determine the overall strategy of the fight against IS. It was also a test for the power and effectiveness of the YPG militia. The coalition needed a local force in Syria to fight against IS on its behalf, and the YPG was shining as “a willing and able coalition ground partner.”<sup>19</sup>

The victory in Kobane, therefore, strongly convinced US officials that the YPG was the most eligible group on the ground for the fight against IS and thus it precipitated the inception of a “tactical alliance”<sup>20</sup> of the US-led Western coalition with the PYD in Syria. From then on, the coalition started to support the Kurdish group with military, financial, political and diplomatic assistance. However, the coalition’s backing was not only limited to these four domains. The PYD would also be endorsed by Western media networks in their coverage including the BBC and VOA.

In light of the lengthy account given above and dedicated to the chain of events that took place since the beginning of the IS offensive on Kobane, it is understood that the Kurds of Northern Syria have increasingly become a relevant actor within the context of the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, mostly because of the fight they began to conduct against IS militants in Northern Syria as the coalition partner, they received wide coverage in Western media networks, increasing dramatically their visibility in the international arena and recognition in the eyes of the international community. However, the number of studies conducted to analyze their portrayal in the media did not match with this intensive press coverage. There is yet to be comprehensive research that concentrates entirely in the Western media coverage of the Kurds of

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<sup>18</sup> “Syrian Kurds Drive Islamic State out of Kobane”, *BBC*, 26 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30991612>, access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>19</sup> “Is Tal Abyad a Turning Point for Syria's Kurds?”, *BBC*, 16 June 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33146515>, access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>20</sup> “New U.S.-Backed Alliance to Counter ISIS in Syria Falsters”, *The New York Times*, 2 November 2015, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html), access date: 18 July 2019.

Northern Syria. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap in the literature by accounting for how Syrian Kurds were portrayed to the international community in Western media.

As the title of the thesis suggests, the analysis made in this study will be based mostly on the materials published and broadcasted by the BBC and VOA. There are several reasons as to why these two media broadcasters were specifically chosen among many to be the main sources of this research. To begin with, the BBC and VOA are respectively the United Kingdom (UK) and US-based media networks. Together with France, these two countries played the most leading roles in the fight against IS which meant that British and American media agencies would report on the PYD – the coalition partner on the ground – more broadly than any other. Moreover, since the UK and the US were among the most invested countries in the fight against IS alongside the PYD, American and British media agencies would, in turn, be more tempted to adopt pro-Kurdish and pro-PYD positions in their coverage, perhaps at the expense of reality. All the more so because IS was threatening American and British citizens with terrorist attacks and assaulting the Western way of life with its discourse and rhetoric. Therefore, the analysis of the coverage of Syrian Kurds will basically function as a litmus test of the impartiality of the Anglo-American media.

As for the reason why the BBC and VOA were selected among many influential Anglo-American media networks, it is mainly because of the historic roles these two have played as vehicles at the disposal of the UK and the US governments to influence international public opinion. That's why they can reflect best the dynamic positions of their respective governments vis-à-vis a certain foreign policy issue. In this case, it is the position adopted towards Syrian Kurds and the PYD within the context of the fight against IS.

VOA is the largest government-funded international broadcaster in the US that was established in February 1942 “to combat Nazi propaganda”<sup>21</sup> and to address “the need

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<sup>21</sup> “VOA History”, VOA, undated, available at: <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5829.html>, access date: 14 December 2019.

of peoples in closed and war-torn societies for reliable news.”<sup>22</sup> Today, VOA declares on its website that its mission is “to represent America” and “to present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively” to the whole world.<sup>23</sup> VOA “tells America’s story explaining its people, institutions, and culture.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, as also understood from its name, VOA is the primary media network to look at to be informed about US policies and perspectives in the international arena.

VOA is “one of the largest multimedia news organizations in the world.”<sup>25</sup> With its vast annual budget that amounts to a total of \$218 million and is funded directly by the US Congress, it broadcasts news in 47 languages via “radio, television, mobile and the Internet” and reaches an “estimated global audience of 236 million people” each week.<sup>26</sup> Besides, with the constant shift of news consumers towards online platforms, VOA has started to use social media effectively. So, in addition to its website, VOA shares news content on many social media platforms including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Youtube*, and *Telegram*.<sup>27</sup> As many as 15 million people worldwide follow VOA’s English-language social media accounts. However, VOA’s prestige does not match its influence and popularity. Even though the VOA Charter enacted in 1976 declares that VOA would “serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news” that is “accurate, objective, and comprehensive,”<sup>28</sup> VOA does not enjoy a prestigious reputation among the international public as it is

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<sup>22</sup> “The Largest U.S. International Broadcaster: VOA”, VOA, 9 February 2017, p. 1, available at: <https://docs.voanews.eu/en-US-INSIDE/2016/12/05/5d1e6a53-3ed2-4c3e-b043-ecae12d9eed8.pdf>, access date: 14 December 2019.

<sup>23</sup> “Mission and Values”, VOA, available at: [www.insidevoa.com/p/5831.html](http://www.insidevoa.com/p/5831.html), access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>24</sup> “Congressional Budget Justification: 2019”, *Broadcasting Board of Governors*, undated, p. 21, available at: [www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2018/02/BBGBudget\\_FY19\\_CBJ\\_2-7-18\\_Final.pdf](http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2018/02/BBGBudget_FY19_CBJ_2-7-18_Final.pdf), access date: 14 December 2019.

<sup>25</sup> “The Largest U.S. International Broadcaster”, VOA, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> “The Largest U.S. International Broadcaster”, VOA, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Congressional Budget Justification”, *Broadcasting Board of Governors*, pp. 26-27.”

<sup>28</sup> “The VOA Charter”, VOA, 30 October 2009, available at: [voanews.com/archive/voa-charter-0](http://voanews.com/archive/voa-charter-0), access date: 14 December 2019.

often accused of being a “propaganda arm”<sup>29</sup> of the United States and criticized for advancing US interests “in more subtle ways.”<sup>30</sup>

As for the BBC, it is a British media network established in October 1922.<sup>31</sup> The BBC is one of the world’s oldest media organizations and the largest in the world in terms of the number of employees. Currently, it employs more than 22,000 personnel in total.<sup>32</sup> Unlike VOA, the BBC is not a government-funded media network. It is a public service broadcaster principally financed through the television licensing fees “paid by those [British citizens] who own TV sets or watch live television transmissions.”<sup>33</sup> With its immense annual revenue of £5 billion, The BBC is “one of the best-funded public service broadcasters in the world.”<sup>34</sup>

The BBC continues to be one of the most important soft power instruments at the disposal of the United Kingdom with its capability to reach “into some of the most remote places in the world, providing a link to the UK for individuals and societies who would otherwise not have this opportunity.”<sup>35</sup> BBC World Service, for example,

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<sup>29</sup> “Double Standard? Media Warn Trump could Exploit US ‘Propaganda Arm’ – under Bipartisan Law”, *FOX News*, 13 December 2016, available at: [foxnews.com/politics/double-standard-media-warn-trump-could-exploit-us-propaganda-arm-under-bipartisan-law](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/double-standard-media-warn-trump-could-exploit-us-propaganda-arm-under-bipartisan-law), access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Hudson, John, “U.S. Repeals Propaganda Ban, Spreads Government-made News to Americans”, *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2013, available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/14/u-s-repeals-propaganda-ban-spreads-government-made-news-to-americans](https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/14/u-s-repeals-propaganda-ban-spreads-government-made-news-to-americans), access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>31</sup> “British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)”, *Britannica*, available at: [britannica.com/topic/British-Broadcasting-Corporation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Broadcasting-Corporation), access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>32</sup> “BBC: Group Annual Report and Accounts, 2018/19”, *Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport*, 21 June 2019, p. 214, available at: [www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport](https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport), access date: 15 December 2019.

<sup>33</sup> “British Broadcasting Corporation”, *Britannica*.

<sup>34</sup> “A BBC for the Future: A Broadcaster of Distinction”, *Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport*, 12 May 2016, p. 10, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-bbc-for-the-future-a-broadcaster-of-distinction>, access date: 15 December 2019.

<sup>35</sup> “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom”, *The UK Government*, 23 November 2015, p. 49, available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015), access date: 15 December 2019.

“provides news and analysis from around the globe”<sup>36</sup> to an international audience in 42 languages and reaches up to 319 million people each week.<sup>37</sup> The magnitude of the weekly global audience of the BBC goes up to 426 million people with the inclusion of the BBC broadcasting conducted through television, radio and online platforms.<sup>38</sup> Last but not least, the social media accounts of the BBC are followed by tens of millions of people worldwide. Three most-followed BBC accounts on *Twitter* have more than 75 million followers: @BBCBreaking (41.1 million), @BBCWorld (26.3 million) and @BBCNews (10.3 million). The main *Facebook* page of the BBC has more than 50 million followers on its own: @bbcnews (50.2 million). So, it is no wonder that Tony Hall, the director-general of the BBC, considers that the British media network is “one of the UK’s most important cultural exports and one of [its] best sources of global influence.”<sup>39</sup>

According to the Royal Charter presented to the British parliament in December 2016, the mission of the BBC is “to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial [...] output.”<sup>40</sup> The Charter goes on to declare that the BBC had to “be independent in all matters concerning the fulfillment of its mission.”<sup>41</sup> Contrary to VOA, the BBC enjoys a reputable standing among the international community and is known to be “one of the most respected news

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<sup>36</sup> “BBC World Service: About”, *Facebook*, available at: [facebook.com/pg/bbcworldservice/about](https://www.facebook.com/pg/bbcworldservice/about), access date: 15 December 2019.

<sup>37</sup> “Group Annual Report and Accounts”, *Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport*, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> “Group Annual Report and Accounts”, *Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport*, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> “BBC World Service to Receive £289m from Government”, *The Guardian*, 23 November 2015, available at: [www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/23/bbc-world-service-receive-289m-from-government](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/23/bbc-world-service-receive-289m-from-government), access date: 15 December 2019.

<sup>40</sup> “BBC Charter and Framework Agreement”, *Gov.UK*, 15 December 2016, p. 5, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bbc-charter-and-framework-agreement>, access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>41</sup> “BBC Charter and Framework Agreement”, *Gov.UK*, p. 4.

organizations.”<sup>42</sup> In 2004, *the Guardian* described the BBC as “the most trusted purveyor of news in the world.”<sup>43</sup> And recently, *Forbes* magazine depicted the BBC as “the global standard-bearer for excellence in broadcast radio and TV journalism.”<sup>44</sup>

As understood, even though both the BBC and VOA have traditionally been employed by the UK and the US governments as an instrument of ‘soft power’ in foreign policy and a tool to influence international public opinion in accordance with national interests, VOA is perceived to be associated with propaganda as opposed to the BBC which is considered an objective media agency. In fact, the disparity between the BBC and VOA in terms of prestige and credibility is another reason for their designation as the main sources of material. It will be interesting to find out if they adopted a common discourse or a similar language while covering Syrian Kurds and the PYD in the face of the security threats emanating from IS and the intensive propaganda it conducted at the expense of Western civilization.

This study intends to analyze the Western media coverage of Syrian Kurds. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, Western media networks portrayed the PYD as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds by making no distinction between one another. According to Western media, Syrian Kurds were equal to the PYD and the PYD to Syrian Kurds. In their coverage, the terms ‘PYD’, ‘YPG’, ‘the Kurds of Northern Syria’, ‘Syrian Kurds’ and ‘Kurds of Syria’ were all used interchangeably and synonymously. So, Syrian Kurds were largely reduced to the PYD. Therefore, this study focused inevitably on the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG. After all, these organizations were ‘made’ the representatives of Syrian Kurds. Having said that, this study prefers to make a distinction between Syrian Kurds and the PYD as

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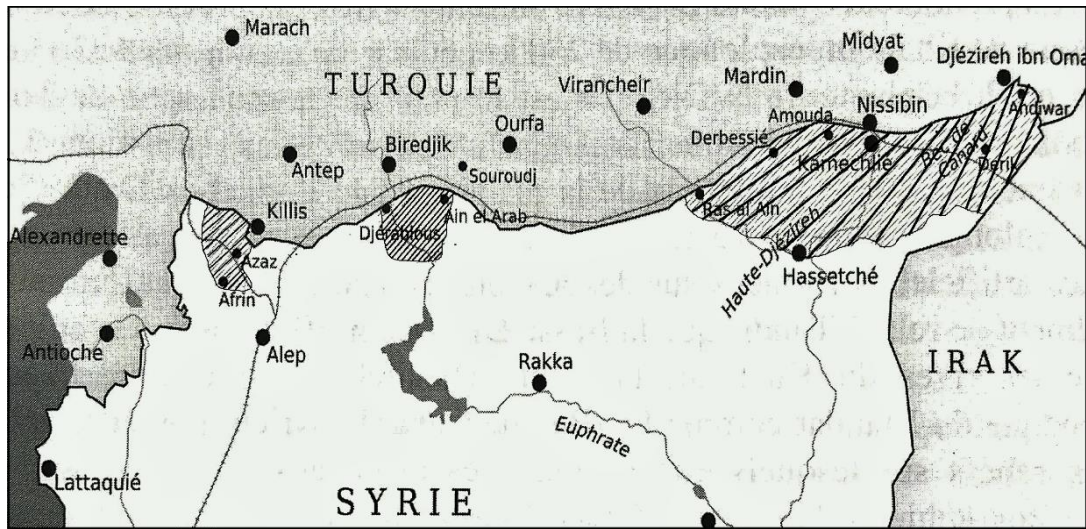
<sup>42</sup> Fisher, Tim, “Best Online News Sites”, *LifeWire*, 15 November 2019, available at: [lifewire.com/top-sources-for-finding-world-news-online-3481981](http://lifewire.com/top-sources-for-finding-world-news-online-3481981), access date: 18 November 2019.

<sup>43</sup> “No Apology Needed: The BBC still Leads the World”, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2004, available at: [theguardian.com/media/2004/nov/14/bbc.politicsandthedia](http://theguardian.com/media/2004/nov/14/bbc.politicsandthedia), access date: 5 December 2019.

<sup>44</sup> “10 Journalism Brands Where You Find Real Facts Rather than Alternative Facts”, *Forbes*, 1 February 2019, available at: [forbes.com/sites/berlinschoolofcreativeleadership/2017/02/01/10-journalism-brands-where-you-will-find-real-facts-rather-than-alternative-facts/#667d84c9e9b5](http://forbes.com/sites/berlinschoolofcreativeleadership/2017/02/01/10-journalism-brands-where-you-will-find-real-facts-rather-than-alternative-facts/#667d84c9e9b5), access date: 18 November 2019.



the latter is only one of many groups present in Northern Syria with a claim to represent Syrian Kurds.



Map 2: The Kurdish enclaves in Northern Syria, *Le Mouvement Kurde*.<sup>45</sup>

The selection of the time period for the research also requires some justification. This study will analyze the Western media coverage of Syrian Kurds from September 2014 to March 2018. September 2014 was when IS launched its offensive on Kobane. As was discussed above, this offensive was quite significant as it substantially enhanced the recognition of Syrian Kurds in the international community and augmented the number of news pieces published and broadcasted about them in Western media. March 2018 corresponds to another major turning point. It was when the Turkish-backed anti-Assad fighters captured the Kurdish-majority Afrin city of Northwest Syria from the PYD two months after Turkey started its ‘Operation Olive Branch’.<sup>46</sup> As did the battle of Kobane, the battle of Afrin also received extensive coverage in Western media. Hence, these two battles represented the climax of the Western media attention on Syrian Kurds. Nevertheless, Syrian Kurds and the PYD had been in the

<sup>45</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Berne: Peter Lang SA, 2007): p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Operation ‘Olive Branch’ is the cross-border military operation launched in January 2018 by the Turkish government. It was carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups against the PYD in the Syrian Kurdish city of Afrin.

limelight between these two battles thanks to the fight they were conducting against IS as the Western proxy in Syria.

The following chapters of this thesis will discuss the different dimensions of the Western media coverage, the BBC and VOA in particular, of the Kurds of Northern Syria. While doing so, the political context will be analyzed in detail in order to present the political aims behind the media coverage. The thesis will also discuss at length the historical representation of Kurds in the West to make a comparison between the past and present portrayal of Kurds.

In Chapter 2, the discussion will be on the PYD connection with the PKK, a US-designated terrorist organization. After giving brief background information about the history of the PKK and the PYD, it will be demonstrated that these two organizations are closely connected. This chapter will argue, however, that Western media sought to downplay and even obscure this connection in order to prevent the terrorist designation of the PKK from undermining the image and international legitimacy of the PYD.

Chapter 3 will explore the efforts made by Western media to legitimize the PYD as a political actor in Syria in the eyes of the international community. This chapter will argue that Western media networks pursued various strategies and adopted several discourses in their coverage to promote the international legitimacy of the PYD and have the PKK offshoot recognized as a legitimate Syrian Kurdish organization in Northern Syria.

Chapter 4 will discuss the Kurdish images constructed by Western media while building a comprehensive narrative on Syrian Kurds. This chapter will argue that Western media networks portrayed Syrian Kurds with different 'invented' images in their coverage in accordance with the changing political and military situation on the ground and in line with Western interests in Syria and the wider region.

Chapter 5 will dwell on the question of how the PYD was framed by Western media as the champion of Western values and democratic ideals. This chapter will argue

that in order to cultivate a positive PYD image especially in the eyes of Western public opinion, Western media 'reinvented' the PYD and the society under its control as possessing democratic, secular and pluralistic credentials.

Chapter 6 will analyze the Western media coverage of Kurdish female fighters. This chapter will argue that Western media networks instrumentalized Kurdish women and the images thereof as a tool to promote the international legitimacy of the PYD and a vehicle to garner international support and sympathy for the Kurds of Northern Syria.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PKK-PYD CONNECTION

The most contentious issue regarding the alliance of Western governments with the PYD in the context of the fight against IS is the latter's 'suspected' connection with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or PKK), an insurgent group that has engaged in an armed fight against the Turkish state since 1984 and is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States,<sup>47</sup> the United Kingdom<sup>48</sup> and the European Union (EU).<sup>49</sup> The reason why it is a thorny issue is evident: if the PYD was in fact affiliated with the PKK as the Turkish government insistently claims, the West's increasingly deepening ties with the PYD due to, *inter alia*,<sup>50</sup> the fight against IS would be questioned and the efforts of the coalition to combat IS would be delegitimized in the eyes of the international community as the Western states would be working hand-in-hand with a terrorist affiliate. So, it all boils down to one question: Are these two groups separate? Are the PYD and the PKK two

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<sup>47</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", *U.S. Department of State*, available at: [www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations](http://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations), access date: 26 June 2019.

<sup>48</sup> "Proscribed Terrorist Groups or Organisations", *UK Government*, 12 July 2013, available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2#history](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2#history), access date: 23 October 2019.

<sup>49</sup> "EU Terrorist List", *The Council of the European Union*, 8 January 2019, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2019/25/oj>, access date: 23 October 2019.

<sup>50</sup> For the reasons why the US-led Western coalition is increasingly engaging with the YPG in Syria, see: Balanche, Fabrice, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", *Hoover Institution*, 17 July 2018, pp. 1-3, available at: [hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria](http://hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria), access date: 15 January 2019.

distinct entities as the American, British and French governments and their respective media agencies assert?

No, they are not. As will be explained in detail presently, the PYD and its military wing the YPG are the offshoots of the PKK in Syria. However, the BBC and VOA together with other Western media agencies have been trying to separate the PYD from the PKK and seeking to create a distinct PYD image cleansed from the problematic PKK label. But, how are the PYD and the PKK affiliated and despite the obvious links between the two, how and for what purpose did Western media create a PYD image as distinct from the PKK?

## 2.1. The PKK: A Brief History

To better understand the PKK-PYD connection, it is crucial to go back to the very origins of the PKK and provide a brief account of its historical development giving particular attention to its relations with the Syrian state. The PKK or the Kurdistan Workers' Party was founded in Diyarbakır, Turkey in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and his associates<sup>51</sup> as a Kurdish nationalist party based on Marxist-Leninist teachings.<sup>52</sup> The party's main objective was to establish an "independent and democratic"<sup>53</sup> Kurdish state and Öcalan believed that the only way to accomplish this was "to launch an armed struggle" against Turkey.<sup>54</sup> To that end, the PKK started to organize itself in Turkey under the leadership of Öcalan in the late 1970s. However, because the rumors of an imminent *coup d'état* by the Turkish military were in circulation in Turkey and as it was clear to Öcalan that it would be too dangerous for him to

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<sup>51</sup> Marcus, Aliza, *Blood and Belief. The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007): p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno, Greg, "Inside the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 October 2007, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Özcan, Ali Kemal, *Turkey's Kurds. A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2006): p. 134.

<sup>54</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, p. 27.

continue to operate in Turkish proper, he decided to move to Syria in August 1979.<sup>55</sup> That is how the PKK's Syrian adventure started.

In Damascus, Öcalan was successful to reach an agreement with the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP)<sup>56</sup> with regard to the training of PKK cadres in the Syrian-controlled Beka'a Valley in Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> Following the 1980 *coup d'état* in Turkey, hundreds of PKK militants fleeing the military crackdown passed to Lebanon through Syria for military and ideological training in the camps established by the Palestinian leftist organizations.<sup>58</sup>

In the meantime, Syrian intelligence services were closely observing the increasing PKK presence in Syria and Lebanon without impeding its activities.<sup>59</sup> However, what started out as tacit regime support for the PKK in the form of a policy of inaction and tolerance quickly turned into an overt backing in the later period. The Syrian regime was already used to benefitting from foreign militias as political leverage against its neighbors, most notably Israel.<sup>60</sup> So, as part of its foreign policy strategy of dealing with its Turkish and Iraqi neighbors by means of using the "Kurdish card", the regime

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<sup>55</sup> Özcan, Nihat Ali, *PKK (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi). Tarihi, İdeolojisi ve Yöntemi* (Ankara: Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Yayınları, 1999): p. 243.

<sup>56</sup> The Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP) was a radical armed group that adopted a Palestinian nationalist and Marxist-Leninist ideology. The organization continued its presence in Lebanon and Syria under the auspices of the Syrian regime in the 1970s and 1980s. See: "Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine", *Britannica*, available at: [britannica.com/topic/Democratic-Front-for-the-Liberation-of-Palestine](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Democratic-Front-for-the-Liberation-of-Palestine), access date: 16 August 2019.

<sup>57</sup> White, Paul, *The PKK. Coming Down From the Mountains* (London: Zed Books, 2015): p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> Birand, Mehmet Ali, *Apo ve PKK* (İstanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1992): p. 116.

<sup>59</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>60</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond, "The Foreign Policy of Syria", in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002): pp. 156-160.

instrumentalized the PKK as a political tool to exert pressure on the Turkish government.<sup>61</sup>

The Syrian regime under the presidency of Hafez al-Assad had good reasons to give backing to the PKK despite the Turkish protests. To begin with, Syria still had claims on the Turkish province of Hatay (Alexandretta) which was annexed by Turkey with the French acquiescence following a plebiscite in 1939 that was never recognized by Syria.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güney Doğu Anadolu Projesi* in Turkish, or GAP) initiated in 1977 by the Turkish government that planned the construction of “22 dams and 19 hydroelectric plants” on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers for agricultural irrigation and electricity production<sup>63</sup> caused significant disturbance in Damascus as the completion of the project meant that Syria would be dependent on the Turkish state for the water resources it so much needed to revive its barren lands. Therefore, by applying pressure on Turkey using the PKK as political leverage, the Assad regime hoped to gain the upper hand in the diplomacy table in case of the solution of bilateral problems by diplomatic means.

There was also a domestic dynamic to the regime support given to the PKK. Syria had its own Kurdish minority who predominantly lived in the areas along the Syrian border with Turkey. Historically, Kurds of Syria were oppressed by the successive Syrian governments. This oppression was to such an extent that between 120,000 and 150,000 Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship in 1962<sup>64</sup> with the purpose of “identifying alien infiltrators” who were claimed to have “illegally crossed the border” from Turkey’s Kurdish areas.<sup>65</sup> As a result, the Syrian regime was always

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<sup>61</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Syria’s Kurds. History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009): pp. 70-71.

<sup>62</sup> Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> Dohrmann, Mark and Hatem, Robert, “The Impact of Hydro-Politics on the Relations of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria”, *Middle East Journal*, 68/4 (2014): p. 572.

<sup>64</sup> Lowe, Robert, “The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered”, *Chatham House – Middle East Programme*, 6/1 (2006): p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> “Syria: The Silenced Kurds”, *Human Rights Watch*, 8/4 (1996): Appendix A, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>, access date: 6 November 2019.

concerned about the eruption of a possible Kurdish insurgency in Syria encouraged by the Kurdish movements going at full steam in Iraq and Turkey. Therefore, by assisting the PKK in its fight against the Turkish state and giving it a free hand in the Syrian Kurdish areas, the Assad regime intended to divert the attention and the energy of Kurds of Syria towards the Kurdish question in Turkey.

With these objectives in mind, the Syrian regime had been extremely benevolent to its Kurdish guests. “New instructors would be provided, bank accounts were opened and more weapons and better premises would be found” for the PKK cadres.<sup>66</sup> The Helwe camp in Beka’a Valley, which was renamed as the Mazlum Korkmaz Academy in 1986, operated as “the PKK’s main training facility”<sup>67</sup> and its administration was completely given to the PKK by the Assad regime.<sup>68</sup> Thanks to all the assistance granted to the PKK by the Syrian regime, Syria became “a breeding ground for PKK militants during the 1980s and 1990s.”<sup>69</sup>

However, this political instrument of exploiting Turkey’s Kurdish problem had its limits. Increasing PKK “efforts to be recognized as a political organization,” especially by European countries and “the signing of the US-brokered agreement between Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani in September 1998” pushed Turkey to take measures to put an end to the PKK problem.<sup>70</sup> In October 1998, Turkey started to mass troops to its border with Syria and threatened the Syrian regime with an imminent war unless it ousted the PKK militants from the Syrian proper.<sup>71</sup> “Significantly weaker than Turkey militarily and fearful of Israel to its rear,” Syria

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<sup>66</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, p. 76.

<sup>67</sup> “Statue of PKK Founder, People Attacked in Lice”, *Bianet English*, 19 August 2014, available at: [m.bianet.org/english/minorities/157927-statue-of-pkk-founder-people-attacked-in-lice](http://m.bianet.org/english/minorities/157927-statue-of-pkk-founder-people-attacked-in-lice), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Özcan, *PKK*, p. 247.

<sup>69</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, p. 76.

<sup>70</sup> Oktav, Özden Z., “Water Dispute and Kurdish Separatism in Turkish-Syrian Relations”, *The Turkish Yearbook*, 34 (2003): p. 106.

<sup>71</sup> Aykan, Mahmut Bali, “The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View”, *Middle East Policy Council*, 6/4 (1999): p. 77.



was compelled to make an agreement with the Turkish government on Turkey's terms.<sup>72</sup> The Adana Agreement signed between Ankara and Damascus thereafter effectively terminated the PKK presence in the Syrian territory. In line with the terms of the agreement, Öcalan was deported from Syria. He was then captured by the Turkish intelligence in Kenya in 1999. Nevertheless, the PKK's removal from Syria was only a temporary episode in the organization's Syrian adventure.

## **2.2. The PYD: The PKK in Syria**

After its expulsion from Syria and the capture of its leader by Turkey, the PKK entered into a phase of disarray.<sup>73</sup> It would take approximately five years for the organization to return to Syria to continue where it left off, but this time with a different brand than the usual: The Democratic Union Party or the PYD. According to *the International Crisis Group*, an independent, non-governmental organization based in Brussels, Belgium that focuses on international conflict prevention and resolution, the PKK remnants who escaped the Syrian regime's repression after the signing of the Adana Agreement established the PYD covertly in 2003<sup>74</sup> in order to sustain what was left of the PKK's support base in Syria by binding its members and sympathizers to the party.<sup>75</sup> In an interview with Zelal TV, an Iraqi Kurdish television channel, Osman Öcalan, the younger brother of Abdullah Öcalan made a significant statement about the origins of the PYD and its connection with the PKK:

I founded the PYD, as I did PJAK [Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, the PKK's Iranian arm]. We did not use the word 'Kurdistan' in the party's title since we did not want to provoke the Syrian regime. The PYD is connected to the PKK

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<sup>72</sup> McDowall, David, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004): p. 480.

<sup>73</sup> Marcus, Aliza, "Turkey's PKK: Rise, Fall, Rise Again?", *World Policy Journal*, 24/1 (2007): pp. 78-80.

<sup>74</sup> "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", *International Crisis Group*, 22 January 2013, p. 12, available at: [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle](http://crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle), access date: 19 January 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Savelsberg, Eva, "The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather than Driving Forces for Democratization", in David Romano and Mehmet Gürses (eds.), *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): p. 97.

and acts upon on PKK orders. We founded the PYD in Qandil. We held the first general PYD congress in October 2003. We trained the cadres in Qandil.<sup>76</sup>

According to these remarks, it was the PKK that created the PYD as its offshoot in Syria. By the establishment of a new party with a new name, the PKK wished to enhance its international and local legitimacy. At a time when ‘the Global War on Terrorism’<sup>77</sup> was severely limiting the capabilities of terrorist organizations worldwide, the PKK deemed it vital to create new groups with different names to eschew the negative repercussions emanating from being designated a terrorist organization. It also wanted to “appear more local and nationalist in the Kurdish majority areas outside Turkey” to help broaden its appeal beyond the party’s narrow base and boost its legitimacy in the eyes of Syrian Kurds.<sup>78</sup> That is the game of semantics being played by the PKK for years. It simply creates new parties with new brands to avoid the unfavorable implications of the notorious PKK label and the “legal and political challenges”<sup>79</sup> it poses. Therefore, the distinction drawn between the PKK and the PYD is an artificial one, made to escape the terrorist label of the former. In effect, these two organizations are two sides of the same coin.

There is a myriad of reports and academic studies which indicate that these two groups are still tightly connected and have been operating closely together in Northern Syria and Iraq’s Sinjar Mountain in the absence of strong central governments in Syria and Iraq as a result of the Syrian Civil War and the emergence of IS. The PYD which had sheltered with the PKK militants in the Qandil mountains of Northern Iraq returned to Syria soon after the Syrian uprisings erupted in March

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<sup>76</sup> “The PYD & the PKK: Two Sides of a Coin”, *The Hill*, 10 May 2016, available at: [thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/279169-the-pyd-the-pkk-two-sides-of-a-coin](http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/279169-the-pyd-the-pkk-two-sides-of-a-coin), access date: 3 November 2019.

<sup>77</sup> The War on Terror is a global military effort launched by the United States after the 9/11 terror attacks. The main targets of this international campaign were jihadi terrorist organizations such Al-Qaeda and Taliban.

<sup>78</sup> Orton, Kyle W., *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters. The PKK in Syria* (London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2017): p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Stein, Aaron, “Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward”, *Atlantic Council*, 10 July 2017, p. 22, available at: [atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/partner-operations-in-syria](http://atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/partner-operations-in-syria), access date: 23 January 2019.

2011<sup>80</sup> to take advantage of the conflict unraveling in Syria. The organization began to organize Syrian Kurds as part of its scheme to create a political and military force to project power in the region drawing on what was remaining of the Syrian Kurdish sympathy towards Öcalan and the PKK. It was in effect the PKK's Syrian veterans who established the YPG, the PYD's military wing, in 2012,<sup>81</sup> consolidated its power with additional militants from the Qandil mountains<sup>82</sup> and provided it with "the experience and resources [necessary] to organize an armed militia."<sup>83</sup> The militants from the PKK such as Fahman Husain (*nom de guerre* Bahoz Erdal), Ferhat Abdi Shahin (*noms de guerre* Mazlum Kobane and Shahin Cilo), Asya Abdallah,<sup>84</sup> Aldar Khalil, Ilham Ahmed, Redul Khalil, and Polat Can<sup>85</sup> all took significant leadership positions within the ranks of the PYD and the YPG giving the PKK a significant authority over decision-making in strategic matters.<sup>86</sup> The fact that all these PKK militants who formerly operated under the PKK leadership in Qandil are now in control of the PYD and the YPG is a clear indication of the hierarchical subordination of these groups to the PKK.

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<sup>80</sup> "Syria's Kurds", *International Crisis Group*, p. ii.

<sup>81</sup> Balanche, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", *International Crisis Group*, 8 May 2014, p. 5, available at: [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria), access date: 27 January 2019.

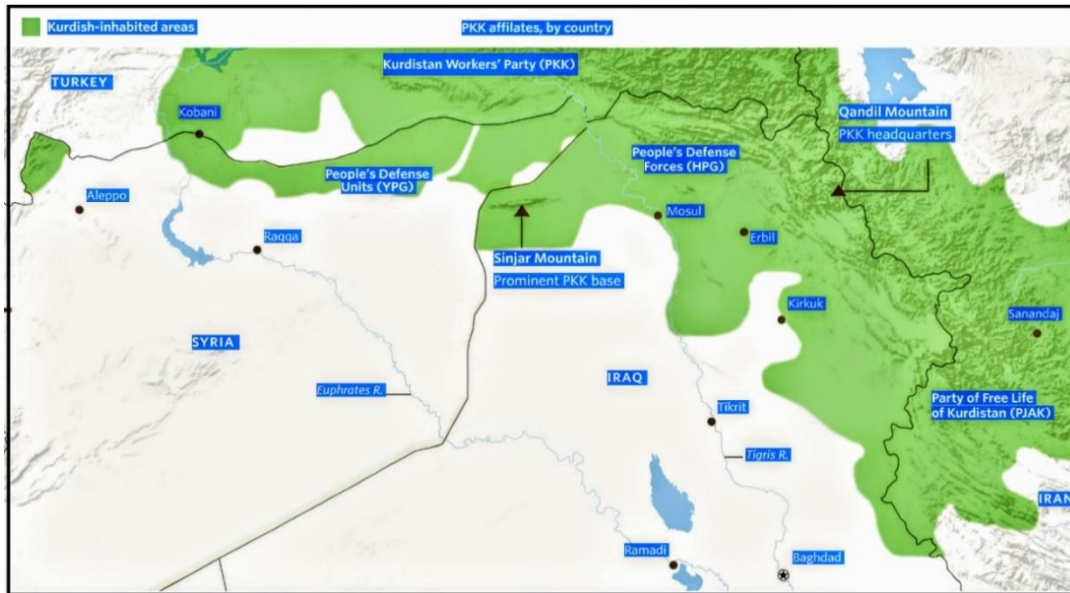
<sup>83</sup> Lowe, Robert, "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria", in Romano and Gürses, *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds*, p. 229.

<sup>84</sup> Acun, Can and Keskin, Bünyamin, *The PKK's Branch in Northern Syria: PYD-YPG* (İstanbul: SETA Foundation, 2017): p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Balanche, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Soner, Bayram A., Aslan, Ömer and Kiyıcı, Hasan, *PKK'nın Bölgesel Terör Ağı Yapılanması* (Ankara: Polis Akademisi Yayınları, 2017): p. 20.

<sup>86</sup> "The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria", *International Crisis Group*, 4 May 2017, p. 7, available at: [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria), access date: 8 February 2019.



**Map 3: The operation areas of the PKK and its affiliates, *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>87</sup>**

Reports also suggest that as many as 2,000 PKK militants descended from the Qandil in 2012 to help bolster the influence the PYD exerted in the region.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, after “the partial withdrawal” of the Syrian regime forces from the mainly Kurdish areas of Syria in July 2012,<sup>89</sup> the PYD was able to easily establish its military and administrative control over local people in Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira (see Map 4). Moreover, the PKK and the YPG militants still swing from one group to another in accordance with the operational necessities<sup>90</sup> rendering irrelevant the distinction drawn between the two organizations. Some PKK militants confirm this reality. A news article titled “America’s Marxist Allies against ISIS” published by *The Wall Street Journal* in July 2015 tells the story of a 24-year old female PKK militant. Zind

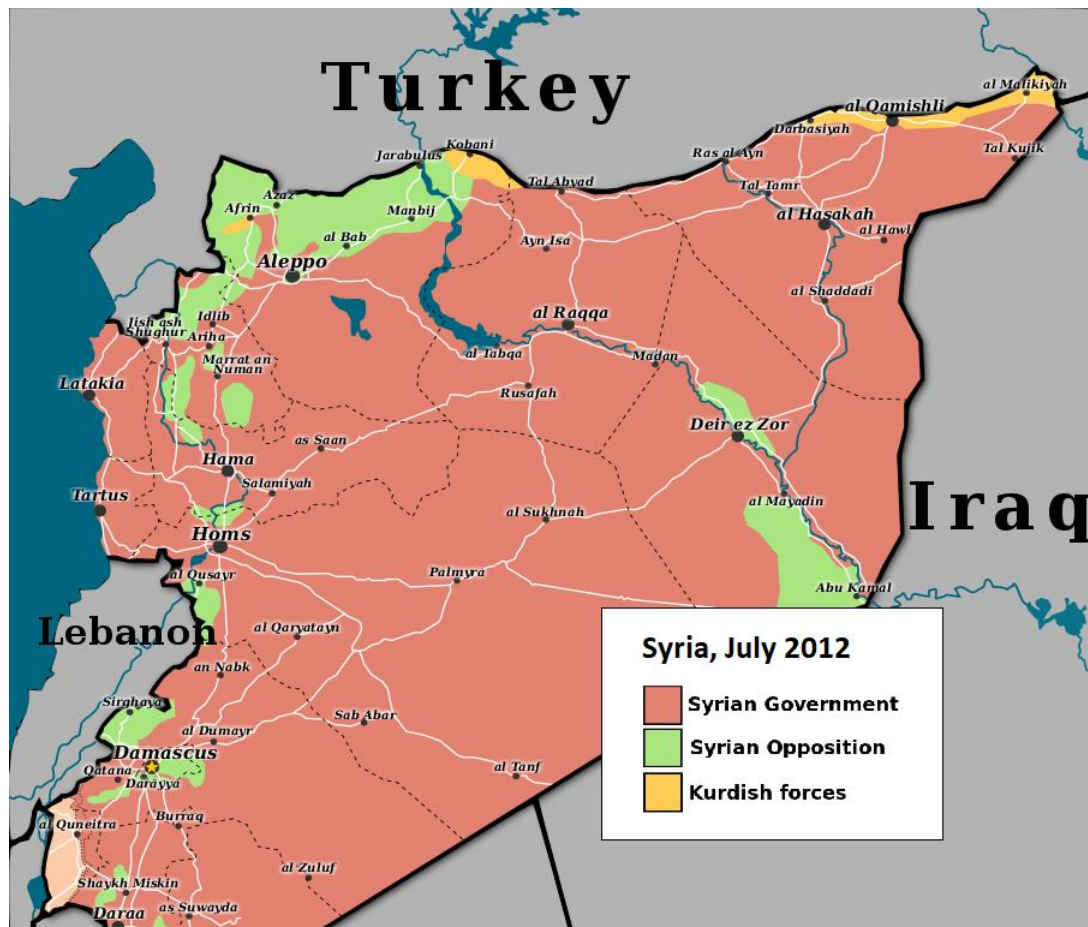
<sup>87</sup> “A Personal War: America’s Marxist Allies against ISIS”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949>, access date: 11 April 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Enders, David, “Competing Senses of Liberation, Dread Rule in Kurdish Areas of Syria”, *McClatchy*, 15 August 2012, available at: [mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24734857.html](http://mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24734857.html), access date: 26 July 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Tejel, Jordi, “Syria’s Kurds: Troubled Past, Uncertain Future”, *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 October 2012, p. 3, available at: [carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/16/syria-s-kurds-troubled-past-uncertain-future-pub-49703](http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/16/syria-s-kurds-troubled-past-uncertain-future-pub-49703), access date: 2 February 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Pollock, David, “Making Rojava More like the KRG”, in Patrick Clawson (ed.), *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally. Cooperation and Complications* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016): p. 4.

Ruken (her *nom de guerre*) says, “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>91</sup>



Map 4: The PYD-held areas after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime, *Corriere Della Sera*.<sup>92</sup>

The PYD officials are perfectly aware that to secure international legitimacy and to widen their support base in Northern Syria, they have to detach themselves – especially in rhetoric – from the PKK.<sup>93</sup> It is a necessity on their part to overcome the legitimacy crisis caused by being an offshoot of a terrorist organization. Thus, there

<sup>91</sup> “A Personal War”, *The Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>92</sup> “Syria: Collateral Damage”, *Corriere Della Sera*, undated, available at: [corriere.it/reportages/esteri/2017/guerra-siria-danni-collaterali/desktop.html?lang=en](http://corriere.it/reportages/esteri/2017/guerra-siria-danni-collaterali/desktop.html?lang=en), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Tejel, Jordi, “Toward a Generational Rupture within the Kurdish Movement in Syria?”, in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening. Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): p. 241.

has been a constant effort by the PYD to obscure the nature and extent of its links connecting the party to the PKK. The PYD defended that it was independent of the PKK and the relationship it maintained with the party was limited solely to an ideological inspiration from the writings of Öcalan<sup>94</sup> whom the PYD militants also consider their “ideological leader.”<sup>95</sup> In an interview with VOA Turkish in May 2017, Salih Muslim, the former co-chair of the PYD, argued that the YPG was only protecting the Kurds of Northern Syria from rival militias by “using its right of self-defense.”<sup>96</sup> He assured Turkish public opinion in particular that the PYD or the YPG were not an extension of the PKK and that “Turkey had no reason to be concerned about” the weapons given to the YPG militia by the US-led coalition.<sup>97</sup>

However, contrary to the statements of the PYD officials or deceptive PKK and PYD propaganda, if there was one thing constant in the course of the PYD’s empowerment and consolidation in Northern Syria, it was the party’s strong connection with and unwavering dependency on the PKK. The latter continues to “retain control over its decision-making”<sup>98</sup> and despite the claims of autonomy, the PYD is in effect ruled by the PKK militants trained in the Qandil<sup>99</sup> and inspired by the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “The People’s Rule: An Interview With Salih Muslim, Part I”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 27 February 2014, available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54675>, access date: 19 July 2019.

<sup>95</sup> “U.S. Offered to Use YPG to Fight PKK – Turkish Defence Minister”, *Ahval*, 15 February 2018, available at: [ahvalnews.com/us-turkey/us-offered-use-ypg-fight-pkk-turkish-defence-minister](http://ahvalnews.com/us-turkey/us-offered-use-ypg-fight-pkk-turkish-defence-minister), access date: 10 August 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Amerika'nın Sesi, “Salih Müslim: Türkiye'nin YPG'ye Silah Verilmesiyle İlgili Kaygıları Yersiz”, *Youtube*, 12 May 2017, available at: [youtube.com/watch?v=5rGw11WZkw4](https://youtube.com/watch?v=5rGw11WZkw4), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Amerika'nın Sesi, “Salih Müslim”.

<sup>98</sup> “Syria's Kurds”, *International Crisis Group*, p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> Wimmen, Heiko, “The US Joins the Turkey-PKK Fight in Northern Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, 12 May 2017, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/us-joins-turkey-pkk-fight-northern-syria](http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/us-joins-turkey-pkk-fight-northern-syria), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Gunter, Michael M., *Out of Nowhere. The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2014): p. 111.

### 2.3. Changing Western View on the PKK-PYD Connection

In light of all the information given above, it is rather safe to argue that there is no distinction between the PKK and the PYD and that the latter is the offshoot of the former in Syria. This was exactly why the US hesitated to lend its support to the group in the first place before September 2014, that they were “allied to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).”<sup>101</sup> This was exactly how the American administration and Western media viewed the PKK-PYD relationship before “the U.S. ha[d] become the YPG’s air force and the YPG ha[d] become the U.S.’s ground force in Syria.”<sup>102</sup> For instance, the former Secretary of State John Kerry remarked in October 2014 that “they [YPG] are an offshoot group of the folks [PKK] that our friends, the Turks, oppose.”<sup>103</sup> A spokesperson for the State Department reiterated this by saying, “we’re certainly aware of the connection—some of the connections between some PYD members and the PKK.”<sup>104</sup> It is no surprise to see that the BBC and VOA were on the same page with the US officials concerning the PKK-PYD association and they *did* regard the PYD as the PKK’s branch in Syria until the former’s designation by the West as the coalition boots on the ground.

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<sup>101</sup> “Islamic State Crisis: Syrian Kurds Battle to Keep Hold of Strategic Kobane”, *BBC*, 4 October 2014, available at: <https://bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29486130>, access date: 18 July 2019.

<sup>102</sup> “A Personal War”, *The Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>103</sup> “Remarks [by John Kerry]”, *U.S. Department of State*.

<sup>104</sup> “Daily Press Briefing [by Spokesperson Jen Psaki]”, *U.S. Department of State*, 16 October 2014, available at: [2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/233047.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/233047.htm), access date: 18 July 2019.

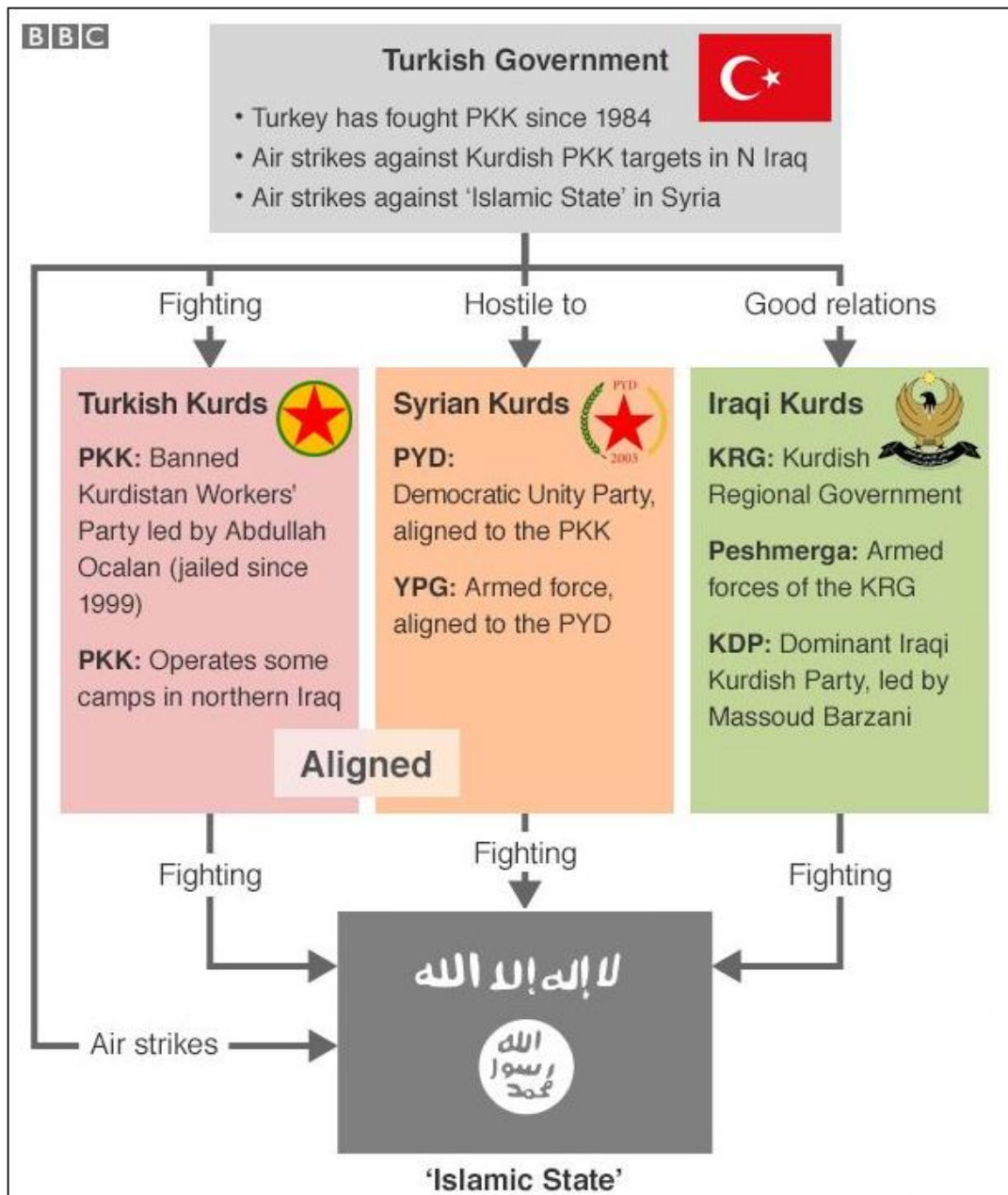


Fig. 1: An infographic released by the BBC on 28 July 2015 clearly shows that the PKK and the PYD are “aligned”, BBC.<sup>105</sup>

There are many examples as to how the BBC and VOA formerly acknowledged the PKK-PYD connection. A news article posted by the BBC on its website on 5 September 2014 – just before the IS offensive on Kobane – indicates, “the YPG is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Turkish-Kurdish guerrilla group

<sup>105</sup> “Kurdish Peace 'Impossible' – Turkey's Erdogan”, BBC, 28 July 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33689660>, access date: 26 August 2019.



labeled a terrorist organization by the US and the EU.”<sup>106</sup> Another BBC article published in October 2014 notes, “they [Kurdish militants in Kobane] are allied to the PKK, banned as a terrorist organization in Turkey.”<sup>107</sup> And one last BBC news article which manifestly demonstrates the links between the two groups was posted in July 2015 and states, “the YPG, closely allied with the PKK have represented Washington’s best hope for confronting IS on the ground in Syria.”<sup>108</sup> So, as can also be understood from the infographic published by the BBC in July 2015 and shown in Figure 1, the BBC explicitly confirmed that the two organizations were “aligned”.<sup>109</sup>

As for the VOA coverage, it is not different at all from the BBC’s with regard to the PKK-PYD affiliation. A VOA news article dated 8 September 2014 points out, “Turkey has concerns over the PYD’s historic links to the separatist PKK that fought for Kurdish rights on the Turkish side of the border.”<sup>110</sup> Another news article published by VOA in October 2014 is more straightforward about the nature and extent of the relationship between the PKK and the PYD and states, “the PYD is an offshoot of Turkey’s outlawed Kurdish separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party.”<sup>111</sup> And one last VOA news article closely associating the two groups is published in December 2015 and points out, “it [PYD] is closely allied with the Turkey-based

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<sup>106</sup> “The Kurdish Female Fighters Bringing the Fight to IS”, *BBC*, 5 September 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29085242>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>107</sup> “Kurds Clash with Turkish Security Forces on Syria Border”, *BBC*, 4 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29490256>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>108</sup> “What Can Turkey Gain from the Nato Meeting?”, *BBC*, 27 July 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33680049>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>109</sup> “Kurdish Peace 'Impossible'”, *BBC*.

<sup>110</sup> “West Still Wary of Contact with Syria's Kurds”, *VOA*, 8 September 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/west-still-wary-contact-syrias-kurds](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/west-still-wary-contact-syrias-kurds), access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>111</sup> “Syrian Kurds Push Back on Turkish Plan”, *VOA*, 21 October 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-push-back-turkish-plan](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-push-back-turkish-plan), access date: 20 July 2019.

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)".<sup>112</sup> As can be understood from the excerpts of the news articles taken from the BBC and VOA websites, both news agencies considered that the PYD and the PKK were closely connected. It means that they did not always regard the two groups to be distinct and separate entities. There was a time in which Western media acknowledged the affiliation between the PKK and the PYD in their coverage. However, it would not last long.

Within the context of the new American policy of "leading from behind" enlisting local forces to fight America's war on its behalf without the American troops in war zones,<sup>113</sup> the YPG was designated in February 2015 as the American boots on the ground,<sup>114</sup> i.e. the American proxy to do its bidding, its task being to degrade and ultimately destroy IS. Following the swift YPG advances against IS in Syria, "the illusion of a distinction between the PKK and the PYD" was created<sup>115</sup> and officials from Western capitals started to deny, in a sudden and dramatic volte-face, the close ties existing between the PKK and the PYD.<sup>116</sup> The reason for this shift in discourse is clear: not to jeopardize the legitimacy of the fight against IS because of the PKK-PYD affiliation.

A senior administration official from the US government noted in July 2015 that it was "important to separate out the PKK from the PYD."<sup>117</sup> A spokesperson for the

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<sup>112</sup> "In Kurdish Syria, Confusion Rules Amid Fallout of War", VOA, 10 December 2015, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-syria-confusion-rules-amid-fallout-war](http://voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-syria-confusion-rules-amid-fallout-war), access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Krieg, Andreas, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *International Affairs*, 92/1 (2016): pp. 103-109.

<sup>114</sup> "Syrian Kurds Cut IS Supply Line Near Iraq", VOA, 25 February 2015, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-cut-supply-line-near-iraq](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-cut-supply-line-near-iraq), access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Balanche, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Barfi, Barak, "Ascent of the PYD and the SDF", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 2016, p. 9, available at: [washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ascent-of-the-pyd-and-the-sdf](http://washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ascent-of-the-pyd-and-the-sdf), access date: 15 February 2019.

<sup>117</sup> "Senior Administration Officials on Counter-ISIL Coalition Efforts", *U.S. Department of State*, 28 July 2015, available at: [2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/07/245403.htm](http://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/07/245403.htm), access date: 18 July 2019.

US State Department pointed out in May 2016, “we have made very clear that the YPG is a separate entity from the PKK.”<sup>118</sup> The United Kingdom, one of the members of the anti-IS coalition who “has been launching [air] strikes against IS targets” since 2014,<sup>119</sup> likewise adopted the same stance towards the PYD. Boris Johnson, the then Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom indicated, “we don’t share the perspective of the Turkish government on this matter [the PKK-PYD relationship], though we are certainly aware of Turkish sensitivities.”<sup>120</sup> Alistair Burt, the British Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa stated, “we believe they [PKK and PYD] are separate organizations.”<sup>121</sup> A policy report written by the British Foreign Affairs Committee and presented to the House of Commons indicates that although “the UK considers the PKK to be a terrorist organization, [it] does not apply that designation to the PYD/YPG and it draws a distinction between that group and the PKK.”<sup>122</sup>

As for France, another member of the US-led coalition which is deeply involved in the anti-jihadist fight in Iraq and Syria as part of its ‘Operation Chammal’,<sup>123</sup> it also adopts the same posture in its dealings with the PYD. The former French President François Hollande explicitly manifested the French position towards the group by meeting in Elysee Palace with its representatives who were described by the state-

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<sup>118</sup> “Daily Press Briefing [by Spokesperson Mark C. Toner]”, *U.S. Department of State*, 27 May 2016, available at: [2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/05/257787.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/05/257787.htm), access date: 18 July 2019.

<sup>119</sup> “UK Drops First Bombs in Syria After MPs Approve Air Strikes”, *France 24*, 3 December 2015, available at: [france24.com/en/20151202-uk-parliament-votes-join-airstrikes-syria-islamic-state](https://france24.com/en/20151202-uk-parliament-votes-join-airstrikes-syria-islamic-state), access date: 18 July 2019.

<sup>120</sup> “Kurdish Aspirations and the Interests of the UK”, *House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, 11 February 2018, p. 22, available at: [publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/518/518.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/518/518.pdf), access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>121</sup> “Kurdish Aspirations”, *House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, p. 22.

<sup>122</sup> “Kurdish Aspirations”, *House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, p. 20.

<sup>123</sup> “Armée française en Syrie: un succès en demi-teinte face à l'Organisation État Islamique?”, *France 24*, 26 March 2019, available at: [www.france24.com/fr/20190326-syrie-france-armee-francaise-operation-chammal-daech-florence-parly-colonel-legrier](https://www.france24.com/fr/20190326-syrie-france-armee-francaise-operation-chammal-daech-florence-parly-colonel-legrier), access date: 19 July 2019.

sponsored TV network France 24 as “the Kurdish heroes of Kobane.”<sup>124</sup> President Emmanuel Macron did the same and hosted Kurdish militants from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<sup>125</sup> in the French presidential palace.<sup>126</sup> Thus, one can argue that the Western states involved in the anti-IS fight in Syria and Iraq have gradually adopted similar positions with regard to the nature and extent of the links between the PKK and the PYD/YPG since the latter’s cooptation into the fight against IS in coalition ranks.

To be sure, it was not unusual for US governments to cooperate with groups that “used violence to advance their political goals.”<sup>127</sup> Although it is illegal according to the American legal system to “provide material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations [FTO],”<sup>128</sup> the US administration did not refrain from giving support even to the listed terrorist groups when its national interests required to do so.<sup>129</sup> Even if the PYD was not a designated terrorist organization, it was still an offshoot of the PKK which was listed as an FTO by the US State Department in August 1997.<sup>130</sup> This problem needed to be redressed in the media coverage for the anti-IS fight not to be undermined due to the PKK-PYD affiliation and for the United

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<sup>124</sup> “Les héros kurdes de Kobané reçus par François Hollande”, *France 24*, 10 February 2015, available at: [www.france24.com/fr/20150210-france-kurdes-syrie-francois-hollande-paris-etat-islamique-pyd-ypg-pkk-turquie-terroriste](http://www.france24.com/fr/20150210-france-kurdes-syrie-francois-hollande-paris-etat-islamique-pyd-ypg-pkk-turquie-terroriste), access date: 22 July 2019.

<sup>125</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is an Arab-Kurdish military alliance established in October 2015 by the initiative of the US-led coalition to assuage the Turkish concerns about the growing PYD dominance in Northern Syria and to more easily earn the trust of local Arabs. However, it was simply the YPG in a different brand. For a detailed analysis, see the sections 2.6, 3.3, and 5.4.

<sup>126</sup> “Emmanuel Macron apporte son soutien aux Forces Démocratiques Syriennes”, *France 24*, 29 March 2018, available at: [www.france24.com/fr/20180329-france-emmanuel-macron-apporte-soutien-forces-democratiques-syriennes-fds-kurdes-ypg](http://www.france24.com/fr/20180329-france-emmanuel-macron-apporte-soutien-forces-democratiques-syriennes-fds-kurdes-ypg), access date: 22 July 2019.

<sup>127</sup> Phillips, David L., *The Kurdish Spring. A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015): p. 173.

<sup>128</sup> “18 U.S.C. 2339B – Providing Material Support or Resources to Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations”, *Gov.Info*, available at: [www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2011-title18/USCODE-2011-title18-part1-chap113B-sec2339B/summary](http://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2011-title18/USCODE-2011-title18-part1-chap113B-sec2339B/summary), access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. 173.

<sup>130</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”, *U.S. Department of State*.

States not to be perceived by the international public as providing support to a terrorist group.

Besides, the PYD would be employed against a universal enemy whose notoriety had reached to the edges of the world because of its brutality. So, the whole world was watching closely what was happening with the fight against IS. Therefore, if an offshoot of a terrorist organization was to be mobilized in this struggle, the international community would know all about it and this could lead to a serious legitimacy crisis. So, the PKK-PYD ties had to be swept under the rug for the coalition partner in the fight against IS not to be recognized as a terrorist organization in the eyes of the international public. However, there was yet another problem to cope with: Turkey's fervent opposition to anything to do with the PYD.

#### **2.4. Turkish Position on the PYD/YPG**

To contextualize Turkey's current position on the PYD and its objection to the PYD partnership with the Western coalition in the anti-IS fight, it is crucial to go back in time and analyze first the Turkish strategy vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis. During the first few months of the Syrian revolts, the Turkish government was committed to the task of persuading the Assad regime to take concrete steps towards the liberalization of the Syrian political scene.<sup>131</sup> Senior Turkish officials held talks with their Syrian counterparts and demanded the regime halt its violent repression of the demonstrations and find a peaceful political solution to the nascent Syrian crisis.<sup>132</sup> But, to the dismay of Turkey, the Turkish demands were not met and the Syrian uprising turned ultimately into a civil war with Turkey taking the side of the Arab opposition groups whose primary objective was to overthrow the Syrian regime. From then on, Turkey became the most fervent supporter of the anti-Assad front and

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<sup>131</sup> Smith, Hannah L., "Erdogan's War Wounds", *Chatham House*, August & September 2019, available at: [chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/erdogans-war-wounds#](http://chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/erdogans-war-wounds#), access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>132</sup> "One Problem with a Neighbour", *The Economist*, 20 August 2011, available at: [economist.com/europe/2011/08/20/one-problem-with-a-neighbour](http://economist.com/europe/2011/08/20/one-problem-with-a-neighbour), access date: 4 November 2019.

threw all its weight behind the rebel cause.<sup>133</sup> However, this would last only until the emergence of the PYD as a powerful organization in Syria with a claim to represent Syrian Kurds.

The Assad regime withdrew from most of the Syrian Kurdish areas in July 2012 handing over the control of those areas to the PYD in a tactical maneuver to concentrate its forces in the Syrian heartlands which were deemed more important for the regime survival.<sup>134</sup> It was also a manifestation of the regime's strategic thinking to redirect Kurdish attention towards Turkey<sup>135</sup> and to divert Turkey's energy and resources away from the rebel cause and instead towards countering the rising PYD autonomy. The ultimate result of this regime maneuver has been the gradual empowerment of the PYD in Northern Syria after it started to administer the Kurdish areas of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira. Turkey, on the other hand, was antagonistic to the PYD's growing influence in Syria from the very beginning of their 'land grab' due to the organization's relationship with the PKK.<sup>136</sup> So, if there was one thing constant in Turkey's dealing with the crisis in Syria, it was the Turkish objective of hampering the empowerment of the PKK affiliates and preventing the creation of a possible Kurdish statelet in Northern Syria.

Turkey made no distinction between the PKK and the PYD and considered the link between these two organizations as a challenge to its national interests in the region

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<sup>133</sup> Smith, "Erdogan's War Wounds".

<sup>134</sup> "Syria Conflict: Kurds Declare Federal System", *BBC*, 17 March 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35830375>, access date: 12 July 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Abramovitz, Morton I. and Edelman, Eric S., "U.S.-Turkish Cooperation toward a Post-Assad Syria", *Bipartisan Policy Center*, April 2013, p. 11, available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-US-Turkey-Syria.pdf>, access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>136</sup> Güneş, Cengiz and Lowe, Robert, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East", *Chatham House*, 23 July 2015, pp. 9-10, available at: [chathamhouse.org/publication/impact-syrian-war-kurdish-politics-across-middle-east](http://chathamhouse.org/publication/impact-syrian-war-kurdish-politics-across-middle-east), access date: 26 March 2019.

and a major threat to its national security.<sup>137</sup> However, during the Turkish-Kurdish peace process initiated by the Turkish government in late 2012 based on the talks between the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and Turkey's intelligence officials with the objective of solving Turkey's Kurdish question, Turkey engaged in a dialogue with also the PYD in accordance with the newly adopted Turkish policy towards the PKK. Salih Muslim even came to Turkey several times in this period to hold meetings with senior Turkish officials.<sup>138</sup> During one of these talks that was held on 4 October 2014 while the siege of Kobane by IS was in progress, the Turkish intelligence tried to convince Muslim to "bring his forces under the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)" and "take an open stance against the Syrian regime."<sup>139</sup> But, apparently to no avail. Even though some FSA fighters took part in the defense of Kobane afterward<sup>140</sup> and the FSA and the YPG took the city of Tal Abyad from IS with a joint operation in June 2015,<sup>141</sup> they never cooperated against the Syrian regime contrary to what Turkey hoped for. By contrast, the YPG would fight against FSA rebels in cooperation with the regime forces and Russia during the battle of Aleppo in February 2016.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, the West continued to support the YPG

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<sup>137</sup> Stein, Aaron and Foley, Michelle, "The YPG-PKK Connection", *Atlantic Council*, 26 January 2016, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection), access date: 24 April 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Çağaptay, Soner, "Turkey's Kurdish Path", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 2015, p. 5, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-kurdish-path](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-kurdish-path), access date: 17 March 2019.

<sup>139</sup> "Ankara Urges PYD Leader to Join Ranks of Free Syrian Army against Al-Assad", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 5 October 2014, available at: [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-urges-pyd-leader-to-join-ranks-of-free-syrian-army-against-al-assad-72545](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-urges-pyd-leader-to-join-ranks-of-free-syrian-army-against-al-assad-72545), access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>140</sup> "Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Arrive in Kobani to Bolster Fight against Isis", *The Guardian*, 1 November 2014, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/01/kurdish-peshmerga-kobani-isis-syria](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/01/kurdish-peshmerga-kobani-isis-syria), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>141</sup> "Kurdish Forces Seize Border Town of Tal Abyad, Cutting off Key Isis Supply Line", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/kurdish-fighters-cut-key-supply-line-to-islamic-state-capital-raqqqa>, access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>142</sup> "The Enemy of My Enemy: Russia and the Kurds Reshape the Syrian Civil War", *HuffPost*, 21 February 2016, available at: [www.huffpost.com/entry/the-enemy-of-my-enemy-rus\\_b\\_9282978](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-enemy-of-my-enemy-rus_b_9282978), access date: 5 November 2019.

because the fight against IS conducted by the Kurdish militia outweighed all other strategic considerations in Syria.

The talks held between the Turkish government and the PYD were unsuccessful to bring a solution to the conflict between the two sides. Soon after the Muslim's last visit to Turkey in October 2014, the PYD and the YPG were designated as a terrorist organization by a Turkish court.<sup>143</sup> So, there was no true rapprochement between the Turkish government and the PYD. What amounted to few overtures on Turkey's part was instigated by the Turkish aspiration to mobilize the PYD behind the anti-regime cause. And what seemed to be a Turkish acquiescence of the PYD presence in Northern Syria back in the day was driven by the policies adopted by the Turkish government within the context of the peace process.

The already fragile relations between Turkey and the PYD came to a head with the inception of the IS offensive on Kobane in September 2014. During the offensive, Turkey chose to stay on the sidelines while the IS militants wreaked havoc on the Kurdish town in front of the whole world. Kurds in Turkey harshly criticized the inaction and reluctance of the Turkish government to help the Kurds of Kobane in the face of the IS assault.<sup>144</sup> Widespread protests broke out in the Kurdish populated areas of Turkey and 51 people lost their lives after clashes erupted between the police and protesters.<sup>145</sup> At that time, Öcalan released a statement from his prison cell warning the Turkish government that the peace process would be ended by the PKK if Kobane fell to the jihadists.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> "Mahkeme Pyd Ve Ypg'yi Terör Örgütü İlan Etti", *İhlas Haber Ajansı*, 31 October 2014, available at: [iha.com.tr/mardin-haberleri/mahkeme-pyd-ve-ypgyi-teror-orgutu-ilan-etti-902303](https://www.ihaber.com.tr/mardin-haberleri/mahkeme-pyd-ve-ypgyi-teror-orgutu-ilan-etti-902303), access date: 6 November 2019.

<sup>144</sup> "Kurds Protest against Turkey as IS Advances on Kobane", *BBC*, 7 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29518448>, access date: 20 August 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Güneş and Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics", p. 9

<sup>146</sup> "Islamic State Crisis", *BBC*.



However, the Turkish government did not even allow the United States to use the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey for airstrikes against IS.<sup>147</sup> For Turkey, the battle of Kobane was no more than a showdown of two terrorist organizations.<sup>148</sup> That was the rationale behind the Turkish inaction and non-intervention. But, the international public opinion was turning fast against Turkey who resisted growing international calls to intervene in Kobane to help the YPG repel the IS offensive. Western media even began to publish news articles that implied, between the lines, the Turkish complicity in the rapid expansion of the IS group in Syria and Iraq.<sup>149</sup> Ultimately, yielding to the international pressure, the Turkish government made a compromise and opened a corridor in Turkish soil for the peshmerga forces (Iraqi Kurdish fighters) to pass into the besieged town of Kobane.<sup>150</sup> When all is said and done, Turkey's staying idle by and preferring not to intervene against the IS militants in and around Kobane in spite of the mounting pressures on the part of the international community was a vibrant indication of the deep hostility that the Turkish government fostered towards the PYD.

Another factor that exacerbated the Turkish worries about the PKK affiliates in Syria was the rapid YPG expansion in the areas captured from IS along the Turkish-Syrian frontier as of the summer of 2015. The YPG seized the city of Tal Abyad from IS in June 2015. This latest advance of the Kurdish militia in Northern Syria granted the

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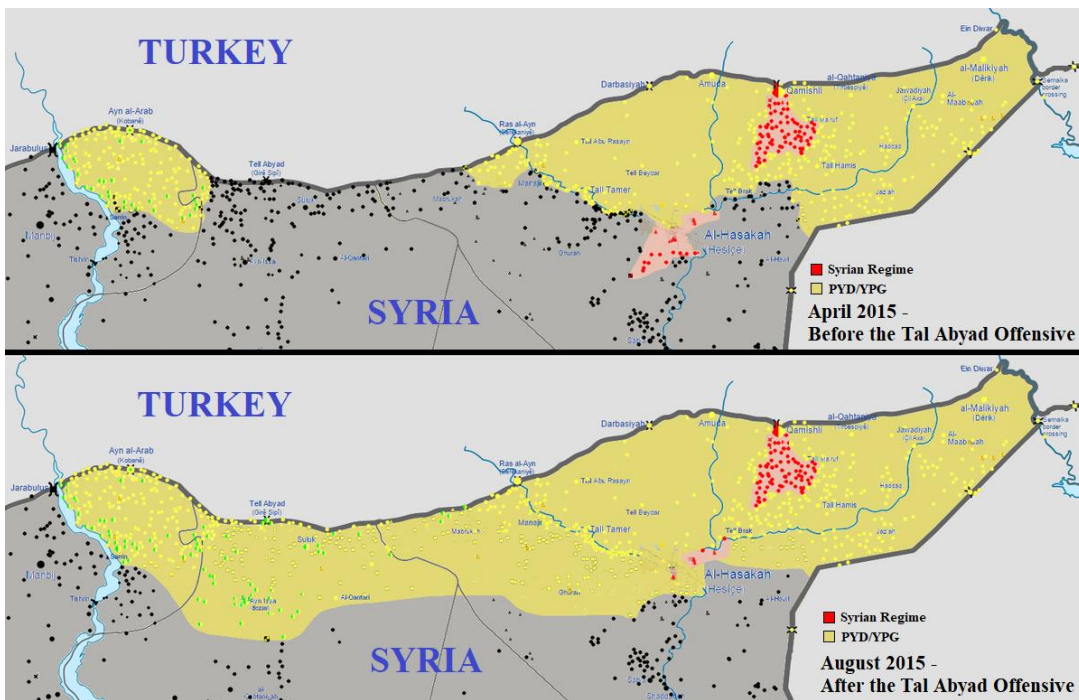
<sup>147</sup> "Turkey Denies Reaching Accord with U.S. on Use of Air Base against Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2014, available at: [washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/turkey-denies-reaching-accord-with-us-on-use-of-air-base-against-islamic-state/2014/10/13/9f705cd0-52da-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/turkey-denies-reaching-accord-with-us-on-use-of-air-base-against-islamic-state/2014/10/13/9f705cd0-52da-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Öğür, Berkan and Baykal, Zana, "Understanding 'Foreign Policy' of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and beyond", in Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş (eds.), *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East. Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018): p. 64.

<sup>149</sup> "Kurds Wary of Turkey Role in Fight against Islamic State", *BBC*, 3 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29479615>, access date: 10 October 2019 and "Kobane: IS and Syria Kurds in Fierce Gun Battles", *BBC*, 8 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29532291>, access date: 10 October 2019.

<sup>150</sup> "Turkey Opens Corridor for Kurdish Fighters to Relieve Kobani", *Financial Times*, 20 October 2014, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/64ed8d28-581e-11e4-b331-00144feab7de>, access date: 6 November 2019.

group control over the whole territory lying between Kobane and Qamishli and thus brought the Kurdish militia one big step closer to its long-standing objective of “creating a contiguous zone bordering Turkey’s Kurdish regions”<sup>151</sup> by connecting all of its cantons in Syria.<sup>152</sup> The Kurdish Corridor in the making along the Turkish border with Syria significantly augmented Turkey’s fears and alarmed Turkish officials who were increasingly disturbed by the Western backing and armament of the YPG.



Map 5: The Kurdish Corridor in the making – The main source of Turkish worries, *HuffPost*.<sup>153</sup>

Finally, the collapse of the peace process in July 2015 “under domestic and regional pressures”<sup>154</sup> added insult to the injury. The bloody conflict between the two sworn

<sup>151</sup> “Advances by Kurdish Militants Test Syrian Alliances”, *Financial Times*, 17 February 2016, available at: [www.ft.com/content/a433f2c2-d59c-11e5-829b-8564e7528e54](http://www.ft.com/content/a433f2c2-d59c-11e5-829b-8564e7528e54), access date: 22 August 2019.

<sup>152</sup> Itani, Faysal, “Why Turkey Went to War in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2016, available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/24/why-turkey-finally-went-to-war-in-syria-jarabulus-invasion-kurds](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/24/why-turkey-finally-went-to-war-in-syria-jarabulus-invasion-kurds), access date: 22 August 2019.

<sup>153</sup> “Turkey and the Kurdish Corridor: Why the Islamic State Survives”, *HuffPost*, 16 August 2015, available at: [www.huffpost.com/entry/turkey-and-the-kurdish-co\\_b\\_7994540](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/turkey-and-the-kurdish-co_b_7994540), access date: 5 November 2019.

enemies started to rage again with significant regional and international implications. As the extension of the PKK in Syria, the PYD was affected the most from this turn of events and the organization topped the list of Turkish enemies. Needless to say, the rising tensions between Turkey and the PKK also had a negative impact on the US-led anti-IS coalition as the latter became the YPG's air force in Syria and its political, financial and military sponsor. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was becoming increasingly hostile to the Western cooperation with the PYD in the face of the group's expanding influence along Turkey's southern border with Syria.<sup>155</sup> When it comes to Kurdish politics, "cross-border influences are almost axiomatic"<sup>156</sup> and naturally, Turkey feared that the growing Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria could foment its own Kurdish population to demand what Syrian Kurds were having under the control of the PKK affiliates.<sup>157</sup> Ankara was also worried that the PYD foothold in Syria could turn out to be a springboard for the PKK's fight with Turkey<sup>158</sup> and serve "as a logistics and training base" for the PKK militants.<sup>159</sup>

So, as was confirmed by Fabrice Balanche, an adjunct researcher at *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Turkey had legitimate concerns to be worried about<sup>160</sup> and felt increasingly threatened by the Western empowerment of the PYD. As a result, President Erdoğan started to criticize vehemently the coalition partnership

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<sup>154</sup> Salih, Cale, "Turkey, the Kurds and the Fight against Islamic State", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 September 2015, p. 4, available at: [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/turkey\\_the\\_kurds\\_and\\_the\\_fight\\_against\\_islamic\\_state4043](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/turkey_the_kurds_and_the_fight_against_islamic_state4043), access date: 3 March 2019.

<sup>155</sup> "Turkey's Erdogan Denounces US Support for Syrian Kurds", *BBC*, 10 February 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35541003>, access date: 7 May 2019.

<sup>156</sup> Bengio, Ofra, "Introduction", in Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> Gürses, Mehmet, "From War to Democracy: Transborder Kurdish Conflict and Democratization", in Romano and Gürses, *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds*, p. 255.

<sup>158</sup> "Syria's Kurds", *International Crisis Group*, p. ii-iii.

<sup>159</sup> Orton, *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters*, p. 130.

<sup>160</sup> Balanche, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", p. 3.

with the PYD in an attempt to delegitimize the foundations of this cooperation in the eyes of the international community.<sup>161</sup>

To be sure, Turkey was not opposing the coalition's anti-IS struggle, but its being conducted by the offshoot of a terrorist organization that was still actively operating in Turkish proper with a separatist agenda directly threatening the Turkish territorial integrity. As can be predicted by now, the main Turkish argument in its criticism was the PKK-PYD association. Turkish officials and Turkish media networks lambasted the Western coalition for the support they had given to the YPG militia and accused the United States of arming a terrorist organization. Western media, for its part, adopted an anti-Turkey and pro-PYD position in its coverage in an attempt to safeguard the legitimacy of the fight against IS in the face of the growing Turkish verbal assaults. As a result, Western media agencies worked hard to dismiss or at least downplay the Turkish claims that accused the PYD of being the offshoot of the PKK in Syria.

## **2.5. Obscuring the PKK-PYD Connection: The Western Media Coverage**

The change of heart of the US-led anti-IS coalition towards the PYD also transformed the way Western media viewed the PKK-PYD relationship. However, it is crucial to emphasize here that the impact of this policy shift on the media coverage was limited and it did not change the Western media discourse in its entirety. To be sure, the Western media coverage was already pro-PYD as the West already initiated a *de facto* alliance – albeit limited in scope – with the group since the IS offensive on Kobane in September 2014 and there was already a level of coordination between the YPG militants on the ground in Northern Syria and the US command center. As will be analyzed in the next chapters, the BBC and VOA were already seeking to create a new PYD image and attempting to promote its standing in earnest in the eyes of the international community since the battle of Kobane. Hence, there was not much to be changed regarding their PYD coverage. However, as has been stated before, the

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<sup>161</sup> "Turkey's Erdogan Chastises U.S. over Support for Syrian Kurds", *Reuters*, 10 February 2016, available at: [reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kurds-idUSKCN0VJ0E3](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kurds-idUSKCN0VJ0E3), access date: 6 November 2019.

actual impact was on the coverage of the PKK-PYD relationship. The US-led coalition was about to engage in a formal partnership with a ‘shady’ group whose affiliation with a terrorist organization carried the risk of jeopardizing the legitimacy of the ‘Operation Inherent Resolve.’<sup>162</sup> Besides, subsequent to the end of the peace process, Turkey augmented the tone of its protests against the PYD-Western alliance with reference to the PKK-PYD connection. So, a media campaign was put in place by Western media to obscure the true color of the PKK-PYD relationship. Western media networks have gradually changed their discourse about the PYD’s affiliation with the PKK and downplayed the links between the two organizations. This change in the discourse of Western media about the PKK-PYD connection reflects the transformation of the media rhetoric in line with the Western governments’ policy shifts. The coverage of the BBC and VOA vividly manifested this phenomenon. The following pages will analyze how the BBC and VOA tried to separate the PYD from the PKK in their coverage.

From 2016 to the present day, the chief strategy followed by the BBC and VOA in this regard has been not to confirm nor deny the links existing between the PKK and the PYD. Although they acknowledged the PKK-PYD connection until early 2016, they could no longer confirm that the two were affiliated because it would delegitimize profoundly the Western engagement with the PYD in Syria. They could not deny the links either to spare the group the negative connotations of being the PKK extension because doing so would necessitate substantiating their claims with evidence that was non-existent. The current editorial policy is to include first the Turkish allegations and subsequently the PYD denials as to the nature and extent of the ties between the PYD and the PKK and to refrain from passing judgment, contrary to their previous editorial policy of revealing the truth as it is.

A few examples to clarify the new BBC and VOA policy are necessary. A news article published by the BBC in February 2016 notes, “Turkey sees the YPG as being

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<sup>162</sup> Inherent Resolve is the name of the operation launched by the US military in June 2014 against IS in Syria and Iraq.

linked with Kurdish guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).”<sup>163</sup> So, BBC does not anymore acknowledge explicitly the links between the two groups, but presents them as a mere Turkish assertion. Another BBC article published in November 2016 gives a detailed account of the PKK, but abstains from recognizing the PKK-PYD relationship by saying, “Turkey views the Popular Protection Units (YPG) [...] as linked to the PKK.”<sup>164</sup> So, BBC basically relegates the PKK-PYD connection from being the reality to being a sole Turkish claim. VOA does the same thing in its coverage. A news article issued by VOA in January 2016 points out, “Ankara accuses the PYD of being linked to the Kurdish rebel group the PKK, which Turkish forces are currently fighting.”<sup>165</sup> Another VOA article posted again in January 2016 indicates, “Ankara accuses the PYD/YPG of being offshoots of the Kurdish rebel group PKK.”<sup>166</sup>

As can clearly be seen, the formerly employed statement “the PYD is an offshoot of the PKK” is replaced with “Turkey views the PYD as an offshoot of the PKK” in the BBC and VOA coverage. There is undoubtedly a huge difference between these two statements. The former recognizes the phenomenon as the truth and the reality, but the latter refers to it only as a claim, an accusation made by a state against its enemy. Allegations as such made by states often lack credibility since states are inclined to incriminate their adversaries with groundless accusations for propaganda purposes. So, the Turkish accusations as to the nature of the PKK-PYD relationship are considered as such and are dismissed as being Turkey’s incrimination of its enemy.

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<sup>163</sup> “Syria Conflict: Turkey Shells Kurdish Militia”, *BBC*, 13 February 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35571663>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>164</sup> “Who are Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Rebels?”, *BBC*, 4 November 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>, access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>165</sup> “Top US General in Turkey for Talks on IS”, *VOA*, 5 January 2016, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/top-us-general-turkey-talks>, access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>166</sup> “Turkey Threatens Military Action against Syrian Kurds”, *VOA*, 28 January 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkey-threatens-military-action-against-syrian-kurds](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkey-threatens-military-action-against-syrian-kurds), access date: 21 July 2016.

Besides, in an attempt to give the PYD the benefit of the doubt concerning its denials of being the PKK offshoot, the ties between the two groups become ‘alleged’ or ‘suspected’, being devoid of certainty as to their veracity. A news article from VOA released in June 2015 refers to “the Syrian fighters’ [YPG militants] ‘suspected’ links to the PKK,”<sup>167</sup> and shows how the American broadcaster makes small modifications in its coverage in an effort to contest the indisputable disposition of the PKK-PYD relationship.

The BBC and VOA further attempted to downplay the close connection between the PYD and the PKK by reducing this relationship to solely an ideological affinity. Indeed, “the PYD is ideologically aligned with the PKK.”<sup>168</sup> They both share a commitment to Öcalan’s ideology of democratic confederalism, a bottom-up system of administration that purports “to implement some type of effective local government”<sup>169</sup> and is defined by Öcalan shortly as “democracy without a state”<sup>170</sup>. In an interview with Reuters in August 2012, Salih Muslim claimed that the PYD did not have anything to do with the PKK other than an ideological affinity.<sup>171</sup> It has been a PYD strategy all along to define the relationship with the PKK “as an ideological alliance which is not institutionalized.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> “Kurds Accuse Turkey of Allowing IS Attack on Kobani”, VOA, 25 June 2015, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/kurds-accuse-turkey-allowing-attack-kobani](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/kurds-accuse-turkey-allowing-attack-kobani), access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>168</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. xiv.

<sup>169</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, p. 127.

<sup>170</sup> Akkaya, Ahmet H. and Jongerden, Joost, “Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy”, in Michael Gunter and Mohammed M. A. Ahmed (eds.), *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (California: Mazda Publishers, 2013): p. 180.

<sup>171</sup> “Syrian Kurd Party Says Turkey should not Fear its Rise”, Reuters, 7 August 2012, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kurds/syrian-kurd-party-says-turkey-should-not-fear-its-rise-idUSBRE8760HN20120807>, access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>172</sup> Kaya, Zeynep and Lowe, Robert, “The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship”, in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): p. 277.

It appears that the BBC and VOA take a cue from the PYD by employing the same strategy in their coverage in a bid to obscure the existence of organizational links between the two groups. A news article published by VOA in October 2017 notes, “Syria’s PYD is ideologically affiliated with the Turkish Kurdish PKK, inspired by its leader Abdullah Öcalan.”<sup>173</sup> A BBC news article from August 2016 also limits the affiliation to an ideological alignment by pointing out, “Syrian Kurds, including those leading the YPG, share the PKK’s aspiration to establish an autonomous democratic confederation,” and goes on with the usual mantra of PYD denial, “but the YPG denies Turkey’s claim that it is an extension of the PKK.”<sup>174</sup> So, in an effort to mask the true nature of the PKK-PYD relationship, the BBC and VOA give a small concession and acknowledge the ideological alignment between the two groups copying the PYD’s propaganda tactics in the meantime.

Finally, in BBC and VOA coverage, the PYD denials are given extra credibility by making references to the American position on the issue. A BBC article from January 2018 states, “it [Turkey] sees the militia [YPG] as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – the YPG denies any direct political or military links – an assertion backed by a US-led coalition.”<sup>175</sup> Another BBC article from March 2018 indicates, “the US also backs the YPG’s assertion that it has no direct organizational links to the PKK.”<sup>176</sup> VOA follows suit. An article published by VOA in January 2018 notes, “Turkey alleges the group is an extension of the Kurdish separatists inside Turkey, – but Washington rejects Turkey’s claims and considers

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<sup>173</sup> “It’s not Independence, but Syria’s Kurds Entrench Self-Rule”, *VOA*, 8 October 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/its-not-independence-syrias-kurds-entrench-self-rule](https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/its-not-independence-syrias-kurds-entrench-self-rule), access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>174</sup> “Turkey v Syria’s Kurds v Islamic State”, *BBC*, 23 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>, access date: 20 April 2019.

<sup>175</sup> “Syria Ready to Down Turkish Jets Attacking Kurds Afrin”, *BBC*, 18 January 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42731227>, access date: 24 April 2019.

<sup>176</sup> “Syria War: France Offers to Mediate between Turkey and Kurds”, *BBC*, 30 March 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43592323>, access date: 24 April 2019.



the YPG a key ally in fighting IS.”<sup>177</sup> So, basically it is Turkey’s word against the US’s. But, the former is at a clear disadvantage here as Western media has adopted a common discourse in the way it reports on the PKK-PYD relationship based on the American position.

What is even worse for Turkey is that it has been suffering from a ‘credibility crisis’ for a long time now, especially in the eyes of the Western community. There are many factors that contributed to the emergence of such a phenomenon. The most important of them can be listed as follows with citation marks placed above referring to their coverage in Western media: Turkey’s divergence from the Syria policy of the West,<sup>178</sup> Turkey’s drifting away from the NATO alliance,<sup>179</sup> its engagement in diplomacy with Russia and Iran and the purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia,<sup>180</sup> the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Turkish government,<sup>181</sup> the coup attempt of July 2016 and the perception (common even among Turkish citizens themselves) that it was staged by Erdoğan himself to eliminate his opponents,<sup>182</sup> the government’s increasing encroachment on press freedom<sup>183</sup> and imprisoning a substantial number

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<sup>177</sup> “New Batch of US-backed Forces Finish Border Training in Northern Syria”, *VOA*, 22 January 2018, available at: [voanews.com/extremism-watch/new-batch-us-backed-forces-finish-border-training-northern-syria](http://voanews.com/extremism-watch/new-batch-us-backed-forces-finish-border-training-northern-syria), access date: 10 June 2019.

<sup>178</sup> “Goals Diverge and Perils Remain as U.S. and Turkey Take on ISIS”, *The New York Times*, 27 July 2015, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/world/middleeast/us-and-turkey-agree-to-create-isis-free-zone-in-syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/world/middleeast/us-and-turkey-agree-to-create-isis-free-zone-in-syria.html), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>179</sup> “Turkey’s Drift From NATO”, *The New York Times*, 13 March 2015, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/opinion/turkeys-drift-from-nato.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/opinion/turkeys-drift-from-nato.html), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>180</sup> “Turkey Signs Russian Missile Deal, Pivoting From NATO”, *The New York Times*, 12 September 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/europe/turkey-russia-missile-deal.html>, access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>181</sup> “Turkey Slides towards Authoritarian Rule as Commission Approves Plan to Increase Powers for President Erdoğan”, *The Independent*, 30 December 2016, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-increase-executive-powers-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-authoritarian-rule-government-a7501666.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-increase-executive-powers-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-authoritarian-rule-government-a7501666.html), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>182</sup> “One Year Later, the Turkish Coup Attempt Remains Shrouded in Mystery”, *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2017, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/07/14/one-year-later-the-turkish-coup-attempt-remains-shrouded-in-mystery](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/07/14/one-year-later-the-turkish-coup-attempt-remains-shrouded-in-mystery), access date: 28 October 2019.

of dissident journalists,<sup>184</sup> the purge of an enormous number of civil servants from their official duties,<sup>185</sup> Turkey's transition from parliamentary system to a presidential one giving Erdoğan sweeping executive powers,<sup>186</sup> the negative reports coming frequently from the governmental and non-governmental organizations imbued with heavy criticism of Turkey's human rights violations,<sup>187</sup> the increasing visibility of the Islamist ideology in Turkish politics,<sup>188</sup> Turkey's ambivalent position towards the PYD during the peace process and finally, Turkey's perceived backing of IS.<sup>189</sup> As can be understood from the references provided above, the issues conducive to Turkey's credibility crisis received broad coverage in the news articles published by the most influential international media networks between 2014 and 2019. Thus, the Turkish image and reliability were in tatters. As a result, Turkey's words had little – if not any – credibility in the eyes of the international and particularly Western public. Therefore, Turkish officials could not persuade the world that the PYD is the PKK extension in Syria. In the meantime, the BBC and VOA effectively detached the PYD from the PKK in their coverage by taking advantage of

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<sup>183</sup> "Amid Turkey's Media Crackdown, Erdogan Praises Trump for Putting CNN Reporter in His Place", *The Washington Post*, 12 January 2017, available at: [washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/12/amid-turkeys-media-crackdown-erdogan-praises-trump-for-putting-cnn-reporter-in-his-place](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/12/amid-turkeys-media-crackdown-erdogan-praises-trump-for-putting-cnn-reporter-in-his-place), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>184</sup> "Turkey Leads the World in Jailed Journalists", *The Economist*, 16 January 2019, available at: [www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/01/16/turkey-leads-the-world-in-jailed-journalists](http://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/01/16/turkey-leads-the-world-in-jailed-journalists), access date: 29 October 2019.

<sup>185</sup> "47,155 Arrests: Turkey's Post-coup Crackdown by the Numbers", *CNN*, 15 April 2017, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2017/04/14/europe/turkey-failed-coup-arrests-detained/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/14/europe/turkey-failed-coup-arrests-detained/index.html), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>186</sup> "Turkey Referendum Grants President Erdogan Sweeping New Powers", *BBC*, 16 April 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39617700>, access date: 29 October 2019.

<sup>187</sup> "U.N. Report: 2,000 Killed in Turkey Since End of PKK Cease-Fire", *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 March 2017, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-n-report-2-000-killed-in-turkey-since-end-of-pkk-cease-fire-1489165384>, access date: 10 December 2019.

<sup>188</sup> "Erdogan's 'Pious Generation' Goal Drives Islam into Education", *Financial Times*, 30 May 2018, available at: [ft.com/content/83328a4e-4317-11e8-97ce-ea0c2bf34a0b](http://ft.com/content/83328a4e-4317-11e8-97ce-ea0c2bf34a0b), access date: 29 October 2019.

<sup>189</sup> "Islamic State: Where does Jihadist Group Get its Support?", *BBC*, 1 September 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253>, access date: 29 October 2019.

the credibility crisis from which Turkey has been suffering in order to prevent the PYD's legitimacy from being undermined by the PKK label.

## 2.6. Inventing the Syrian Democratic Forces

In addition to denying the PKK-PYD affiliation and separating the two organizations in rhetoric, the US-led coalition also established the SDF to further downplay the PKK-PYD connection. The SDF was established in October 2015 by a joint American and YPG initiative as “the formal partner organization” of the US-led coalition.<sup>190</sup> The emergence of this organization formalized the *de facto* alliance previously initiated between the US-led coalition and the Kurdish militants fighting under the YPG banner. Even though the new organization was dominated by the YPG “militarily and politically”<sup>191</sup> from the very start, it also integrated some “less-experienced” Arab, Christian, Assyrian, Armenian and Turkmen fighters.<sup>192</sup> There are four principal reasons as to why it was deemed necessary by the Western coalition to create such a new organization rather than preferring to engage in a formal alliance relationship with the PYD in the first place. The first two are about the PYD's affiliation with the PKK. The remaining two reasons are about the Western effort to legitimize the PYD<sup>193</sup> and portray the group as a democratic, pluralist and secular organization.<sup>194</sup>

The first reason is about a legal obligation on the part of the US administration. As it is clear by now thanks to the detailed explanations above, the PKK continues to carry out its operations in Syria under the cover of a different brand, the PYD. As for the

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<sup>190</sup> Orton, *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters*, p. 35.

<sup>191</sup> Smith, “Erdogan's War Wounds”.

<sup>192</sup> Ignatius, David, “The New Coalition to Destroy the Islamic State”, *The Washington Post*, 22 May 2016, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-coalition-to-destroy-the-islamic-state/2016/05/22/54d9b466-2036-11e6-aa84-42391ba52c91\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-coalition-to-destroy-the-islamic-state/2016/05/22/54d9b466-2036-11e6-aa84-42391ba52c91_story.html), access date: 17 September 2019.

<sup>193</sup> This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>194</sup> This will be examined in depth in Chapter 5.

YPG with which the Western countries cooperate militarily within the global fight against IS, it constitutes the armed wing of the PYD and is organically linked to this group. It means that the formalization of a military alliance by the US administration with these PKK brands in Syria could have been problematic on legal grounds<sup>195</sup> as the PKK was classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the US State Department.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, a legal formula was invented and put in place in order to bypass this potential setback and the SDF was established. Consequently, the US-led coalition formally armed and equipped the SDF – rather than the YPG – with advanced weaponry and made use of the organization to annihilate IS. This way, the Western coalition could always deny arming the PKK affiliates in Syria. As pointed out concisely by Soner Çağaptay, the director of the Turkish Research Program at *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “the SDF is a fig leaf created by lawyers to ensure that US was not providing weapons to a terror-designated PKK-offshoot YPG in Syria to combat ISIS.”<sup>197</sup>

The second reason for the establishment of the SDF is related to the Turkish concerns about the empowerment of the PKK-linked militants in Northern Syria. As was told earlier in this chapter, Turkey opposed from the very beginning to the partnership starting to develop between the PYD and the US-led coalition after the IS offensive on Kobane launched in September 2014. Turkey’s antagonism to the increasing Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria has remained a constant factor in its foreign policy dealings with the relevant actors of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>198</sup> Turkey’s focus on and obsession with the prevention of a potential PKK proto-state in Syria was so

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<sup>195</sup> Stein, “Partner Operations in Syria”, p. 22.

<sup>196</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”, *U.S. Department of State*.

<sup>197</sup> Çağaptay, Soner (@SonerCagaptay), “The SDF is a fig leaf created by lawyers to ensure that US wasn’t providing weapons to terror-designated PKK-offshoot YPG in Syria to combat ISIS. Ankara’s Syria policy makes little sense when it is cast as Turkey vs. SDF, but becomes crystal clear if it’s framed as Turkey vs PKK”, *Twitter*, 7 October 2019, 7:26, available at: [twitter.com/sonercagaptay/status/1181244418130612224](https://twitter.com/sonercagaptay/status/1181244418130612224), access date: 7 October 2019.

<sup>198</sup> Wilgenburg, Wladimir V., “Kurdish Militia Aims to Connect Kurdish Enclaves in Syria”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 November 2013, available at: [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html), access date: 20 August 2019.

strong and vigorous that Turkey even had to forsake its initial goal of regime overthrow in Syria to that end.

It is because of this Turkish sensitivity that US officials came under an increasing pressure by their Turkish counterparts to terminate the coalition partnership with the YPG after the latter's capture of the city of Tal Abyad in June 2015 giving birth to a Kurdish corridor between Kobane and Qamishli. The abrupt ending of the peace process roughly a month later in July 2015 made it all the more difficult for the coalition to maintain its burgeoning partnership with the YPG in the face of the insistent Turkish demands to drop its Kurdish allies. The establishment of the SDF took place against such a backdrop and was considered an effective measure to alleviate Turkish concerns and mitigate Turkish protests.

The formation of a new umbrella organization incorporating militants from different ethnic and religious backgrounds made it possible for the coalition to deny giving support to the Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria and to “distance itself from the Kurdish cause.”<sup>199</sup> By trying to weaken, at least seemingly, the YPG and therefore the PKK dominance in the struggle against IS by integrating non-Kurdish fighters into the SDF ranks, the Western coalition attempted to assuage Turkish apprehension about the PKK-PYD affiliation and thus, sought to obtain Turkish acceptance – or at least silence – regarding the coalition partnership with the Kurdish militants fighting under the YPG command.

As described by *Spiegel Online*, an influential German news website, the SDF project is only an act of “linguistic acrobatics” performed by the coalition to “skirt” the PKK's terrorist designation and prevent the legitimacy of the anti-IS fight from being delegitimized by the PKK label.<sup>200</sup> In that sense, one could argue that in order to further its interests in the Middle East, the Western coalition copied a PKK strategy:

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<sup>199</sup> Schøtt, Anne S., *The Kurds of Syria. From the Forgotten People to World-Stage Actors* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2017): p. 8.

<sup>200</sup> “Abandoning the Kurds – What the Turkish Invasion Means for Syria”, *Spiegel Online*, 2 February 2018, available at: [spiegel.de/international/world/war-that-won-t-end-no-signs-fighting-will-cease-in-syria-a-1190938.html](https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/war-that-won-t-end-no-signs-fighting-will-cease-in-syria-a-1190938.html), access date: 3 March 2019.

The creation of new brands to overcome legitimacy problems derived from the PKK-PYD affiliation.

As the SDF will further be analyzed in Chapters 3 and 5, only one example each from the BBC and VOA coverage will be provided in order to account for how the SDF was instrumentalized to de-emphasize the PKK-PYD connection. A rather lengthy excerpt cited from a BBC news article written in January 2018 illustrates the vigorous efforts on the part of the British news agency to obscure the YPG connection with the PKK:

Turkey had been threatening to attack the Kurdish-controlled towns of Afrin and Manbij for some time in an attempt to counter a militia called the People's Protection Units (YPG), which it considers a terrorist group. Turkey sees the militia as being an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) [...] The YPG denies any direct military or political links with the PKK. The US also rejects Turkey's portrayal of the militia, a key ally in the battle against Islamic State. The YPG is part of an alliance with a number of ethnic Arab militias called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>201</sup>

As can clearly be seen, the BBC makes a great effort to detach the YPG from the PKK. In this excerpt, several Western media arguments mentioned in this chapter are employed to disguise the PKK-PYD affiliation. At the end of the excerpt, the BBC presents the YPG participation in the SDF alliance as further evidence of the 'PKK-PYD distinction'.

As for VOA, it seeks to distance the anti-IS fight from the PKK by pointing out that it is the SDF that the coalition supports and arms with weapons. A news article issued by the American news agency in February 2018 indicates that the US administration did "not assist the PKK, but support[ed] the Syrian Democratic Forces [...] against Islamic State extremists in Syria."<sup>202</sup> VOA directly points out that the American

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<sup>201</sup> "Turkey Targets Kurdish Forces in Afrin: The Short, Medium and Long Story", *BBC*, 22 January 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42704542>, access date: 25 July 2019.

<sup>202</sup> "Top US General Hears Turkey's Complaints About Kurdish Fighters", *VOA*, 18 February 2017, available at: [voanews.com/europe/top-us-general-hears-turkeys-complaints-about-kurdish-fighters](http://voanews.com/europe/top-us-general-hears-turkeys-complaints-about-kurdish-fighters), access date: 28 July 2019.

support was provided to the SDF and not to the PKK in order to draw a clear distinction between the PKK and the SDF of which the YPG is by far the most dominant component.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

The PYD's lack of international and local legitimacy as a result of its profound relationship with the PKK was "its Achilles heel" before the beginning of the Western partnership with the PYD within the context of the fight against IS.<sup>203</sup> It effectively prevented the group from being sponsored by the West and caused its authority to be questioned by Syrian Kurds in the areas it controlled. In order to become a legitimate actor recognized as such by the international community and to be the true representative of Syrian Kurds, the PYD had to distance itself from the PKK and detach its decision-making from the PKK cadres. It did not bother to do either. Yet it became an internationally accepted organization anyway thanks to the Western media coverage.

Following the change of heart on the part of the US administration towards the PYD after its battle victories against the IS militants, there was a gradual but unswerving discourse change in the BBC and VOA coverage with regard to the PYD's close connection with the PKK. There was a conscious attempt to obscure the links the PYD sustained with its parent organization. It was a vibrant indication of how the shifting allegiances of states and their definition of friends and foes in line with national interests alter the way their media networks cover the incidents. In this case, it was a pro-PYD shift in the BBC and VOA coverage. And the purpose was clear: to prevent the image of the PYD from being marred by the PKK's terrorist label in the eyes of the international community as the group was the latest Western ally in the Middle East that would fight on the West's behalf against the latest Western enemy.

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<sup>203</sup> "Flight of Icarus?", *International Crisis Group*, p. 21.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LEGITIMIZING THE PYD: THE ROLE OF WESTERN MEDIA**

The previous chapter explained how Western media sought to prevent the delegitimization of the PYD by concealing its affiliation with the PKK. This chapter, on the other hand, will dwell on the question of how Western media tried to legitimize the PYD in the eyes of the international community. Firstly, Western media networks created an image of the organization as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds and thus justified the PYD control over the peoples in Northern Syria. Secondly, they sought to legitimize the organization and the Western partnership with it by frequently bringing to the fore the fight conducted jointly against IS. Thirdly and finally, they instrumentalized the SDF to legitimize the PYD control over Syrian Arabs and facilitate the YPG advance in the Arab majority areas of Syria.

#### **3.1. The PYD as the Sole Representative of the Kurds of Northern Syria**

As part of the Western strategy to legitimize the PYD, Western media portrayed the organization as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds as a whole. While doing so, Syrian Kurds under the PYD control were depicted to be a monolithic entity and the 'other' Kurdish parties present in Syria with an alternative claim of representation were deliberately ignored and excluded from the Western media coverage. According to Western media, there was no distinction at all between the PYD and Syrian Kurds and the two were one and the same entity. So, Western media networks equated Syrian Kurds with the PYD in order to make the latter the agents of the former. The objective in mind was loud and clear: to legitimize the PYD and its control over



Syrian Kurds and thus have the new Western ally accepted as a legitimate actor in Northern Syria.

### **3.1.1. Problematization of the Syrian Kurdish Character of the PYD**

Before asking whether or not the PYD is the true representative of the Kurds of Northern Syria, it is necessary to start with the question of whether or not the group is genuinely 'Syrian Kurdish' in the first place. Hence, even the Syrian Kurdish character of the PYD should not be accepted as given and must be put under a thorough investigation.

Although the PYD is a Kurdish organization operating largely<sup>204</sup> in Syrian Kurdish areas, it does not by itself make the group a genuinely Syrian Kurdish entity. The group's extensive relationship with the PKK seems to be the biggest hurdle standing in the way.<sup>205</sup> As has been indicated multiple times now, "the PYD is the PKK's offspring and shares its regional goals."<sup>206</sup> The PYD and the areas it controls in Northern Syria offers the PKK a "strategic depth and inspiration for attacks inside Turkey" in its wider efforts against the Turkish state in Turkey's south-east.<sup>207</sup> The Syrian Kurdish interests are thus subordinated to the broader PKK fight with Ankara and regarded only secondary as part of the overall PKK struggle in the Middle East. Therefore, it is not possible for the PYD to fully serve the interests of the Kurds of Northern Syria when the organization is still controlled by those who are hierarchically subordinate to the PKK leadership in Qandil whose regional goals are

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<sup>204</sup> The group also operated in Iraq's Sinjar mountain. The YPG and the PKK took part in a joint operation against IS in that area located in northwestern Iraq. See: Çiviroğlu, Mutlu, "Interview with YPG Spokesman Polat Can about Yezidi People in Sinjar", *civiroglu.net*, 18 August 2014, available at: [https://civiroglu.net/2014/08/18/p\\_can\\_sinjar](https://civiroglu.net/2014/08/18/p_can_sinjar), access date: 26 June 2019.

<sup>205</sup> Gunter, Michael M., *Out of Nowhere. The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2014): p. 27.

<sup>206</sup> Balanche, Fabrice, "Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 24 August 2016, p. 3, available at: [washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy), access date: 15 February 2019.

<sup>207</sup> Phillips, Christopher, "Turkey's Syria Intervention: A Sign of Weakness not Strength", *Newsweek*, 22 September 2016, available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/turkeys-syria-intervention-sign-weakness-not-strength-501516>, access date: 2 April 2019.

centered on the Kurdish areas of Turkey. Similar phenomena occurred twice in the history of Syrian Kurds. So, two more times in the past, the interests of Syrian Kurds were sacrificed for the Kurdish nationalist agenda in Turkey.

The Kurdish national movement organized under the Khoybun League<sup>208</sup> around the Kurdish elites who were residing in Syria as political exiles from Turkey aimed at establishing an independent Kurdish state within the borders of Turkey.<sup>209</sup> From the 1920s onwards, they started to operate predominantly in Syria to launch an armed rebellion against the Turkish state. However, for them not to lose their operation base in Syria, they had to tread a fine line not to disturb the French authorities who were in control of the Syrian mandate. To that end, they “avoided any territorial claims” on the Syrian Kurdish areas and “underlined the privileges of Kurds of Syria”<sup>210</sup> ‘provided’ by the Syrian state. Consequently, the interests of Syrian Kurds were “sacrificed for the benefit of an autonomous entity in Turkey.”<sup>211</sup>

The exact same thing happened while the PKK used the Syrian soil as its base of operations in the 1980s and 1990s. The PKK made use of the Kurdish areas of Syria as “a breeding ground”<sup>212</sup> for its militants and exploited Syrian Kurdish people as a recruitment pool from which it could enlist combatants to sustain its fight against the Turkish state. As many as 10,000 Syrian Kurds recruited by the PKK at that time are

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<sup>208</sup> The Khoybun (‘being oneself’ in Kurdish) was established in Lebanon in 1927 as a Kurdish nationalist organization. It brought together “Kurdish intellectuals, leaders of tribes, sheikhs and rebel fighters” (Allsopp 2015: 58) with the objective of establishing an independent Kurdish State in the Middle East. The Khoybun League operated mostly in the French Mandate of Syria in cooperation with some French officials and intellectuals as well as the Armenian Dashnak organization. For the detailed history and analysis of the Khoybun League, see: Allsopp, Harriet, *The Kurds of Syria. Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015): pp. 58-61 and Tejel, Jordi, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Berne: Peter Lang SA, 2007): pp. 115-307.

<sup>209</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, p. 58.

<sup>210</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 163.

<sup>211</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 163.

<sup>212</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Syria’s Kurds. History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009): p. 76.

thought to have lost their lives while fighting the Turkish army in the PKK ranks.<sup>213</sup> Besides, while operating in Syria under the auspices of the Syrian regime, the PKK leader Öcalan went to great lengths to keep the regime's backing and went as far as to deny "the existence of Kurdistan in Syria and the existence of a Kurdish problem in Syria."<sup>214</sup> In an interview conducted by the Syrian journalist Nabil al-Mulhim, he argued that Syrian Kurds were all "immigrants" from Turkey who fled "the oppression and violence of the Turkish governments" and refuged in Syria from the 1920s onwards.<sup>215</sup> This is an important indication of how the PKK, the PYD's parent organization, is ready to put the interests of the Kurds of Northern Syria on the back burner and sacrifice their rights for the broader and arguably more important Kurdish struggle taking place in Turkey's south-east.

Today, this is exactly what Syrian Kurds are worried about the most; the denial of their own interests by the PYD for the sake of the PKK's political and military adventures in the region.<sup>216</sup> Taking into consideration the close ties the PKK and the PYD maintained with the Syrian regime and its staunch backers in Tehran since the breakout of the Syrian Civil War,<sup>217</sup> it is more than likely that Kurdish interests in Syria will be denied as before, and the Syrian Kurdish areas will be used once again as a rear base in the wider PKK struggle against Turkey in tandem with the Syrian regime.

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<sup>213</sup> McDowall, David, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004): p. 479.

<sup>214</sup> Ose, Hosheng, "The PKK-Assad Regime Story: Harmony, Discord and Öcalan", *Now News*, 10 April 2015, available at: <http://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565108-the-pkk-assad-regime-story-harmony-discord-and-ocalan>, access date: 9 November 2019.

<sup>215</sup> Ose, "The PKK-Assad Regime Story".

<sup>216</sup> Kaya, Zeynep and Lowe, Robert, "The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship", in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): p. 280.

<sup>217</sup> For a detailed account of how the PKK and the PYD sustained close ties with the Syrian and Iranian regimes during the Syrian Civil War, see: Caves, John, "Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)", *Institute for the Study of War*, 6 December 2012, pp. 10-12, available at: [understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syrian-kurds-and-democratic-union-party-pyd](http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syrian-kurds-and-democratic-union-party-pyd), access date: 17 February 2019.

All these factors mentioned above challenge the Syrian Kurdish character of the PYD and question the legitimacy of the group as the agents of the Kurds of Northern Syria. Therefore, it is naive at best for the BBC and VOA to present the PYD as the legitimate representative of the Syrian Kurdish interests by equating the group with Syrian Kurds in their coverage. However, considering the numerous attempts on their part to legitimize the PYD dominance in Syria, it is more fitting to call what they do a calculated venture to justify the Western partnership with the PYD and have the organization recognized as a legitimate Kurdish actor in Syria in the eyes of the international public.

### **3.1.2. The ‘Other’ Kurdish Parties in Syria and the PYD Dominance**

Contrary to what has been portrayed in the coverage of the BBC and VOA, a sharp distinction must be drawn between the PYD/YPG group and the Kurds of Northern Syria as the latter does not constitute a politically homogenous society at all.<sup>218</sup> There have been many Kurdish political parties operating in the Kurdish areas of Syria long before the PKK militants deployed in the country in the 1980s. The first Kurdish political party founded within the Syrian frontiers was the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) established in 1957 “with the aim of inspiring a mass social movement.”<sup>219</sup> From this year forward, various parties claiming to represent the Syrian Kurdish interests were founded and operated in the Syrian Kurdish political scene. Even though their room to maneuver was extremely constrained by the Syrian regime, they tried to conduct “a strategy of peaceful action”<sup>220</sup> to uphold the rights of Syrian Kurds in the face of the repressive Syrian government. Therefore, vis-à-vis the other Kurdish political parties active in Syria for decades, the PKK and its affiliates in Syria are only the newcomers to the Syrian Kurdish political life.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas, *Suriye Kürdistanı’nda Savaş ve Devrim. Rojava’dan Sesler, Analizler, Sevinç Altınçekiç* (trans.) (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2015): p. 139.

<sup>219</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, p. 48.

<sup>220</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, p. 5.

<sup>221</sup> Caves, “Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)”, p. 4.

Historically, Syrian Kurdish parties were too fragmented to constitute a collective front in Syrian politics<sup>222</sup> and too factionalized to effectively deal with the Syrian regime.<sup>223</sup> However, they came together with the eruption of the Syrian Civil War to counter the rising PYD influence in the Syrian Kurdish areas and to have the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights secured in the event that the regime fell. “In an unprecedented move” in October 2011, Kurdish political parties and many civil society organizations set aside their differences and came together with the aim of “unit[ing] the Kurdish opposition in one bloc and establish[ing] a united and representative Kurdish voice in Syria.”<sup>224</sup> The result was the emergence of the Kurdish National Council (KNC). At first, ten Kurdish political parties participated in the KNC umbrella. In early 2012, this number increased to sixteen.<sup>225</sup>

Considering the traditionally fragmented disposition of Syrian Kurdish politics, the creation of the KNC was a remarkable moment for Syrian Kurds. The KNC positioned itself as the bloc to represent the Kurdish interests in Syria and became an important actor to be the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds.<sup>226</sup> In effect, the West formerly preferred the KNC to the PYD until mid-2014 because of the latter’s connection with the PKK and the Syrian regime.<sup>227</sup> So, at least until the emergence of IS as an imminent threat to Western security, the KNC was seen as the Syrian Kurdish interlocutor and was even invited to the Geneva II conference on Syria in January 2014 getting a significant boost to its international legitimacy and

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<sup>222</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, pp. 477-479.

<sup>223</sup> Phillips, David L., *The Kurdish Spring. A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015): p. 73.

<sup>224</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, p. 178.

<sup>225</sup> Schmidinger, *Suriye Kürdistanı’nda Savaş ve Devrim*, p. 108.

<sup>226</sup> Savelsberg, Eva, “The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather than Driving Forces for Democratization”, in David Romano and Mehmet Gürses (eds.), *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): p. 95.

<sup>227</sup> Kaya and Lowe, “The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship”, p. 281.

visibility.<sup>228</sup> However, after the rapid expansion of IS in Syria, it did not take long for the PYD to gain the favor of the West at the expense of the KNC.

- ❖ **The Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîfî)**
- ❖ **The Kurdistan Democratic Party – Syria (PDK-S)**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Reform Movement – Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Party in Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî)**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdistan Democratic Union Party**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdistan Left Party – Syria**
- ❖ **The Kurdish Future Movement in Syria**
- ❖ **Syrian Yezidi Assembly**
- ❖ **Avant-Garde Party Kurdistan – Syria**

Fig. 2: The Kurdish political parties currently under the KNC umbrella, *Middle East Institute*.<sup>229</sup>

To the detriment of Syrian Kurdish parties, the PKK found itself an opportunity to revive its presence in the Kurdish areas of Syria with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. However, the PKK influence in Syria by dint of its offshoots did not

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<sup>228</sup> “Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria”, *International Crisis Group*, 8 May 2014, p. 15, available at: [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria), access date: 27 January 2019.

<sup>229</sup> Koontz, Kayla, “Borders Beyond Borders: The Many (Many) Kurdish Political Parties of Syria”, *Middle East Institute*, 25 October 2019, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/borders-beyond-borders-many-many-kurdish-political-parties-syria>, access date: 25 August 2019.

rest on popular acceptance by Syrian Kurds. It was basically the shadow of the guns<sup>230</sup> and “a tacit understanding with the regime in Damascus”<sup>231</sup> and its regional sponsors, Russia and Iran throughout the war that allowed the PYD to become the dominant power in the area.<sup>232</sup> The regime withdrew its forces from the Kurdish areas of Syria in July 2012 to focus on the more critical battles in the Syrian heartlands, ceding effectively the control of those areas to the YPG militia.<sup>233</sup> “The stockpiles of arms and ammunition” left by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) for the YPG to claim helped bolster the PYD dominance over the other Kurdish parties.<sup>234</sup>

Besides, “Tehran announced a ceasefire with the PKK’s Iranian wing, PJAK” that served to consolidate the PYD control thanks to the additional PKK fighters which flowed from the Kurdish areas of Iran.<sup>235</sup> The PYD established contacts with the Russians as well. It was with the help of the Russian airstrikes in February 2016 that the YPG was able to capture from the FSA rebels the strategically important Menagh airbase near the Turkish border.<sup>236</sup> So, thanks to the close relationship that the PYD sustained with the counter-revolutionary forces in Syria that the group consolidated its domination and superiority over the KNC.

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<sup>230</sup> Semin, Ali, “Suriye Krizindeki İç Dinamikler: ÖSO-İŞİD-PYD Denklemi”, *Bilgesam*, 23 July 2015, p. 6, available at: [www.bilgesam.org/incele/2140/-suriye-krizindeki-ic-dinamikler--oso-isid-pyd-denklemi/#.XTs7r-gzZPY](http://www.bilgesam.org/incele/2140/-suriye-krizindeki-ic-dinamikler--oso-isid-pyd-denklemi/#.XTs7r-gzZPY), access date: 25 February 2019.

<sup>231</sup> “Who is Salih Muslim, the Syrian Kurdish Leader Wanted by Turkey?”, *DW News*, 9 March 2018, available at: [www.dw.com/en/who-is-salih-muslim-the-syrian-kurdish-leader-wanted-by-turkey/a-42899328](http://www.dw.com/en/who-is-salih-muslim-the-syrian-kurdish-leader-wanted-by-turkey/a-42899328), access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>232</sup> Salih, Cale, “Turkey, the Kurds and the Fight against Islamic State”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 September 2015, p. 5, available at: [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/turkey\\_the\\_kurds\\_and\\_the\\_fight\\_against\\_islamic\\_state4043](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/turkey_the_kurds_and_the_fight_against_islamic_state4043), access date: 3 March 2019.

<sup>233</sup> Savelsberg, “The Syrian-Kurdish Movements”, p. 98.

<sup>234</sup> Caves, “Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)”, p. 5.

<sup>235</sup> “Flight of Icarus?”, *International Crisis Group*, p. 20.

<sup>236</sup> “Kurdish Forces Said to Take Airbase near Turkish Border”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2016, available at: [reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/kurdish-forces-said-to-take-air-base-near-turkishborder-idUSKCN0VK0E8](http://reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/kurdish-forces-said-to-take-air-base-near-turkishborder-idUSKCN0VK0E8), access date: 20 July 2019.

The biggest setback of the other Kurdish political parties organized under the KNC umbrella, on the other hand, was that they have never taken up arms in their political struggle.<sup>237</sup> So, they were devoid of any military power to offset the PYD's rising influence in the area.<sup>238</sup> Consequently, the PYD started to “control everything with weapons”<sup>239</sup> without needing the approval of the Syrian Kurdish society. In line with its PKK heritage of “trying to monopolize the Kurdish political arena,”<sup>240</sup> the PYD began to apply political pressure on its opponents and “sidelined other Syrian Kurdish groups”<sup>241</sup> in an attempt to be the sole power wielder in Syrian Kurdish politics. It refused to work with other Kurdish political parties in the administration and refrained from sharing power with them in order not to lose its monopoly in the area.

The repression that characterized the PYD rule in Syria is well-documented by reports released by various human rights organizations. According to a report published by Amnesty International (AI) in September 2015, the PYD detains the members of the opposition parties “as retribution for peacefully opposing or criticizing the PYD authorities” and “uses the counter-terrorism laws to detain and prosecute Kurdish opposition groups critical of the PYD.”<sup>242</sup> Another report issued by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in June 2014 documented the cases of the PYD's “harassment” of its Kurdish political rivals in which the PYD security forces “arbitrarily detained individuals affiliated to Kurdish opposition political parties.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Izouli, Seve A., “Les Kurdes de Syrie et la résistance de Kobané”, *Civitas Europa*, 34 (2015): p. 137.

<sup>238</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. 164.

<sup>239</sup> Morris, Loveday, “The War for Free Kurdistan”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2012, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/25/the-war-for-free-kurdistan>, access date: 22 July 2019.

<sup>240</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, p. 76.

<sup>241</sup> Wahab, Bilal, “Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds”, in Patrick Clawson (ed.), *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally. Cooperation and Complications* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016): p. 39.

<sup>242</sup> “Syria: Arbitrary Detentions and Blatantly Unfair Trials Mar PYD Fight against Terrorism”, *Amnesty International*, 7 September 2015, available at: [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism), access date: 9 June 2019.

<sup>243</sup> “Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria”, *Human Rights Watch*, 19 June 2014, p. 1, available at: [www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria](https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria), access date: 10 June 2019.



As for the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a non-governmental organization that investigates the violations committed in the Syrian conflict, it published a report in January 2016 that documented in detail and length the most significant human rights violations committed by the PYD and its affiliates. The human rights group indicates in this report that the PYD “violated the International Human Rights Law when it threatened, assaulted, attacked, arrested, killed, and robbed civilians who live under its military authority.”<sup>244</sup> Finally, KurdWatch, “an independent internet portal that reports on human rights abuses against the Kurdish population of Syria,”<sup>245</sup> states in a report released in January 2016 that the PYD “resorts to the exact mechanisms of repression that were already successfully used in the Kurdish areas” which include; “the targeted kidnapping of political opponents, particularly activists critical of the regime,” “the prevention of the entry or the return of critics,” “cooperation with groups and individuals close to the regime” and “the preservation of all power and decision-making authority inside the PYD.”<sup>246</sup> As can be understood from these reports, the PYD has been ruling the Kurdish people under its control with a heavy hand and repressing the opposition parties and activists critical of its authority.

The overall effect of all these authoritarian practices had their toll on the legitimacy of the PYD in the eyes of the Syrian Kurdish community. Its iron-grip control over Syrian Kurdish politics was frowned upon by local Kurds who wanted the group to share power with the KNC parties.<sup>247</sup> The group’s *de facto* alliance with the regime has effectively obstructed its ability “to gain full authority and legitimacy” over

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<sup>244</sup> “The Most Significant Human Rights Violations by Kurdish Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish Self-Management Forces”, *The Syrian Network for Human Rights*, 18 January 2016, p. 21, available at: <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/18/16610>, access date: 10 June 2019.

<sup>245</sup> “About Us”, *KurdWatch*, available at: <https://kurdwatch.ezks.org/?cid=182&z=en>, access date: 9 June 2019.

<sup>246</sup> “Ethnic Cleansing in Tal Abyad: Characteristics of YPG and PYD Rule in the Areas Captured from the IS”, *KurdWatch*, January 2016, pp. 13-14, available at: <https://kurdwatch.ezks.org/?cid=186&z=en>, access date: 9 June 2019.

<sup>247</sup> Caves, “Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)”, p. 10.

Syrian Kurds.<sup>248</sup> The PYD dominance was increasingly seen as an instrument that helped the regime continue controlling the Kurdish areas.<sup>249</sup> The ideology of the PYD was not much popular either among Syrian Kurds<sup>250</sup> who did not believe in Öcalan's philosophy and did not share the group's commitment to his political beliefs.<sup>251</sup> Last but not least, Syrian Kurds were increasingly uneasy about the PKK's direct involvement in Syrian Kurdish politics.<sup>252</sup> All-in-all, although the YPG protected Syrian Kurds from the catastrophe from which Syrian Arabs suffered dearly in the civil war, the group was unable to broaden its base among Kurds of Syria because of its tyrannical tendencies. As a consequence, its claim to representation is highly challenged by the other Kurdish parties operating in the area.

### **3.1.3. Western Recognition of the PYD as the Sole Representative of Syrian Kurds**

Until the emergence of IS as a serious threat to Western security, the PYD was not legitimate either in the eyes of the international community. At a time when the KNC enjoyed international partners and legitimacy,<sup>253</sup> the PYD "lacked an international standing as a political body representing Syrian Kurds."<sup>254</sup> Western governments did not engage with the PYD particularly because of its cooperation with the Syrian regime within the context of the Syrian Civil War and its affiliation with the PKK, a

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<sup>248</sup> Khaddour, Kheder, "How Regional Security Concerns Uniquely Constrain Governance in Northeastern Syria", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 23 March 2017, p. 7, available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/23/how-regional-security-concerns-uniquely-constrain-governance-in-northeastern-syria-pub-68380>, access date: 4 April 2019.

<sup>249</sup> "Flight of Icarus?", *International Crisis Group*, p. 23.

<sup>250</sup> Balanche, "Rojava's Sustainability", pp. 7-9.

<sup>251</sup> Balanche, Fabrice, "The United States in Northeastern Syria", *Hoover Institution*, 17 July 2018, p. 12, available at: [hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria](https://www.hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria), access date: 15 January 2019.

<sup>252</sup> "Flight of Icarus?", *International Crisis Group*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>253</sup> "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", *International Crisis Group*, 22 January 2013, p. iii, available at: [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle), access date: 19 January 2019.

<sup>254</sup> "Syria's Kurds", *International Crisis Group*, p. 21.

terrorist organization recognized as such by most of the Western states. In fact, it was the PYD, rather than the traditional Syrian Kurdish parties, that was considered by the West as the ‘other’ Kurds in Syria. An article published by the BBC on 25 August 2014 – twenty days before the IS offensive on Kobane – refers to the PYD and the YPG as the “other Kurds” while discussing if their backing by the West against IS was possible.<sup>255</sup> So, the PYD was not recognized at that time as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds.

This state of affairs lasted, however, only until the IS offensive on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane. The months-long battle between the YPG and IS turned out to be a significant watershed moment with regard to the Western relationship with the PYD who was gradually considered as the legitimate Syrian Kurdish representative at the expense of the other Kurdish parties. Western media networks including the BBC and VOA were instrumental in having this perception be accepted as reality by the international public. So, they helped the newly acquired Western ally overcome its legitimacy problem by equating it with Kurds of Syria and ignoring the existence of the other Kurdish parties in order not to undermine the PYD claim of representing Syrian Kurds as a whole.

A news article published by the BBC in August 2016 shows explicitly how Syrian Kurds were equated with the YPG militants. The article notes, “Turkey has long insisted that Syrian Kurdish militants [YPG] are an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),” and subsequently adds, “the Syrian Kurds reject the claims.”<sup>256</sup> As can be seen, the YPG is equated completely with the Syrian Kurdish people as if they were represented legitimately by the militant group. Another BBC news article from April 2017 indicates, “Kurdish people living in Syria’s north declared the creation of an autonomous government in areas under their

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<sup>255</sup> “Analysis: Could Support for the 'Other' Kurds Stall Islamic State?”, *BBC*, 25 August 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28925179>, access date: 22 July 2019.

<sup>256</sup> “Turkey Seeks Arrest of Syrian Kurdish Political Leader”, *BBC*, 22 November 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38068008>, access date: 29 April 2019.

control in early 2014.”<sup>257</sup> In effect, this declaration of autonomy was made by the PYD unilaterally without conferring with the KNC parties,<sup>258</sup> let alone getting the approval of the Syrian Kurdish community by means of a referendum or anything of the sort. But, it is striking how the BBC made it look as though it was Syrian Kurds themselves who proclaimed autonomy from the Syrian regime. Yet another indication of how the British media broadcaster makes no distinction between the YPG militants and Syrian Kurds is a news article released in February 2015 on the BBC website with the headline, “Syrian Kurds and rebels advance into IS-held Raqqa province.”<sup>259</sup> The BBC prefers to use the phrase ‘Syrian Kurds’ instead of ‘YPG’, the group conducting the fight against IS, to imply that there was no difference between them.

Not surprisingly, VOA does the same thing in its coverage. An article issued by the American news agency in September 2014 is arguably the most conspicuous example of how reductionist Western media has been in its coverage of the Syrian Kurdish people. The news article states, “such cooperation [of the coalition with the YPG] could prove difficult because of Syrian Kurds’ ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).”<sup>260</sup> This statement does not only equate Syrian Kurds with the YPG but by so doing, also suggests that the Syrian Kurdish people as a whole are tied to the PKK. So, while trying to legitimize the PYD control in Northern Syria, VOA implicates the Syrian Kurdish people directly with a designated terrorist organization. This type of coverage runs the risk of unfairly burdening Syrian Kurds with the PKK label and subverts their struggle for constitutional recognition in the long term. Another news article published by VOA in September 2016 notes that violence had broken out “between Turkish security forces and Syrian Kurds near the border town of

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<sup>257</sup> “Syria War: A Brief Guide to Who’s Fighting Whom”, *BBC*, 7 April 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39528673>, access date: 3 May 2019.

<sup>258</sup> Schmidinger, *Suriye Kürdistanı’nda Savaş ve Devrim*, p. 5.

<sup>259</sup> “Syrian Kurds and Rebels Advance into IS-held Raqqa Province”, *BBC*, 19 February 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31534057>, access date: 7 April 2019.

<sup>260</sup> “IS Attacks Send Thousands of Syrian Kurds Fleeing to Turkey”, *VOA*, 20 September 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/attacks-send-thousands-syrian-kurds-fleeing-turkey](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/attacks-send-thousands-syrian-kurds-fleeing-turkey), access date: 19 May 2019.

Kobane,”<sup>261</sup> and yet another from May 2017 states that it was “likely that any U.S. weaponry supplied to the Syrian Kurds [would] eventually end up in Turkey.”<sup>262</sup> In both articles, the expression ‘Syrian Kurds’ is employed to substitute ‘the YPG militants’ with the implication that there was no difference between the two. So, the BBC and VOA deliberately use the two expressions interchangeably synonymously with the intention of making the PYD the legitimate representative of the Syrian Kurdish interests.

#### **3.1.4. Motives behind the Western Blindness to ‘Other’ Syrian Kurds**

The reporting of Syrian Kurds as such by the BBC and VOA can be considered a reductionist coverage as it simply reduces Kurds of Syria to the YPG militants neglecting completely the other Syrian Kurdish parties organized under the KNC umbrella and the Kurds who support them. The reason why is manifold.

Firstly, it is because of the facility of doing so. Why would those media agencies bother publicizing the PYD rivals and thus add one more dimension to the already complex web of relations and one more actor to the already crowded list of actors active in the Syrian Civil War, especially doing so would undermine the Western interests by giving visibility to the anti-PYD front? So, they pragmatically chose not to refer to the other Kurds of Syria in order not to complicate things any further than they already were and not to create any other challenge to the PYD legitimacy.

Secondly, the BBC and VOA did not cover them intentionally to create an impression of unity in the PYD-held areas of Syria. Factionalism has long been an enduring problem of Kurdish politics.<sup>263</sup> Internal power struggles for dominance between

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<sup>261</sup> “Turkish Forces, Syrian Kurds Clash Over Border Wall”, VOA, 2 September 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkish-forces-syrian-kurds-clash-over-border-wall](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkish-forces-syrian-kurds-clash-over-border-wall), access date: 15 June 2019.

<sup>262</sup> “Trump, Erdogan Avoid Discord Over Kurds in White House Talks”, VOA, 26 May 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/trump-erdogan-avoid-discord-over-kurds-white-house-talks](http://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/trump-erdogan-avoid-discord-over-kurds-white-house-talks), access date: 10 June 2019.

<sup>263</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 90.

different Kurdish groups have always curbed their strengths and weakened the Kurdish cause for autonomy. Perhaps, the most prominent example of this phenomenon is the ongoing schism between the two leading parties of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani tribe and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of the Talabani tribe. The division that started to rage between the two in the 1960s<sup>264</sup> took its toll on the overall Kurdish influence in Iraqi politics. In the mid-90s, the fractures deepened and reached a peak point with the outbreak of the Kurdish Civil War in Northern Iraq. It was then the Americans who acted as mediators between the two parties in an attempt of reconciliation as the internal Kurdish struggle was not serving the American interests in the Iraqi Kurdish areas by causing the Iraqi and Iranian governments to interfere in Kurdish affairs.<sup>265</sup> At that time, the Iraqi Kurdish region was regarded by the United States “as the springboard for its own wider plans.”<sup>266</sup> As for now, for the US to be able to benefit from the PYD in the same way it did from the Iraqi Kurds as the ‘pawns on a chessboard’, it needs a strong and unified Syrian Kurdish front under the PYD banner or at the very least the perception thereof. Therefore, the BBC and VOA portrayed Syrian Kurds as one front united in their aspiration to achieve autonomy and in their strong desire to fight the jihadists.<sup>267</sup> To give an example to such coverage, an article published by VOA in June 2015 attributed the rapid Kurdish advance “to unity among Kurdish factions in Syria.”<sup>268</sup> This portrayal of unity served to promote the perceived image of strength of the PYD and helped bolster the American influence in the region. This image also produced a strong contrast to the rival Free Syrian Army (FSA) who was characterized as a

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<sup>264</sup> Waisy, Karwan S., “The Roots of the Iraqi Kurdish Internal Rivalries, Conflicts and Peace Process: 1964-2000”, *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 15/372 (2015): p. 220.

<sup>265</sup> Waisy, “The Roots of the Iraqi Kurdish Internal Rivalries”, p. 228.

<sup>266</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 390.

<sup>267</sup> “Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State”, *BBC*, 23 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>, access date: 20 April 2019.

<sup>268</sup> “IS Digs Trenches, Cuts Fuel to Syria”, *VOA*, 19 June 2015, available at: [voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/digs-trenches-cuts-fuel-syria](http://voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/digs-trenches-cuts-fuel-syria), access date: 25 May 2019.

“loosely-knit”<sup>269</sup> group devastated by fragmentation and internal struggle for power. Thus, Western media also wished to frustrate the Turkish aspiration for the FSA to be used in lieu of the YPG for the offensive against, Raqqa, the self-declared capital of IS.<sup>270</sup>

Thirdly, referring to the other Kurdish parties in the media coverage would bring with it the obligation to account for the political oppression from which they suffered at the hands of the PYD. The BBC and VOA would have to reveal to the international community how they were eliminated from the Syrian Kurdish political scene through the violent measures carried out by the YPG militia under the supervision of the PYD. This would only damage the ‘democratic’ and ‘pluralistic’ credentials of the PYD constructed diligently by Western media networks.<sup>271</sup>

The fourth reason for the Western media blindness to the other Kurdish parties is about regional Kurdish politics. The Syrian Kurdish parties that are opposed to the PYD rule in Northern Syria have been closely connected with the Kurdish parties of Iraq.<sup>272</sup> The strong relationship between the Kurdish parties of Iraq and Syria has its historical roots and goes back as far as the 1960s. However, there has largely been an asymmetrical relationship between them in which the Iraqi Kurdish parties acted as patrons and the Syrian Kurdish parties as their clients. That’s exactly where the problem starts. Many Kurdish parties in Syria are still supported by the KDP. Masoud Barzani himself played an influential role in the reconciliation effort of the Syrian Kurdish parties and in the process which led to the establishment of the KNC in October 2011.<sup>273</sup> He considers the Syrian Kurdish umbrella organization “as a

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<sup>269</sup> “In Syria, Fluid Loyalties Complicate US Efforts”, VOA, 2 May 2015, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syria-fluid-loyalties-complicate-us-efforts>, access date: 24 July 2019.

<sup>270</sup> “Turkey Wants to See FSA Replace SDF in Raqqa Battle”, *Rudaw*, 21 February 2017, available at: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/21022017>, access date: 24 July 2019.

<sup>271</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 5.

<sup>272</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, pp. 74-77.

<sup>273</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, pp. 192-193.

counterbalance against the PYD and the PKK in Syria.”<sup>274</sup> As a manifestation of the “broader KDP-PKK struggle over the Kurds’ leadership,”<sup>275</sup> Barzani is deeply hostile to the growing PKK control in Northern Syria particularly because the PYD monopolized power and sidelined the pro-KDP Kurdish parties operating there.<sup>276</sup> He wants the Kurds in the Middle East to organize under the KRG leadership as part of his long-standing vision of himself as the pan-Kurdish leader. However, the PKK with its ideology, a well-respected leader among Kurds and recently growing influence in the region seems to be the greatest barrier standing in the way. For that reason, he does not want Syrian Kurds to fall under the influence of the Qandil leadership. What is even more damning for the PKK and its affiliates is that Barzani worked in tandem with President Erdoğan in an effort to curb the PKK power in the region.<sup>277</sup> That’s why giving a voice to the other Kurdish parties in the media coverage would only strengthen the anti-PYD front by increasing the visibility of the PYD’s Syrian Kurdish opponents and create new challenges to the PYD’s legitimacy with the possible outcome that its political power diminishes. The BBC and VOA did not let this happen and ignored the KNC completely.

Last but not least, if the other Kurdish parties were given a voice, there would always be an alternative to the PYD rule. The PYD has many problems of its own that have the potential to crumble its international standing to pieces if these were to be publicized objectively to the international community. Its links with a universally recognized terrorist organization, the problematic record of human rights violations and dubious relationship with the counter-revolutionary forces within the context of the Syrian Civil War are only some of them. The existence of a legitimate Syrian

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<sup>274</sup> Tanır, İlhan, Wilgenburg, Wladimir V. and Hossino, Omar, “Unity or PYD Power Play: Syrian Kurdish Dynamics After the Erbil Agreement”, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 15 October 2012, p. 19, available at: [henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/unity-or-pyd-power-play-syrian-kurdish-dynamics-after-the-erbil-agreement](http://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/unity-or-pyd-power-play-syrian-kurdish-dynamics-after-the-erbil-agreement), access date: 15 January 2019.

<sup>275</sup> “Syria’s Kurds”, *International Crisis Group*, p. 22.

<sup>276</sup> Kaya, Zeynep and Whiting, Matthew, “Sowing Division: Kurds in the Syrian War”, *Middle East Policy*, 24/1 (2017): pp. 86-88.

<sup>277</sup> Şafak, Erdal, “Syria to Top Agenda at Erdogan-Barzani Meeting”, *Al-Monitor*, 15 November 2013, available at: [al-monitor.com/pulse/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/politics/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-meeting-turkey-iraq-syria-pyd.html](http://al-monitor.com/pulse/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/politics/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-meeting-turkey-iraq-syria-pyd.html), access date: 24 July 2019.



Kurdish alternative to the PYD dominance could always challenge the group's legitimacy whenever its infamous characteristics resurface and are reminded to the international public. Therefore, the BBC and VOA deliberately overlooked the existence of the other Syrian Kurdish parties in their coverage and effectively concealed their presence from the notice of the international community.

The Syrian Kurdish parties “never took up arms against” the Syrian regime, choosing the political scene over the military to keep up the struggle for Kurdish rights.<sup>278</sup> So, they had no military power at their disposal to counter their YPG adversaries or to fight against the jihadist groups. This deficiency made it easy for the YPG militants to silence and persecute them with their weapons and exacerbated the Western blindness to their very existence. After all, a group devoid of any military force on the ground would have no real benefit for the Western interests in Syria and could not fight on behalf of the West against jihadists. The PYD was the only armed Kurdish alternative on the ground to fight in the Western battle. Hence, the BBC and VOA did not wish to discredit a Western partner by bothering to publicize its contenders with the potential result of undermining the PYD control and legitimacy in the Syrian Kurdish areas. Therefore, Syrian Kurds were equated with the PYD and the PYD with Syrian Kurds. Other Syrian Kurds were thus disregarded entirely in the Western media coverage. The resulting absence of an alternative to the PYD or more correctly, the unawareness thereof thanks to the selective Western media coverage made the PKK affiliate organization the sole Kurdish actor to represent the Syrian Kurdish interests. The result was the creation of an illusion of representation and a wrongful perception of a unified Kurdish front under the PYD banner. And the PYD reached its objective of gaining legitimacy through Syrian Kurds.

### **3.2. Gaining Legitimacy through Violence: The PYD's Fight against IS**

The IS offensive on Kobane in September 2014 and the successful defense of the town jointly by the YPG and the coalition demonstrated that the Kurdish militia could

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<sup>278</sup> Tejel, Jordi, “Toward a Generational Rupture within the Kurdish Movement in Syria?”, in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening. Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): p. 219.

be “an effective fighting force and a potential partner in the fight against IS.”<sup>279</sup> However, if the coalition was to mobilize the YPG behind the anti-IS cause as the Western proxy, it must have legitimized the group first in the eyes of international public opinion. The YPG militia and its political affiliate, the PYD, were having a legitimacy crisis at the time due to the isolation forced upon them by the international community. Against this backdrop, the fight against IS proved to be an important opportunity for the West to break this isolation and overcome the legitimacy crisis of the PYD. Thus, Western media legitimized the PKK affiliates in Syria and justified the Western partnership with them in frequent reference to the anti-IS fight. So, the PYD would be ‘made’ a legitimate actor in Northern Syria because it was fighting IS alongside the US-led Western coalition.

The IS offensive on Kobane was a blessing for the PYD for many reasons. To begin with, it relieved the group from the isolation from which it suffered for a long time. There was an effective blockade over the group especially by Western governments due to the relationship it maintained with the PKK and the Syrian regime.<sup>280</sup> However, the IS attack on Kobane turned these obscure relations into insignificant small details in the face of the overriding IS threat of expansion in Northern Syria. The IS offensive also granted the group recognition on an international scale thanks to the extensive media coverage. Before the battle of Kobane, there was hardly any mention of the PYD in international media. But during and after the conflict, the Kurds battling in the ranks of the YPG became widely known as the “brave defenders of Kobane”<sup>281</sup> and “honorable fighters”<sup>282</sup> who sacrificed their lives for the protection of their homeland. Moreover, the Kobane attack brought about the beginning of an unwavering Western backing of the YPG in the fight against IS militants. With IS

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<sup>279</sup> “Turkey-PKK Peace Process at Turning Point”, *BBC*, 12 November 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30000969>, access date: 26 July 2019.

<sup>280</sup> Caves, “Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)”, pp. 10-11.

<sup>281</sup> “ISIL Hopes Undermined By Kobane Loss”, *VOA*, 28 January 2015, available at: [editorials.voa.gov/a/isil-hopes-undermined-kobane-loss/2617270.html](http://editorials.voa.gov/a/isil-hopes-undermined-kobane-loss/2617270.html), access date: 28 July 2019.

<sup>282</sup> “Kurds Pay Tribute to 'Hero' Erik Scurfield on Anniversary of Death”, *BBC*, 5 March 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-39172425>, access date: 28 July 2019.

posed to expand its control into the Kurdish areas of Syria, previous Western reservations about assisting the group were put aside and the US-led coalition launched a campaign of airstrikes in support of the YPG militants defending the town of Kobane.

But of all the benefits reaped from the IS offensive on Kobane, the opportunity to be a legitimate actor in Syria in the eyes of the international community was perhaps the most valuable for the PYD since legitimacy was what the group needed the most in order to be taken seriously in international arena and for the gains it had made up until then to be meaningful. Therefore, the PYD sought to gain “international recognition and legitimacy” through the fight it conducted against IS militants.<sup>283</sup> The IS group was a universally loathed terrorist organization that was waging a bloody campaign of terror in the world. By embracing the international cause of combatting against this terrorist group, the PYD hoped to become a legitimate actor in Syria recognized as such by the international community.<sup>284</sup>

Western countries, especially the United States shared the same aspiration regarding the PYD’s legitimacy. IS represented a “preeminent terrorist threat” for the United States and its allies.<sup>285</sup> So, British, French and American troops worked side by side with the YPG militants to eliminate this threat to Western security since the battle of Kobane.<sup>286</sup> But if the West was to establish a lasting partnership with the PYD, the group had to be a legitimate actor in the eyes of the international community. To that end, the anti-IS fight was regarded as the most suitable instrument by PYD propagandists and Western media networks alike in dealing with the legitimacy

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<sup>283</sup> Wahab, “Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds”, p. 43.

<sup>284</sup> Schøtt, Anne S., *The Kurds of Syria. From the Forgotten People to World-Stage Actors* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2017): p. 8.

<sup>285</sup> Clapper, James R., “Statement For the Record. Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community”, *Senate Armed Services Committee*, 9 February 2016, p. 4, available at: [armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper\\_02-09-16.pdf](https://armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper_02-09-16.pdf), access date: 29 July 2019.

<sup>286</sup> Stein, Aaron, “Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 February 2017, p. 3, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/report/reconciling-us-turkish-interests-northern-syria>, access date: 10 April 2019.

problem of the group. After all, it was IS that was described at the time as the “common enemy” of the world.<sup>287</sup> Any organization or group fighting IS would only be struggling for the good of humanity and be automatically endorsed by the world community. Being aware of this, Western media networks were quick to act to benefit from this window of opportunity by launching a pro-PYD media campaign along with some pro-Kurdish academic circles which intended to portray the Kurds as the “main bulwark against Islamic extremism in Syria”<sup>288</sup> and “the only secular force”<sup>289</sup> available on the ground “with the commitment and capabilities to confront Islamic State fighters.”<sup>290</sup> The BBC and VOA took part in this campaign as well and tried to legitimize the group with reference to its being an important part of the struggle against the extremists in Syria. The result was “a wave of solidarity with the Kurdish community on an international scale.”<sup>291</sup>

There are many examples as to how the BBC and VOA benefitted from the anti-IS fight conducted in Syria by the PYD in the quest to legitimize the organization and its partnership with the West. A news article published by the BBC in July 2015 points out that the YPG and the PYD were “among the few reliable partners [the Americans] had on the ground in the struggle against IS.”<sup>292</sup> Another news article issued by the BBC in February 2016 notes, “Turkey views the YPG [...] as allied to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party. But Washington perceives the YPG and the

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<sup>287</sup> “UK: We Share 'Common Enemy' with Assad but won't Help him”, *Middle East Eye*, 20 August 2014, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/uk-we-share-common-enemy-assad-wont-help-him-126703293>, access date: 28 July 2019.

<sup>288</sup> “YPG Commander: Kurds are Bulwark Against Islamic Extremism in Syria”, *Kurdish Institute*, undated, available at: <https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/ypg-commander-kurds-are-bulwark-against-islamic-extremism-in-syria-mutlu-civiroglu>, access date: 28 July 2019.

<sup>289</sup> Schmidinger, *Suriye Kürdistanı'nda Savaş ve Devrim*, p. 242.

<sup>290</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. 217.

<sup>291</sup> Resch, Eva M., “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 17/24 (2017): p. 9.

<sup>292</sup> “Kurdish Peace 'Impossible' – Turkey's Erdogan”, *BBC*, 28 July 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33689660>, access date: 29 July 2019.

PYD as the only effective force against IS on the ground.”<sup>293</sup> One last BBC news article written in August 2016 states that the YPG was “widely regarded as one of the most effective forces” in the anti-IS struggle and that the militia “gained the trust of Turkey’s international allies.”<sup>294</sup> As can be understood from the statements cited above, the BBC sought to legitimize the PYD by portraying the organization as the only reliable ally and the most effective partner on the ground who played a key role in the fight against IS.

VOA follows suit and instrumentalizes the PYD engagement in the anti-IS fight as a tool to legitimize the organization. A news article published by VOA in February 2016 notes that in spite of Turkish protests, the United States did “not consider the YPG a terrorist group” but a “useful ally in the fight against Islamic State.”<sup>295</sup> Another VOA news article from May 2017 indicates, “Turkey views the YPG as the Syrian extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK” and adds, “the United States regards the YPG as a valuable partner in the fight against Islamic State militants in Northern Syria.”<sup>296</sup> So, by often reminding the audience of the PYD participation in the anti-IS efforts and depicting the organization as a valuable and useful American ally, VOA tries to legitimize the PYD and its partnership with the West in the eyes of international public opinion.

Besides, in relation to the argument defended in Chapter 2 that was about the Western media effort to downplay the PKK-PYD connection, the anti-IS fight conducted by the PYD is also utilized by Western media as a tool to detach the group from the PKK and used as a shield for protection from the Turkish allegations about the PKK-PYD

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<sup>293</sup> “Syria Conflict: Why Azaz is so Important for Turkey and the Kurds”, *BBC*, 18 February 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35595023>, access date: 29 July 2019.

<sup>294</sup> “Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State”, *BBC*.

<sup>295</sup> “Obama Discusses Syrian Security Issues with Turkey's Erdogan”, *VOA*, 19 February 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/europe/obama-discusses-syrian-security-issues-turkeys-erdogan](http://www.voanews.com/europe/obama-discusses-syrian-security-issues-turkeys-erdogan), access date: 30 July 2019.

<sup>296</sup> “US Starts Providing Weapons to Syrian Kurds”, *VOA*, 30 May 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/us-starts-providing-weapons-syrian-kurds](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/us-starts-providing-weapons-syrian-kurds), access date: 30 July 2019.

affiliation. As is clear from the news articles cited above, whenever the BBC or VOA refer to the Turkish claims that accuse the PYD of being linked with the PKK, the group's participation in the anti-IS fight is pointed out before or after in response. So, the value and effectiveness of the PYD in the anti-IS fight are not only employed to legitimize the organization but also to downplay its affiliation with the PKK. The purpose of such an editorial strategy is evident: to vitiate the negative effects of the bad publicity caused by the Turkish accusations that are likely to taint the image of the PYD and to dismiss these accusations by reminding the audience of the group's indispensable involvement in the overriding fight against IS.

During the time period analyzed in this thesis (2014-2018), Turkey tried hard to delegitimize the PYD and its alliance with the Western coalition. The West, on the other hand, sought to dismiss or at least downplay the Turkish accusations against the PYD and tried to legitimize the group with reference to its conducting an anti-IS struggle in Syria. It was a fight of words and what was at stake was the legitimacy of the PYD. In this fight, the BBC and VOA appeared determined to have the PYD recognized as a legitimate actor in Syria in the eyes of the international community. While doing so, one of the most recurrent arguments they employed was the PYD's taking part in the fight against IS alongside the US-led anti-IS coalition. At the end of the day, as was indicated on *Twitter* by Aliza Marcus, a Washington-based expert on the PKK and Kurds, "they [PYD] *did* gain legitimacy thru the fight against ISIS."<sup>297</sup>

### **3.3. The Syrian Democratic Forces: A Tool to Legitimize the PYD**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the SDF was established in October 2015 mainly because the coalition needed to mask the PKK-PYD affiliation and "assuage

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<sup>297</sup> Marcus, Aliza (@AlizaMarcus), "They did gain legitimacy thru the fight against ISIS. Which is one reason why Turkey wanted to push into Rojava - to break YPG military & political gains and end relationship with US", *Twitter*, 16 November 2019, 11:15, available at: <https://twitter.com/AlizaMarcus/status/1195797501376380928>, access date: 17 November 2019.

Turkish concerns” over the Western partnership with the PYD.<sup>298</sup> In addition to these motives and as connected with the Western efforts to legitimize the PYD, the third reason for the establishment of the SDF was the integration of Arab militias into the umbrella group and thus the creation of an Arab-Kurdish alliance. Syrian Arabs were not sympathetic to Syrian Kurds in general and the PYD in particular. So, by incorporating Arabs into the ranks of the new organization and thus diluting the Kurdish dominance within the anti-IS ground troops, the coalition wanted the SDF to be a legitimate organization in the eyes of Syrian Arabs. More importantly for the research question of this thesis, Western media instrumentalized the SDF as a tool to legitimize the PYD by arguing that the Kurdish group was working together with Syrian Arabs in the struggle against IS and that the Arab majority areas captured by the SDF would be governed by an Arab-Kurdish coalition.

Before diving into how the BBC and VOA sought to legitimize the PYD through the SDF alliance, it is essential to analyze briefly the past and present of Arab-Kurdish relations in Syria. The antagonism between Arabs and Kurds in Syria is not a recent phenomenon. For decades, the relationship between these two ethnic groups has been one of antipathy, if not outright hostility. There are many factors that contributed to the emergence and consolidation of such a phenomenon which goes a long way back to the early years of the French Mandate of Syria. It was indeed the French authorities who provoked Arab-Kurdish frictions in the first place to “weaken the Sunni Arab majority”<sup>299</sup> by implementing a strategy of divide and rule in Syria via “playing on the rivalry [...] between ethnic and religious minorities and Sunni Arabs.”<sup>300</sup> As was the case with other minorities, Kurds of Syria were privileged by French officials at the cost of marginalizing the Sunni Arab majority.

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<sup>298</sup> Stein, Aaron, “The Washington-Ankara Disconnect”, *War on the Rocks*, 4 November 2016, available at: [warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-washington-ankara-disconnect](http://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-washington-ankara-disconnect), access date: 28 October 2019.

<sup>299</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 468.

<sup>300</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, p. 16.

Syrian domestic politics was another factor conducive to the Arab-Kurdish animosity. Since the 1950s, the Syrian State sought to cultivate an image of Syrian Kurds as “the internal enemy” or “the enemy within.”<sup>301</sup> The propaganda fostered by the successive Syrian governments against the Kurdish minority to gain popularity among and strengthen internal cohesion within the Arab majority made things all the worse in terms of the Arab-Kurdish dynamics. Besides, the important role played by the Kurdish troops in suppressing the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925 alongside the French forces<sup>302</sup> and the involvement of the Kurdish factions of the Syrian Army in brutally crushing the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama in 1982<sup>303</sup> left deep scars in the collective Arab psyche at the expense of Syrian Kurds.

Last but not least, the political developments that occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century had their share of impact on the current state of affairs. The Qamishli revolt that broke out in 2004 as a result of the violent clashes that took place between Kurds and Arabs at a football match was the first major incident to that effect.<sup>304</sup> Then, everything came to a head after the eruption of the Arab uprisings in Syria in March 2011. While the Arab opposition was on the streets facing the regime violence, the reluctance of the traditional Syrian Kurdish parties to participate in demonstrations and their predilection to stay on the sidelines were met with disapproval by the former. The YPG takeover of the Kurdish areas after the regime retreat further exacerbated the already tense situation. The YPG’s crackdown on the revolutionary protests in the areas under its control,<sup>305</sup> its “tacit understanding”<sup>306</sup> and occasional explicit

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<sup>301</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, pp. 56-61.

<sup>302</sup> Khoury, Philip S., “Syrian Urban Politics in Transition: The Quarter of Damascus during the French Mandate”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16/4 (1984): p. 526.

<sup>303</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 477.

<sup>304</sup> “The Kurds’ Quest for Independence: 1920-2019”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, undated, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/kurds-quest-independence>, access date: 17 September 2019.

<sup>305</sup> “What does the Syrian Kurdish Opposition Want: Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil”, *KurdWatch*, Report 9 (September 2013): pp. 16-18, available at: <https://kurdwatch.ezks.org/?cid=186&z=en>, access date: 21 June 2019.



cooperation with the pro-Assad forces and finally, the YPG attempt to ethnic cleansing by “forced displacement and destruction of homes”<sup>307</sup> in the Arab majority town of Tal Abyad in June 2015 all frustrated Arab citizens of Syria, especially those suffering from the regime violence. In short, there was no love lost between the Arab and Kurdish societies of Syria. The SDF was founded against such a backdrop as an Arab-Kurdish coalition.

In light of the brief account given above with regard to the former and current state of affairs between the Arabs and Kurds of Syria, it is easier to understand what the US-led coalition sought to achieve with the establishment of the SDF. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for the Kurdish YPG militants to hold on to the Arab majority areas of Syria they captured from IS as they lacked the legitimacy needed to administer these areas. By incorporating tribal Arab militias into the newly created umbrella organization, the US-led coalition sought to legitimize the PYD by getting the local Arabs to accept the PYD authority<sup>308</sup> and tried to assuage the Arab worries about “the rapidly expanding territory under Kurdish control.”<sup>309</sup> So, the new entity would dispel the local concerns associated with the rising Kurdish dominance at the expense of the Arabs, more easily earn the trust of the Arab population and by “reliev[ing] pressure on the YPG”, could “facilitate further YPG advance.”<sup>310</sup>

As can clearly be seen, the establishment of the SDF constitutes an important milestone in the course of the legitimization of the PYD by the Western coalition.

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<sup>306</sup> “Exclusive: Syrian Kurdish YPG Says Raqqa Attack to Start in Early April”, *Reuters*, 17 March 2017, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-exclusive/exclusive-syrian-kurdish-ypg-says-raqqa-attack-to-start-in-early-april-idUSKBN16O218](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ypg-exclusive/exclusive-syrian-kurdish-ypg-says-raqqa-attack-to-start-in-early-april-idUSKBN16O218), access date: 24 September 2019.

<sup>307</sup> “We Had Nowhere Else to Go: Forced Displacement and Demolition in Northern Syria”, *Amnesty International*, 13 October 2015, p. 23, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en>, access date: 25 April 2019.

<sup>308</sup> Clawson, Patrick, “U.S. Policy and the PYD”, in Clawson, *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally*, p. 55.

<sup>309</sup> Stein, “Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria”, p. 4.

<sup>310</sup> Barfi, Barak, “Ascent of the PYD and the SDF”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 2016, p. 2, available at: [washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ascent-of-the-pyd-and-the-sdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ascent-of-the-pyd-and-the-sdf), access date: 15 February 2019.

Western media networks greatly helped this coalition initiative to accomplish its objectives by covering the SDF in a way compatible with the coalition narrative. The BBC and VOA played a key role in this Western media effort.

As was discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the SDF was made up of not only Kurdish and Arab militants but also of Christian, Armenian and Turkmen fighters. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, this multiethnic and multireligious character of the SDF was significantly emphasized by Western media to portray the organization as a democratic, pluralist and diverse entity. However, in line with the coalition objectives of facilitating the YPG advance in the Arab majority areas captured from IS and showing to the international community that the Arab territories of Syria were being captured and administered by a joint Arab-Kurdish force, the BBC and VOA modified their discourse regarding the components of the SDF. So, during the SDF operations against IS in the Arab majority areas of Syria, they started to report that the SDF comprised Arab and Kurdish militias and the other ethnic and religious elements of the umbrella organization were thus ignored in the coverage.

A few examples from the BBC and VOA coverage will clarify this editorial policy. When the BBC reported on the SDF advance towards the Arab majority town of Manbij, it was “the US-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters”<sup>311</sup> within the SDF that carried out the offensive in June 2016. When the town was captured in August 2016, the BBC celebrated the SDF victory by declaring that “the US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters” seized the IS-held Syrian town.<sup>312</sup> The same editorial policy was pursued by the BBC before and after the SDF offensive on the Arab majority city of Raqqa. So, it was again “a US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters” which had “launched an offensive to capture the jihadist group’s stronghold

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<sup>311</sup> “Syria Conflict: US-backed Fighters Advance on IS-held Manbij”, *BBC*, 1 June 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36423822>, access date: 20 September 2019.

<sup>312</sup> “Syrian Rebels Seize Key Town Manbij from IS”, *BBC*, 6 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36995759>, access date: 20 September 2019.

of Raqqa”<sup>313</sup> and a Kurdish militia and “several Arab factions” that took the city from the IS extremists.<sup>314</sup>

As for VOA, its coverage of the SDF offensives on the Arab majority areas also underlines the Arab-Kurdish character of the organization and ignores the existence of factions from other ethnic and religious backgrounds. A news article published by VOA in May 2017 during the isolation phase of the Raqqa offensive indicates that the SDF was “an alliance of Kurdish and Arab forces that ha[d] driven IS militants from large swaths of land in northern Syria.”<sup>315</sup> Another news article published by VOA in July 2017 during the battle of Raqqa notes that “the Arab armed groups allied with the Kurdish YPG [...] along with several other local militias” formed the SDF alliance.<sup>316</sup> In light of the statements cited from the BBC and VOA websites, it can clearly be seen that the Turkmen, Assyrian, Armenian and Christian elements of the SDF were not mentioned in the news articles reporting on the offensives carried out by the SDF against the Arab majority areas. Conversely, there was a particular emphasis on the participation of the Arab militias in these offensives. The reason why is quite clear: to demonstrate to the international community that the Syrian Arab territories were being seized by a force incorporating Arabs into its ranks and that those areas would be administered jointly by an Arab-Kurdish alliance after their capture.

There was also a special focus on the Arab-Kurdish cooperation. A VOA news article written in September 2017 draws attention to the solidarity formed between Arabs and Kurds within the SDF in the fight against the IS group. The article states that the

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<sup>313</sup> “Raqqa: Syrian Kurdish-led Forces Launch Offensive on IS Capital”, *BBC*, 6 June 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40171406>, access date: 20 September 2019.

<sup>314</sup> “Raqqa: IS ‘Capital’ Falls to US-backed Syrian Forces”, *BBC*, 17 October 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41646802>, access date: 20 September 2019.

<sup>315</sup> “Kurdish Militia Says US Arms Will Hasten Assault on IS-held Raqqa”, *VOA*, 10 May 2017, available at: [voanews.com/extremism-watch/kurdish-militia-says-us-arms-will-hasten-assault-held-raqqa](http://voanews.com/extremism-watch/kurdish-militia-says-us-arms-will-hasten-assault-held-raqqa), access date: 20 September 2019.

<sup>316</sup> “Kurdish Officials: Turkish Movements in N. Syria Threaten Raqqa Operation”, *VOA*, 6 July 2017, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/kurdish-officials-turkish-movements-n-syria-threaten-raqqa-operation>, access date: 20 September 2019.

fighters from these two ethnic groups were “working side by side” in the anti-IS struggle united in their common “personal grudge against the Islamic State group.”<sup>317</sup> It goes on to indicate that the SDF had “proven a startling success in bringing together Kurds and Arabs.”<sup>318</sup> As understood from these statements cited from the VOA article, the American news agency underlines the ‘seemingly’ friendly relations between Arabs and Kurds and thus, attempts to downplay the deep-seated tensions existing between these two Syrian societies. So, Western media sought to legitimize the PYD group with reference to its being a part of the Kurdish-Arab alliance that operated in Northern Syria as the Western partner on the ground in the struggle against IS.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

As a result of the alliance established by the West and the PYD, the latter began to serve the Western interests in Syria by bearing the brunt of the fight against IS. However, for this partnership with a ‘dubious’ organization such as the PYD to be justified and legitimate, it was vital for the group to be legitimized in the eyes of the international community with the contribution of Western media networks. As understood from the discussions made in this chapter, Western media, the BBC and VOA in particular, made a great effort to promote the local and international legitimacy of the PKK-linked organizations. By means of resorting to various discourses and arguments, the BBC and VOA sought to have the PYD recognized as a legitimate actor in Northern Syria. As part of this media campaign, the BBC and VOA portrayed the PYD as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds, brought to the fore the key role played by the group in the anti-IS fight and used the Arab-Kurdish alliance engendered by the SDF as a source of legitimacy for the PYD.

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<sup>317</sup> “Arabs, Kurds Unite Against IS, But Post-Victory? God Knows”, VOA, 3 September 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/arabs-kurds-unite-against-post-victory-god-knows](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/arabs-kurds-unite-against-post-victory-god-knows), access date: 18 September 2019.

<sup>318</sup> “Arabs, Kurds Unite Against IS”, VOA.

## CHAPTER 4

### SYRIAN KURDS: FROM VICTIMS TO “ONLY EFFECTIVE FORCE”<sup>319</sup>

In the quest of promoting the international standing of Syrian Kurds in order to legitimize the PYD and the anti-IS fight, one of the primary strategies followed by Western media was the construction of new Kurdish images or bolstering the already existing ones. Since the battle of Kobane, it was the victim image of Kurds that was employed the most recurrently to garner international sympathy for the Kurdish struggle against IS and pave the groundwork for a full-fledged Western intervention in Syria. In addition, to overcome the legitimacy crisis of the PYD among the international community, Syrian Kurds were portrayed as rebels opposing the Assad regime and the YPG as the only effective and capable force on the ground that can defeat IS with the assistance from the US-led coalition. Before diving into this Western media initiative in detail, it will be illustrative to provide historical precedence as to how the West portrayed Kurds to the international public in the past. It will show that the promotion of the standing of Kurds is a historical Western practice frequently carried out by the West in accordance with the Western interests in the Middle East.

#### 4.1. Western Representations of Kurds

With the growing appetite of Western imperialist powers for the Orient in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the geostrategic value of the territories under the control of the Ottoman

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<sup>319</sup> “Syria Conflict: Why Azaz is so Important for Turkey and the Kurds”, *BBC*, 18 February 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35595023>, access date: 29 July 2019.

Empire increased accordingly. While the Ottomans were gradually weakening and falling behind the West in terms of military and economic capabilities, the European powers became more interested in the Ottoman areas, regarding them “a potential object of expansion and penetration.”<sup>320</sup> One of the strategies pursued by the West to grab hold of these areas was “the moral enhancement of some ethnic groups” within the empire at the expense of others in line with the interests of European imperialists.<sup>321</sup> That’s why Western diplomats, military officers, merchants, civil servants, and missionaries systematically collected information about the Kurds living under the Ottoman rule in an effort “characterized by the intertwining of science and religion with economic interests.”<sup>322</sup> Western orientalist also started to take an interest in Kurds, their characteristic qualities and image in the eyes of Western public opinion for similar reasons.

Even though the portrayal of Kurds by travelers and official envoys in Kurdish areas was generally in negative terms before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this would change with the infiltration of British spies into the region from the First World War onwards.<sup>323</sup> The political ambitions of Great Britain in Mesopotamia and Persia during the mandatory period required that the image of Kurds be enhanced in the eyes of British public opinion.<sup>324</sup> Kurds could be an important ally for the British in the Middle East and might be used as political and military leverage, especially against the Iraqi central government in the 1920s. Therefore, the British worked hard at that time to cultivate a positive Kurdish image for public consumption so that when the time arrived, the British public would consent an alliance with Kurds. Almost a century later, the Iraq War in 2003 vindicated this prophecy.

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<sup>320</sup> Galletti, Mirella, “Western Images of the Woman’s Role in Kurdish Society”, in Mojab Shahrzad (ed.), *Women of a Non-State Nation. The Kurds* (California: Mazda Publishers, 2001): p. 209.

<sup>321</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Berne: Peter Lang SA, 2007): p. 205.

<sup>322</sup> Galletti, “Western Images of the Woman’s Role in Kurdish Society”, p. 209.

<sup>323</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 205.

<sup>324</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 205.

When the French were given the mandate of Syria in the Conference of San Remo held in Italy in April 1920,<sup>325</sup> they set out to implement the same scheme as their British predecessors in order to establish a strategic alliance with the Kurds of Northern Syria. However, the French public was “very poorly enlightened” about Kurds and their characteristics.<sup>326</sup> Moreover, what was little known about them mostly comprised negative stereotypes and a vague memory of “the sad role” they played in the Armenian massacres.<sup>327</sup> However, with the help of French Kurdologues such as Roger Lescot, Pierre Rondot, Thomas Bois, and the Russian Orientalist Basil Nikitin, the unfavorable stereotypes that the Kurdishness evoked in Western thinking such as Kurdish primitiveness and Kurdish fanaticism were attempted to be erased in a bid to cleanse the label of ‘the Kurd’ from negative connotations and then, a favorable Kurdish image was invented in their stead during and after the French Mandate of Syria.<sup>328</sup> Kurds were henceforth attributed “unadulterated, authentic, and noble qualities” lost in the modern world.<sup>329</sup> They were also granted some significant positive features to distinguish the ‘Kurdish nation’ from the other ethnicities of the Middle East. They were characterized as hospitable, frank, strong and tireless people who loved their land, kept their promises, showed affection for their elderly and gave a special place to women in society.<sup>330</sup>

This new discourse employed by the British and French in order to produce a brand new Kurdish image was indeed intended to gain the sympathy of the Western public in favor of Kurds. Within the context of the “policy of fostering minority identity,”<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Ministère des Affaires Etrangères – Commission des Archives Diplomatiques, *Documents diplomatiques français: 10 Janvier 1920 – 31 Décembre 1921* (Paris: Peter Lang, 2005): p. 181.

<sup>326</sup> Nikitin, Basil, “Quelques observations sur les Kurdes”, *Mercure de France*, 543 (1921): p. 662, available at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k201882n/f1.item>, access date: 20 October 2019.

<sup>327</sup> Nikitin, “Quelques observations sur les Kurdes”, p. 662.

<sup>328</sup> Strohmeier, Martin, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (Leiden: Brill, 2003): p. 151.

<sup>329</sup> Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity*, p. 152.

<sup>330</sup> Bois, Thomas, *The Kurds [Les Kurdes]* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966): pp. 19-58.

<sup>331</sup> McDowall, David, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004): p. 468.

Kurds were regarded at that time by the mandatory powers as valuable leverage to be used against the central governments in Damascus and Baghdad as well as a card to be exploited when necessary in order to maintain influence in the Middle East. Thus, Britain and France wished to improve the Kurds' standing in the eyes of the Western community by constructing various Kurdish images.<sup>332</sup>

Within the context of the fight against IS, the West has put into play a similar scheme once again through media since the fall of 2014. By means of creating new Kurdish images or bolstering the ones already available thanks to Western Kurdologues and orientalist, Western media sought to promote the label of 'the Kurd' since Kurds have become the latest Western allies in the Middle East.

#### **4.2. Syrian Kurds as 'Worthy' Victims**

The Kurdish victimhood was one of the most recurrent rhetoric that the Western press employed in the coverage of the Kurds of Northern Syria. When the offensive on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane was launched by IS in September 2014, Western media was ready to use the incident "as an opportunity to show solidarity with the Kurds."<sup>333</sup> The Western discourse was then built on the Kurdish victimhood. So, the BBC and VOA would seek to garner sympathy for Syrian Kurds by depicting them as the latest victim of the IS brutality. As soon as IS militants launched their offensive on Kobane, Western media networks were awash with striking images and videos of Syrian Kurds suffering from the effects of the IS offensive. There was a conscious effort on the part of Western media to cultivate a portrayal of Kurds as victims in the eyes of the international community.

In this context, it seems useful to refer to Herman and Chomsky's concepts of "worthy victims" and "unworthy victims". These two scholars invented this dichotomization to indicate the differential treatment of the US mass media towards

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<sup>332</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, pp: 205-207.

<sup>333</sup> "Islamic State: What has Kobane Battle Taught us?", *BBC*, 16 January 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29650588>, access date: 31 July 2019.



victims based solely “on political and economic advantage rather than anything like actual worth.”<sup>334</sup> The strategy is simply to “concentrate on the victims of enemy powers and forget about the victims of friends.”<sup>335</sup> In essence, victims become worthy when the detailed coverage thereof benefits the US national interests and unworthy when it does not. So, there is a sharp difference between the coverage of worthy and unworthy victims. “Worthy victims will be featured prominently and dramatically” and “they will be humanized.”<sup>336</sup> Their stories will be told in greater detail and in a way that will appeal to readers’ emotions and evoke sympathy in them towards victims. As for unworthy victims, their stories will include much lesser detail, little humanization and no statement that could arouse emotion in readers.<sup>337</sup>

According to this dichotomization produced by Herman and Chomsky, it is beyond any doubt that the Kurds of Northern Syria were regarded as ‘worthy’ victims by Western media. That is because their extensive coverage in mass media would serve the US and European interests in the Middle East firstly because they were fighting alongside the US-led coalition in the anti-IS struggle and secondly, they were the victims of IS, an enemy of the West. That is why their plight and suffering were covered in detail by Western media networks.

Many videos and visual images were issued by Western media to demonstrate to their viewers the extent of the damage given by the IS militants to the town of Kobane.<sup>338</sup> A lot of videos were produced that displayed Kurdish civilians – mostly women and children – on the run to “escape north across the Turkish border to get away from

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<sup>334</sup> Herman, Edward S., “The Propaganda Model Revisited”, *Monthly Review*, 69/8 (2018): p. 46.

<sup>335</sup> Chomsky, Noam and Herman, Edward S., *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988): p. 32.

<sup>336</sup> Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 35.

<sup>337</sup> Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 35.

<sup>338</sup> “Kobane: Street After Street in Ruins”, *BBC*, 2 December 2014, available at: [bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-30287381/kobane-street-after-street-in-ruins](http://bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-30287381/kobane-street-after-street-in-ruins), access date: 2 August 2019 and “Kobani Reduced to Rubble Following Kurdish Ouster of IS Militants”, *VOA*, 28 January 2015, available at: [voanews.com/episode/kobani-reduced-rubble-following-kurdish-ouster-militants-3686036](http://voanews.com/episode/kobani-reduced-rubble-following-kurdish-ouster-militants-3686036), access date: 2 August 2019.

Islamic State fighters” with their belongings and sometimes children on their backs.<sup>339</sup> Dramatic stories of the Kurdish refugees sheltering in Turkey were told to show to the world the pain and suffering they were forced to endure.<sup>340</sup> All these efforts were part of an information campaign conducted by Western media with the purpose of producing an image of Syrian Kurds as – worthy – victims. Such coverage would serve to facilitate the justification of the Western intervention in Syria since the West could argue that the coalition was conducting the anti-IS fight also because of humanitarian reasons, i.e. to save the victim Kurds.



**Fig. 3: Kurdish civilians from Kobane, mostly women and children, cross into Turkey, *TIME*.<sup>341</sup>**

The attempt to create a Kurdish image of victimhood was not limited solely to visual materials. Especially during the siege of Kobane, there were many claims included in the news articles about a possible massacre or even genocide of the Kurds living in Kobane in the event that it fell to its attackers. A news article published by VOA

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<sup>339</sup> “Kurdish Refugees: The World has Closed its Eyes”, *BBC*, 22 September 2014, available at: [bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-29316485/kurdish-refugee-the-world-has-closed-its-eyes](https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-29316485/kurdish-refugee-the-world-has-closed-its-eyes), access date: 1 August 2019.

<sup>340</sup> “Kobane: Survival Stories from Kobane Refugees”, *BBC*, 7 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29508811>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>341</sup> “Turkey Grapples with an Unprecedented Flood of Refugees Fleeing ISIS”, *TIME*, 23 September 2014, available at: <https://time.com/3423522/enums>, access date: 15 November 2019.

in September 2014 indicated that IS militants wanted to control the town and “carry out a massacre there just like what happened [to Yezidis] in Sinjar.”<sup>342</sup> Another article posted by VOA in October 2014 included an interview of the former PYD co-chair Salih Muslim who remarked that the IS offensive into Northern Syria was “a humanitarian crisis and a genocide.”<sup>343</sup>



Fig. 4: Kurdish women and children waiting in Turkey while Kobane is under the IS siege, *TIME*.<sup>344</sup>

The BBC also described Syrian Kurds as being at risk of a massacre at the hands of the IS group. A news article released by the BBC in October 2014 stated, “if they [IS militants] are not stopped now, there will be a big massacre” and went on, “the rest of the world is silent about this imminent massacre.”<sup>345</sup> As can be seen, the BBC and VOA sought to attract the sympathy of their audience by raising concerns about a possible massacre if the town was taken by IS militants.

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<sup>342</sup> “In Major Assault, IS Fighters Seize Kurdish Villages in Syria”, *VOA*, 18 September 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/major-assault-fighters-seize-kurdish-villages-syria](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/major-assault-fighters-seize-kurdish-villages-syria), access date: 17 July 2019.

<sup>343</sup> “Pro-Kurdish Protesters Clash with Turkish Police; 1 Dead”, *VOA*, 7 October 2014, available at: [voanews.com/europe/pro-kurdish-protesters-clash-turkish-police-1-dead](http://voanews.com/europe/pro-kurdish-protesters-clash-turkish-police-1-dead), access date: 30 July 2019.

<sup>344</sup> “Turkey Grapples with an Unprecedented Flood of Refugees”, *TIME*.

<sup>345</sup> “Kobane: Civilians Flee IS Street-to-street Fighting”, *BBC*, 7 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29515431>, access date: 1 August 2019.

What is noteworthy though is that Kobane was almost empty of its civilian inhabitants as they already fled across the border into Turkey when IS started its march towards the town.<sup>346</sup> There were only YPG fighters left in Kobane who were making the last stand against IS militants with the backing of coalition airstrikes. So, there were hardly any civilians remaining in Kobane at risk of being massacred, let alone subjected to a genocide. Moreover, IS captured all of the surrounding villages and laid a four-month-long siege to the town during the battle. The group was even controlling as much as 40 percent of Kobane itself at times.<sup>347</sup> The situation seemed so hopeless that in order to prepare the international community for a possible defeat, the US-led coalition had to announce several times that the city could fall.<sup>348</sup> However, in spite of all these, the civilian casualty number announced after the YPG victory was a mere 32 according to a UK-based monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR).<sup>349</sup> It indicates that in order to bolster the image of Kurds as the victims at the hands of IS, the BBC and VOA exaggerated the severity of the situation by lending a particular emphasis on a massacre or genocide of the Kurds of Kobane. By doing so, they also aimed to pave the groundwork for coalition airstrikes and prepare the international community for the Western intervention against IS in Syria. This intervention was illegal in terms of international law because unlike the Iraqi government, the Assad regime did not give permission to the US-led coalition to conduct a fight against IS within Syrian territories. Therefore, the portrayal of Syrian Kurds as victims and thus creating a humanitarian

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<sup>346</sup> "Kobani Fighting Sends 400,000 Refugees to Turkey", *VOA*, 19 October 2014, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/kobani-fighting-sends-400000-refugees-turkey](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/kobani-fighting-sends-400000-refugees-turkey), access date: 1 August 2019.

<sup>347</sup> "IS Group Intensifies Assault on Syria's Kobane", *France 24*, 11 October 2014, available at: [www.france24.com/en/20141011-syria-islamic-state-group-intensifies-assault-kobane](http://www.france24.com/en/20141011-syria-islamic-state-group-intensifies-assault-kobane), access date: 1 August 2019.

<sup>348</sup> "US Warns Kobani may be about to Fall as ISIS Advance Further into Town", *The Guardian*, 10 October 2014, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/10/kobani-isis-advance-kurdish-resistance-surprise](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/10/kobani-isis-advance-kurdish-resistance-surprise), access date: 1 August 2019.

<sup>349</sup> "Kurdish Forces Take Back Kobani from Islamic State", *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 27 January 2015, available at: <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=10850>, access date: 1 August 2019.

reason to intervene was an important step to legitimize the Western fight against IS in Syria.

#### **4.2.1. Turkey and ‘Victim’ Kurds**

Kurds were not only the victims of IS though. They were also the victims of Turkey in the BBC and VOA coverage. Taking into account the dichotomization produced by Herman and Chomsky, Kurds of Syria were supposed to be ‘unworthy’ victims vis-à-vis the Turkish government, a long-time ally and a NATO partner of the United States. So, according to the logic of ‘forgetting about the victims of friends,’ in the case of a Kurdish victimhood at the hands of the Turkish state, the incident is supposed to be covered in little detail without evoking sympathetic emotions towards the victims in order not to undermine the interests of a friend of the United States, i.e. Turkey. Nevertheless, that was not quite the case in the BBC and VOA coverage when Turkish aggressions increased over time against the YPG militia in Northern Syria.

##### **4.2.1.1. Turkey-West Divergence on the Syrian Crisis**

Problem was that the victim of an American ally (Turkey) was also an ally (PYD) – albeit a new one – and the US government, as well as Western media, were increasingly forced to make a choice between the two. So, it all boiled down to one question: Would Syrian Kurds be ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ victims? Needless to say, this decision had to be made in accordance with the Western interests in the Middle East. As was made clear several times now, the defeat of IS was the primary objective of the West at the time as the group constituted a direct threat to Western security. As was discussed in Chapter 3, it was the PYD who had the most appetite for fighting IS since it was an opportunity for the group to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and break out of the isolation forced upon them for a long time.

Turkey’s main fight, on the other hand, was not with IS but with the Syrian regime. Turkey placed all its bets on a quick ouster of the Syrian President and was anxious

to see the Western world working to that end. Within the context of the Syrian conflict, this was the main fault line separating the Turkish government from Western states who never fully threw their weights behind the anti-Assad Syrian opposition and failed to support the moderate Free Syrian Army “when the regime was most vulnerable.”<sup>350</sup>

After the emergence and strengthening of the IS group, this divergence deepened due to the West’s sole focus on the destruction of the group and its close cooperation with the PYD to that end. Turkey would directly undermine the Western effort against IS by seeking to delegitimize the coalition partnership with the PYD and by frequently attacking the YPG positions in Northern Syria. As a collective result of all these, the West did no longer see Turkey as its friend or ally within the context of the Syrian crisis. Therefore, Western media considered Kurds of Syria as ‘worthy’ victims whose extensive coverage would serve the Western interests in the Middle East. Consequently, Turkey’s assaults against YPG militants were instrumentalized in the Western narrative as a tool to consolidate the image of Syrian Kurds as the victims.

#### **4.2.1.2. Turkish State vs. the Kurds**

In contrast with Western media, the Turkish government has been careful with drawing a sharp distinction between the PYD and the Kurds of Northern Syria. The Turkish presidential spokesperson İbrahim Kalın indicated this policy by stating on his *Twitter* account, “it is a fatal mistake to equate Syrian Kurds with the PKK [...] and its Syria branch PYD/YPG.”<sup>351</sup> Turkish media agencies likewise argued constantly that the PYD did not represent Syrian Kurds<sup>352</sup> and that it was the PYD

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<sup>350</sup> Phillips, David L., *The Kurdish Spring. A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015): p. 158.

<sup>351</sup> Kalın, İbrahim (ikalin1), “Mr @realDonaldTrump It is a fatal mistake to equate Syrian Kurds with the PKK...”, *Twitter*, 14 January 2019, 2:58, available at: <https://twitter.com/ikalin1/status/1084600650149830656?lang=en>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>352</sup> “PYD doesn't Represent Syrian Kurds: Kurdish Politician”, *Anadolu Agency*, 3 March 2016, available at: [aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/pyd-doesnt-represent-syrian-kurds-kurdish-politician/531196](http://aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/pyd-doesnt-represent-syrian-kurds-kurdish-politician/531196), access date: 2 August 2019.

per se, rather than Syrian Kurds that Turkey had a problem with.<sup>353</sup> In accordance with this discourse, it was the terms ‘PYD’ and ‘YPG’ that Turkish officials referred to in their rhetoric while making a statement about the PKK’s activities in Syria. They also emphasized that Turkey targeted the PKK and its affiliates in its operations, not the Kurds of Northern Syria.<sup>354</sup>

In connection with the Western media effort of cultivating a Kurdish image as victims, however, Western media networks insistently framed the Turkish government–PYD conflict as being waged between Turkey and Kurds or Syrian Kurds as a whole. According to the Western media coverage, it was the Kurds Turkey directly targeted and attacked in its military operations, airstrikes, and artillery shelling, not the PKK-affiliated groups in Syria. This rhetoric substantially bolstered the image of Kurdish victimization because the confrontation was portrayed to be between Kurds, a “nation without a state”<sup>355</sup> and Turkey who, in addition to being “NATO’s second-largest army,”<sup>356</sup> was assaulting Kurds with tanks, warplanes, and howitzers.

A few examples from the BBC and VOA will be explanatory. A news article published by the BBC in August 2016 points out that Turkey warned “Syrian Kurds to withdraw east of the Euphrates.” The article goes on to state that the military operation carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Free Syrian Army rebels with the code name ‘Euphrates Shield’ had two goals: “to secure the border

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<sup>353</sup> “Turkey has no Issue with Kurds: Erdogan”, *Anadolu Agency*, 14 January 2019, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/turkey-has-no-issue-with-kurds-erdogan/1364610>, access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>354</sup> “Turkey Targets PYD, not Kurds in Syria”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 August 2016, available at: [hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-targets-pyd-not-kurds-in-syria-103436](http://hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-targets-pyd-not-kurds-in-syria-103436), access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>355</sup> “The Kurds: The World’s Largest Stateless Nation”, *France 24*, 30 July 2015, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20150730-who-are-kurds-turkey-syria-iraq-pkk-divided>, access date: 10 August 2019.

<sup>356</sup> “Turkey-led Forces Comb Syria's Afrin After Ousting Kurds”, *France 24*, 19 March 2018, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180319-turkey-led-forces-comb-syrias-afrin-after-ousting-kurds>, access date: 10 August 2019.

area and ensure the Kurds are not there.”<sup>357</sup> The BBC notes that the operation aimed to expel Kurds from the border area.

Yet, the former Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Işık who announced the goals of the operation in a televised interview never referred to Kurds in name and indicated instead that it was the PYD and YPG whose presence Turkey did not want in the east of the Euphrates river.<sup>358</sup> Interestingly, an article published by the BBC’s Turkish website on the same day as the minister’s announcement did not refer to Kurds either and pointed out, quoting the Turkish minister, that Turkey had the right to intervene “if the PYD [did] not withdraw” from the area.<sup>359</sup> So, as different from its narrative to the Turkish audience, the BBC deliberately portrayed the conflict to its international audience as taking place between Turkey and Kurds. Likewise, a BBC Newshour video episode released in February 2016 reported on the Turkish bombing of the YPG positions in Northern Syria by noting, “Turkey shells Kurds in Northern Syria.”<sup>360</sup> In spite of the continuous statements from Turkish officials, the video program insisted on stating that the Turkish army targeted Kurds of Syria in its military operations. Interestingly, in the whole episode where the BBC covered the Turkish shelling of the YPG positions in detail, it avoided mentioning the YPG or the PYD in name and opted instead to refer to the victims as “Kurdish militiamen” with the implication that the conflict was between Turkey and Kurds.

VOA takes this effort a step further and goes as far as to misquote the Turkish President. A news article published by VOA on 19 August 2016 (mis)quotes Erdoğan as saying, “Ankara was ‘ready to move against the Kurds if they represent a threat to

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<sup>357</sup> “Turkey Warns Syrian Kurds to Withdraw East of Euphrates”, *BBC*, 25 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37184848>, access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>358</sup> “Fikri Işık: Amerika’nın Verdiği Sözü Yerine Getirmesini Bekliyoruz”, *Sözcü*, 25 August 2016, available at: <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2016/gundem/fikri-isik-amerikanin-verdigi-sozu-yerine-getirmesini-bekliyoruz-1364713>, access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>359</sup> “Savunma Bakanı Işık: PYD Çekilmezse Türkiye'nin Müdahale Hakkı Var”, *BBC Türkçe*, 25 August 2016, available at: [www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37170363](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37170363), access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>360</sup> “Turkey Shells Kurds in Northern Syria”, *BBC Newshour*, 14 February 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p03hwl9r>, access date: 15 August 2019.



Turkey.”<sup>361</sup> However, a simple look at the website of the Turkish presidency reveals that not once does Erdoğan refer to Kurds in his speech that he made on 18 August 2016 and was cited with quotation marks by VOA the next day. What Erdoğan stated in verbatim English translation was, “there are currently YPG attacks in the north of Syria, posing a threat to Turkey; there if necessary... We will continue this struggle everywhere.”<sup>362</sup> It shows that although Turkey did not target Kurds of Syria in its operation, the BBC and VOA wanted the international community to think that Turkey’s operation was carried out against Kurds of Syria – not the PYD or YPG per se in order to victimize Syrian Kurds as a whole in the face of the Turkish operation. So, apart from the purpose of legitimizing the PYD as the representative of the Kurds of Northern Syria, the BBC and VOA equated them with the organization to also reinforce the Kurdish victimhood in the eyes of the international community.

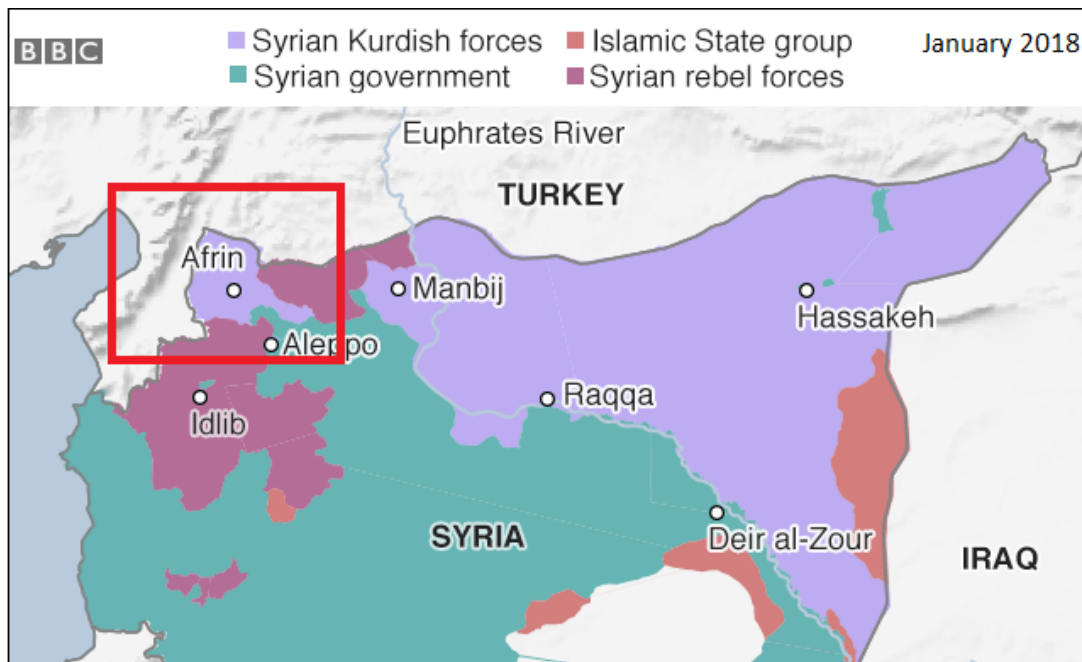
#### **4.2.1.3. Western Media Coverage of the Operation Olive Branch**

In an attempt to contain the PKK influence in the west of the Euphrates river, Turkey launched an offensive on the PYD-controlled city of Afrin on 20 January 2018 acting on its months-long threats against the PYD. Afrin is a Kurdish-majority city in Northwestern Syria that was taken over by the PKK affiliates subsequent to the regime withdrawal in July 2012. The Operation Olive Branch (*Zeytin Dalı*) aimed to put an end to the PYD presence in the city and signaled the onset of a whole new episode in the Syrian Civil War since it was the first time that the Turkish Armed Forces accompanied by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels would carry out a cross-border operation of this magnitude directly against the PKK affiliates in Syria.

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<sup>361</sup> “Syrian Kurdish City Becomes Flashpoint as US Scrambles Aircraft to Protect Coalition Troops”, VOA, 19 August 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syrian-kurdish-city-becomes-flashpoint-us-scrambles-aircraft-protect-coalition](http://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syrian-kurdish-city-becomes-flashpoint-us-scrambles-aircraft-protect-coalition), access date: 2 August 2019.

<sup>362</sup> “İslam Dünyası Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları Birliği Heyetini Kabulünde Yaptıkları Konuşma”, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 18 August 2016, available at: [tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/51004/islam-dunyasi-sivil-toplum-kuruluslari-birligi-heyetini-kabulunde-yaptiklari-konusma](http://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/51004/islam-dunyasi-sivil-toplum-kuruluslari-birligi-heyetini-kabulunde-yaptiklari-konusma), access date: 2 August 2019.



Map 6: The city of Afrin and the situation in Syria before the Operation Olive Branch, BBC.<sup>363</sup>

The Turkish government tried to legitimize this operation in the international arena with reference to the UN Charter’s Article 51 about self-defense and the decisions taken by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) regarding the war on terror.<sup>364</sup> The main argument put forward by the Turkish pro-government media networks to justify the offensive was the PKK-PYD connection. They argued that the Operation Olive Branch aimed to cleanse the Afrin region from terrorist organizations of all stripes, especially those associated with the PKK.<sup>365</sup> Western media, on the other hand, sided with the Kurdish defenders of the city from the very beginning and adopted a pro-PYD and anti-Turkish position during the offensive with a view to delegitimize the Turkish incursion into the city. The chief strategy which they employed while doing so was the victimization of the Kurdish residents of the city. From the onset of the Operation Olive Branch, Syrian Kurds were depicted as “the

<sup>363</sup> “Syria: Turkish Ground Troops Enter Afrin Enclave”, BBC, 21 January 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42765697>, access date: 2 November 2019.

<sup>364</sup> Yeşiltaş, Murat, “Turkey’s Strategic Reasoning behind the Operation Olive Branch”, *SETA Perspective*, 30 January 2018, p. 1, available at: <https://www.setav.org/en/turkeys-strategic-reasoning-behind-operation-olive-branch>, access date: 15 April 2019.

<sup>365</sup> “Afrin Operation Targets both YPG and ISIL: Turkish Chief of Staff Akar”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 12 March 2018, available at: [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/3-347-militants-neutralized-in-afrin-operation-military-128597](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/3-347-militants-neutralized-in-afrin-operation-military-128597), access date: 9 August 2019.

latest victim”<sup>366</sup> of the Syrian conflict who suffered dearly at the hands of the Turkish state. Besides, Western media sought to frame the war as being waged between Turkey and Syrian Kurds. The latter strategy was pursued once again even though Turkish officials emphasized on multiple occasions that the PKK-affiliated groups were the main targets of the operation, not Kurds of Syria.



Fig. 5: Kurdish civilians from Afrin – The “latest victims” of the Syrian crisis, *The Independent*.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> “How Historical Afrin Became a Prize Worth a War”, *BBC*, 24 January 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42788179>, access date: 9 August 2019.

<sup>367</sup> “While the World Looks to E. Ghouta, Civilians in Afrin are Being Slaughtered in their Hundreds by Turkish Forces”, *The Independent*, 9 March 2018, available at: [independent.co.uk/voices/syria-afrin-crisis-turkish-forces-civilians-deaths-eastern-ghouta-assad-a8247206.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-afrin-crisis-turkish-forces-civilians-deaths-eastern-ghouta-assad-a8247206.html), access date: 12 July 2019.

The impact of the battle on the civilians living in and around Afrin received wide coverage in Western media throughout the conflict. A news article published by the BBC in January 2018 points out that there was “a deep unease” about the impact of the Turkish offensive on civilians.<sup>368</sup> The same article includes a video interview conducted with the residents of Afrin. In the video, an old woman and an old man both surrounded by children of different ages complain fervently of the Turkish offensive on Afrin and blame the Turkish army for shelling the city without making any distinction between military installations and civilian residents.



Fig. 6: An old woman surrounded by children is complaining about the Turkish offensive, *BBC*.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> “Germany Suspends Upgrade to Turkey Tanks”, *BBC*, 25 January 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42820151>, access date: 9 August 2019.

<sup>369</sup> “Germany Suspends Upgrade to Turkey Tanks”, *BBC*.

Another BBC article posted in February 2018 likewise accuses Turkey of “indiscriminately shelling civilians in Afrin.”<sup>370</sup> The article states that “indiscriminate shellfire by the Turkish troops” caused the death of several civilians in the area.<sup>371</sup> Moreover, a photograph is attached just under the title of the article displaying an injured Kurdish girl crying in a hospital bed with what appears to be her mother by her side. It is clear that the BBC seeks to evoke compassion in its audience towards Kurds of Syria and tries to muster emotional sympathy for them by featuring children and women prominently in its coverage.



**Fig. 7: A young Kurdish girl claimed to be injured in a Turkish airstrike, BBC.**<sup>372</sup>

VOA also focused on the impact of the Afrin battle on the civilian residents of the city. Many news articles were published on the VOA website to demonstrate to the international community how adversely civilians were affected by the Turkish offensive in the city of Afrin. A VOA article issued in March 2018 points to the “dire

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<sup>370</sup> “Turkey Indiscriminately Shelling Civilians in Afrin”, *BBC*, 28 February 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43228472>, access date: 9 August 2019.

<sup>371</sup> “Turkey Indiscriminately Shelling Civilians in Afrin”, *BBC*.

<sup>372</sup> “Turkey Indiscriminately Shelling Civilians in Afrin”, *BBC*.

humanitarian conditions”<sup>373</sup> from which the civilians who had to flee Afrin suffered as a result of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch. Taking cues from the BBC, VOA attaches to this article an image of civilians departing the city on tractor-trailers towards Tal Rifat, a PYD-held town in Northern Aleppo. Not surprisingly, most of the civilians on the trailers were women and children looking gloomily at the camera.



**Fig. 8: Civilians, mostly women and children, leaving Afrin in tractor-trailers, VOA.**<sup>374</sup>

Another VOA article posted in February 2018 tells the story of a one-month-old Heyim Hasan and his family. When a Turkish artillery shell ‘allegedly’ landed near a hospital in Afrin, the infant was “receiving treatment for a chest infection.”<sup>375</sup> Because of the Turkish attack though, he had to be evacuated from the hospital along

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<sup>373</sup> “Civilians Who Fled Afrin Suffer from Dire Humanitarian Conditions”, VOA, 19 March 2018, available at: [voanews.com/extremism-watch/civilians-who-fled-afrin-suffer-dire-humanitarian-conditions](https://voanews.com/extremism-watch/civilians-who-fled-afrin-suffer-dire-humanitarian-conditions), access date: 9 August 2019.

<sup>374</sup> “Civilians Who Fled Afrin Suffer from Dire Humanitarian Conditions”, VOA.

<sup>375</sup> “As Turkey’s Afrin Offensive Drags on, Civilians Have no Place to Run”, VOA, 15 February 2018, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/turkeys-afrin-offensive-drags-civilians-have-no-place-run](https://voanews.com/middle-east/turkeys-afrin-offensive-drags-civilians-have-no-place-run), access date: 9 August 2019.

with 30 other children without getting the essential treatment for his sickness. The article goes on to recount how the families in Afrin had to shelter in caves and basements to protect themselves from the Turkish bombs and airstrikes.



Fig. 9: Kurdish civilians sitting on carpets in a cave in Afrin, *CNN*.<sup>376</sup>

These accusations about the suspected Turkish shelling of civilian areas in general and the Afrin hospital in particular were originally spread from the pro-PYD media outlets. However, upon the intensive circulation of these allegations by international media, the Turkish Armed Forces released a drone footage on its *Twitter* account showing that the Afrin hospital was not damaged in any way.

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<sup>376</sup> "This is a Massacre: Turkey's Bombs Drive Families into Caves", *CNN*, 1 February 2018, available: [edition.cnn.com/2018/02/01/middleeast/syria-kurds-assault-civilians-intl/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/01/middleeast/syria-kurds-assault-civilians-intl/index.html), access date: 7 November 2019.



**Fig. 10: A snapshot from the Turkish drone footage captured in March 2018. As can clearly be seen, the Afrin hospital seems undamaged, *Twitter*.<sup>377</sup>**

The Turkish army was also accused of dropping napalm bombs on civilians in its offensive against the city of Afrin. A news article published by VOA in January 2018 quotes the statement of a PYD official, Ilham Ahmed, as saying, “the Turkish army uses the forbidden weapon napalm in Afrin against civilians.”<sup>378</sup> However, this claim was never verified by an independent source. The inclusion of such unverified PYD claims on the VOA coverage attests to the pro-PYD position adopted by the American news agency and indicates its efforts to portray Kurds as victims suffering at the hands of the Turkish state.

To conclude, the BBC and VOA covered Kurds of Syria in line with the concept of ‘worthy victims’. Since the beginning of the IS offensive on Kobane, Kurds were

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<sup>377</sup> Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri (@TSKGnkur), “The reports claiming that the hospital in Afrin was bombed by the Turkish Armed Forces are fake.”, *Twitter*, 17 March 2018, 12:24, available at: <https://twitter.com/tskgnkur/status/974939620109574145>, access date: 7 October 2019.

<sup>378</sup> “Kurds Accuse Turks of Dropping Napalm”, *VOA*, 28 January 2018, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/kurds-accuse-turks-dropping-napalm](http://voanews.com/middle-east/kurds-accuse-turks-dropping-napalm), access date: 6 November 2019.



publicized extensively in Western media as the victims of both IS and the Turkish state. This image of victimhood was consolidated by the inclusion to the coverage of dramatic photos and videos of Syrian Kurdish civilians with a particular effort on the publicity of Kurdish women and children. The stories of victims were told to the audience in detail and in a dramatic fashion tailored consciously to arouse the sympathy of the international community. All-in-all, in accordance with the Western interests, the BBC and VOA victimized Syrian Kurds in their coverage and sought to garner international sympathy for the Kurds of Northern Syria.

### **4.3. Battle of Raqqa and the ‘Unworthy’ Victims**

Civilians from Kobane suffered dearly because of the IS offensive on their town. Some left their homes, some fought against the aggressors and some others *did* die in the conflict. What they had to go through was a real tragedy and an utter catastrophe. However, they were not alone in their suffering. They were not the only victims of the civil war. There were many others who suffered as much as the Kurds of Kobane, maybe even more. The civilians living in the Syrian Arab city of Raqqa during the offensive of the SDF against IS also fell victim to the consequences brought by the war just like the civilians in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane. But there was one major difference between them; while the latter was ‘worthy’ victims, the former was ‘unworthy’.

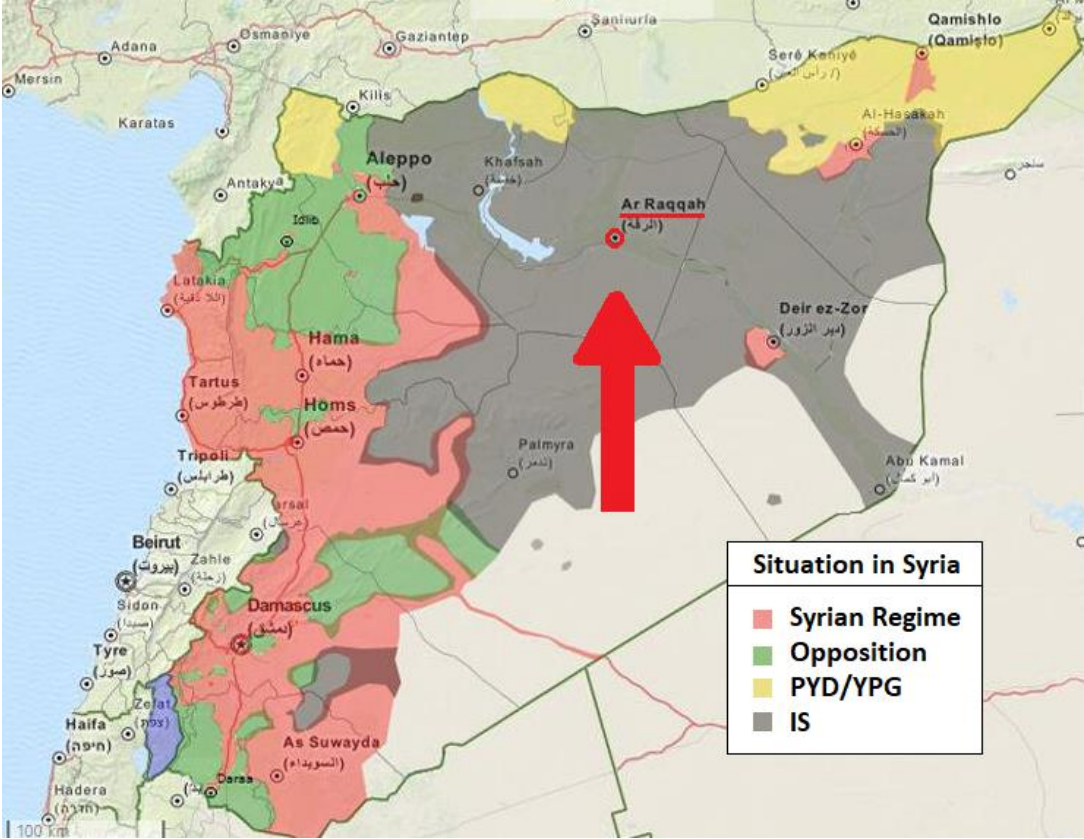
Raqqa is an Arab-majority city in Northern Syria, located on the northeast bank of the Euphrates river. During the Syrian Civil War, on 4 March 2013 to be exact, opposition groups captured the city from government forces<sup>379</sup> and thus, Raqqa became “the first ‘liberated’ city in Syria.”<sup>380</sup> However, it did not last long because soon after the rebel forces established their control in the city, ISIL (the acronym of

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<sup>379</sup> Holliday, Joseph, “The Opposition Takeover in Al-Raqqa”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 15 March 2015, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/opposition-takeover-al-raqqa>, access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>380</sup> Remnick, David, “Telling the Truth about ISIS and Raqqa”, *The New Yorker*, 22 November 2015, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/telling-the-truth-about-isis-and-raqqa>, access date: 15 October 2019.

the IS group before June 2014) would start to challenge their authority until it became the sole power wielder in the area in January 2014.<sup>381</sup> When the jihadists declared the Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq in June 2014,<sup>382</sup> Raqqa would operate as the capital city of the IS group.



Map 7: The city of Raqqa and the military situation in Syria in May 2015, *Business Insider*.<sup>383</sup>

When the fight against IS was launched by the US-led Western coalition in the second half of 2014, Raqqa was always considered the ultimate objective as the capture thereof would deliver *coup de grâce* to the jihadist group. So, a multi-phased operation by the US-led coalition and the SDF was launched in November 2016 to

<sup>381</sup> “Raqqa: Capital of the Caliphate”, *RAND Corporation*, undated, available at: [rand.org/nsrd/projects/when-isil-comes-to-town/case-studies/raqqa.html](http://rand.org/nsrd/projects/when-isil-comes-to-town/case-studies/raqqa.html), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>382</sup> “ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2014, available at: [wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263](http://wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>383</sup> “These Maps Show What ISIS has Achieved in the Last Year”, *Business Insider*, 22 May 2015, available at: [businessinsider.com/isis-gains-in-syria-and-iraq-2015-5](http://businessinsider.com/isis-gains-in-syria-and-iraq-2015-5), access date: 15 October 2019.

capture Raqqa from IS.<sup>384</sup> The first four phases of this operation aimed to isolate Raqqa and surround the city from three sides. The fifth and last phase that was initiated in June 2017 would be for the capture of the city itself and be called the battle of Raqqa.<sup>385</sup>

The relevance of the final offensive on Raqqa for this study lies in its coverage by Western media. The offensive that ended in October 2017 with the coalition victory lasted more than five and a half months and caused an “almost complete destruction” of the city and its infrastructure.<sup>386</sup> A report published by *the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* in July 2018 finds, “70 to 80 percent of buildings were either destroyed or damaged” because of the Raqqa operation. Over 375,000 persons were displaced during the offensive<sup>387</sup> and according to a report published by Amnesty International in April 2019, more than 1,600 civilians were killed by the US-led coalition.<sup>388</sup> The meaning of these numbers is, the battle of Raqqa was much more destructive for the lives of civilians than the battle of Kobane had ever been. However, the media attention was not proportionate to the severity of the humanitarian crises in these conflict and there was a huge difference between the coverage of these two battles. Contrary to the coverage of the battle of Kobane, during the Raqqa offensive, Western media was not teeming with the images of suffering women and children, there were not video footages of civilians departing the city, nor were there dramatic interviews conducted with the victims of the conflict. So, in

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<sup>384</sup> “Turkey Sets out Raqqa Operation Plans to US”, *Middle East Eye*, 18 February 2017, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-sets-out-raqqa-operation-plans-us-report](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-sets-out-raqqa-operation-plans-us-report), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>385</sup> “US-backed Force Launches Assault on Islamic State's 'Capital' in Syria”, *Reuters*, 5 June 2017, available at: [reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa/u-s-backed-force-launches-assault-on-islamic-states-capital-in-syria-idUSKBN18W29P](http://reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa/u-s-backed-force-launches-assault-on-islamic-states-capital-in-syria-idUSKBN18W29P), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>386</sup> “While the World Looks to E. Ghouta, Civilians in Afrin are Being Slaughtered”, *The Independent*.

<sup>387</sup> “Ar-Raqqa City Strategic Response Plan”, *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, July 2018, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ar-raqqa-city-strategic-response-plan-july-2018>, access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>388</sup> “Syria: Unprecedented Investigation Reveals US-Led Coalition Killed More than 1,600 Civilians in Raqqa Death Trap”, *Amnesty International*, 25 April 2019, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/syria-unprecedented-investigation-reveals-us-led-coalition-killed-more-than-1600-civilians-in-raqqa-death-trap>, access date: 15 October 2019.

compliance with the concept of Herman and Chomsky, the Arab victims of the battle of Raqqa were not as ‘worthy’ as the Kurdish victims of the battle of Kobane.

The victims of the Raqqa offensive were ‘unworthy’ in the eyes of Western media because they were victimized by the West itself and so, their coverage with an emphasis on human suffering would definitely not serve Western interests. On the contrary, it would undermine the Western struggle against the jihadists in Syria by delegitimizing the anti-IS fight. Therefore, Western media did not try to garner sympathy for these victims with dramatic and emotional stories, did not humanize them by including their images in the news articles and did not narrate to the audience the sufferings they had to go through. In the Western media coverage, they solely remained ‘numbers killed in an airstrike’ or ‘civilian death toll in strikes on IS’.

The argument defended here about the Western media coverage during the battle of Raqqa is upheld by *Airwars*, an organization that tracks and documents civilian deaths in conflict zones. According to Alexa O’Brien, an investigative journalist who writes in *Airwars*, “the coverage of civilian casualties in the war against so-called Islamic State has been largely absent.”<sup>389</sup> A report published by *Airwars* in July 2019 revealed that there were “big gaps in Western media coverage of civilian harm from the US-led airstrike campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.”<sup>390</sup> The report finds out, “civilian harm from US-led actions in Iraq and Syria had only been covered patchily by major US media.”<sup>391</sup> The report indicates, in particular to the SDF offensive on Raqqa, “the 2017 battle to oust ISIS [another acronym for IS] from its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa was poorly covered by US media.”<sup>392</sup> As

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<sup>389</sup> O’Brien, Alexa, “Where’s the Coverage of Civilian Casualties in the War on ISIS?”, *Defense One*, 22 July 2019, available at: [www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/07/wheres-coverage-civilian-casualties-war-isis/158585](http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/07/wheres-coverage-civilian-casualties-war-isis/158585), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>390</sup> “Ep. 53: Civilian Casualty Reporting and the War on ISIS with Alexa O’Brien and Chris Woods”, *Defense One*, 19 August 2019, available at: [defenseone.com/ideas/2019/08/ep-53-civilian-casualty-reporting-and-war-isis-alexa-obrien-and-chris-woods/159246](http://defenseone.com/ideas/2019/08/ep-53-civilian-casualty-reporting-and-war-isis-alexa-obrien-and-chris-woods/159246), access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>391</sup> O’Brien, Alexa, “US Media Coverage of Civilian Harm in the War against ISIS”, *Airwars*, p. 2, available at: <https://airwars.org/report/news-in-brief-us-media-coverage-of-civilian-harm>, access date: 15 October 2019.

<sup>392</sup> O’Brien, “US Media Coverage of Civilian Harm”, p. 37.

understood, Western media did not cover the victims of the US-led coalition as extensively as it did the victims of other parties during the whole episode of the Western intervention. It denotes that there is a close relationship between Western media coverage and Western interests. The battle of Kobane and the battle of Raqqa were two cases which clearly showed that Western media pursued an editorial policy in line with the significant Western interest of defeating IS.

#### **4.4. The YPG: “The Only Effective Force”<sup>393</sup>**

In the face of the growing IS influence in Syria in the fall of 2014, the Western coalition was on the lookout for “a willing, capable, and effective partner on the ground inside Syria”<sup>394</sup> to lead the fight against IS. As explained in Chapter 1, the battle of Kobane persuaded the US-led coalition that the YPG was the most suitable group in Syria to conduct this struggle. Therefore, even before the designation of the YPG as the coalition’s boots on the ground in February 2015,<sup>395</sup> an image of strength and effectiveness was created regarding the Kurdish militants who were fighting in the ranks of the YPG. Thus, Western media and the Western political discourse lionized the group<sup>396</sup> by portraying its militants as “the most capable”<sup>397</sup> and “the most effective”<sup>398</sup> fighters in Syria in fighting the IS militants. They were presented

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<sup>393</sup> “Syria Conflict”, *BBC*.

<sup>394</sup> “Department of Defense Press Briefing [by Rear Admiral Kirby] in the Pentagon Briefing Room”, *U.S. Department of Defense*, 8 October 2014, available at: [www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/606942/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-rear-admiral-kirby-in-the-pentagon-brie](http://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/606942/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-rear-admiral-kirby-in-the-pentagon-brie), access date: 15 August 2019.

<sup>395</sup> “Syrian Kurds Cut IS Supply Line Near Iraq”, *VOA*, 25 February 2015, available at: [www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-cut-supply-line-near-iraq](http://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/syrian-kurds-cut-supply-line-near-iraq), access date: 20 July 2019.

<sup>396</sup> Orton, Kyle W., *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters. The PKK in Syria* (London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2017): p. 11.

<sup>397</sup> “US-backed Fighters Advance on IS-held Manbij”, *BBC*, 1 June 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36423822>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>398</sup> “Erdogan to Grill Trump over Decision to Arm Kurdish Militia in Syria”, *VOA*, 10 May 2017, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/erdogan-grill-trump-over-decision-arm-kurdish-militia-syria](http://voanews.com/middle-east/erdogan-grill-trump-over-decision-arm-kurdish-militia-syria), access date: 3 August 2019.

to the international audience as the “battle-hardened,”<sup>399</sup> “disciplined,”<sup>400</sup> “well-organized,”<sup>401</sup> “proud and brave”<sup>402</sup> warriors who were leading the fight against the jihadists in the Middle East.

The examples as to how Western media sought to create a perception of strength of the YPG fighters are abundant because confirming the effectiveness and toughness of the YPG became the unofficial mantra of Western media networks since the battle of Kobane. This mantra was frequently repeated from then on in the news articles regarding the group. An article published on the BBC website in October 2014 describes the YPG as being made up of brave fighters who “seem to have been unaffected by the fearsome reputation of the jihadist fighters.” It also attributes effectiveness and power to the group by stating that it has “expertise in keeping discipline and coordination among military units.”<sup>403</sup> The article goes on to suggest ironically that the group derives its strength from the guerilla fight it has conducted in Turkey against the Turkish army.<sup>404</sup> In fact, the BBC indicates here that these ‘brave’ fighters did also combat against the Turkish security forces. So, in a way, the British media agency acknowledges that the PKK and the YPG are the same organizations.

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<sup>399</sup> “On the Frontline in Battle for IS-held Manbij”, *BBC*, 15 June 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36539723>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>400</sup> “US Sends Arms to Kurdish Forces Fighting IS”, *BBC*, 30 May 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40100917>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>401</sup> “Syrian Kurds Cut IS Supply Line”, *VOA*.

<sup>402</sup> “Meet the Men Fighting ISIS with Hunting Rifles and Homemade Mortars”, *CNN*, 28 October 2015, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2015/10/27/middleeast/inside-syria-front-line-against-isis/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/27/middleeast/inside-syria-front-line-against-isis/index.html), access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>403</sup> “Kobane Fighting: IS Meets its Match in Syrian Kurdish Forces”, *BBC*, 9 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29556005>, access date: 3 August 2019.

<sup>404</sup> “Kobane Fighting”, *BBC*.

Another BBC article posted in January 2015 points out that the YPG “emerged among the most prominent and effective forces against Islamic State”<sup>405</sup> in Syria. Yet another article posted on the BBC website again in January 2015 argues that the battle of Kobane was won thanks to “the courage, tenacity, and skill of the YPG guerrillas on the ground.”<sup>406</sup> One last BBC article from August 2016 indicates that the YPG was “widely regarded as one of the most effective forces in the fight against IS.”<sup>407</sup> The perception which the BBC has been trying to create by such coverage of the YPG reflects the intention of Western media to persuade international public opinion that the YPG was the best option the coalition had at its disposal in the Western-sponsored anti-IS struggle in Syria.

VOA sought to create a similar YPG image in its coverage. An article published by VOA in June 2015 notes that the YPG group consisted of “seasoned, trained and capable ground forces.”<sup>408</sup> Another VOA article released in November 2016 states that the US administration considered the YPG as “the most potent anti-IS fighting coalition in the territory near the Turkish border.”<sup>409</sup> Yet another article posted on the VOA website in December 2017 indicated that “the battle-hardened Kurds were the most effective fighting force available”<sup>410</sup> on the ground to fight against IS. One last article published by VOA in January 2018 during the Turkish incursion into the Syrian Kurdish city of Afrin refers to the YPG militants as a “formidable foe on the

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<sup>405</sup> “Kurds Demand Unity amid Battle against Islamic State”, *BBC*, 14 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30784547>, access date: 8 October 2019.

<sup>406</sup> “Islamic State Suffers Setback in Kobane but Battle Continues”, *BBC*, 27 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31008815>, access date: 4 August 2019.

<sup>407</sup> “Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State”, *BBC*, 23 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>, access date: 20 April 2019.

<sup>408</sup> “Pentagon: IS ‘Cracking’ from Kurdish Advance, US Air Power”, *VOA*, 16 June 2015, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/pentagon-cracking-kurdish-advance-us-air-power](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/pentagon-cracking-kurdish-advance-us-air-power), access date: 4 August 2019.

<sup>409</sup> “Syrian Kurds Launch Offensive to Retake IS Stronghold City of Raqqa”, *VOA*, 5 November 2016, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-kurds-launch-offensive-retake-stronghold-city-raqqa](http://voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-kurds-launch-offensive-retake-stronghold-city-raqqa), access date: 4 August 2019.

<sup>410</sup> “Mattis Signals Military Shift in Syria to Reflect IS Defeat”, *VOA*, 1 December 2017, available at: [voanews.com/usa/mattis-signals-military-shift-syria-reflect-defeat](http://voanews.com/usa/mattis-signals-military-shift-syria-reflect-defeat), access date: 5 August 2019.

ground,” considers them an experienced group whose leaders carried out a decades-long guerilla fight against the Turkish government and depicts them as a “battle-hardened” force to deal with, who conducted a months-long confrontation with the jihadists.<sup>411</sup> As the excerpts cited from the BBC and VOA attest, both media agencies seek to create an image of the YPG as an effective and capable military force in Syria in a bid to justify the Western partnership with the group. The military, political and economic support given to the YPG militia by the US-led coalition was thus justified by Western media on the ground that the YPG was the strongest organization in Syria which could effectively defeat the IS group with assistance from the Western-sponsored anti-IS coalition.

#### **4.5. The YPG: A Rebel Force?**

One of the strategies employed by Western media in the quest to legitimize the YPG and its partnership with the Western coalition was the portrayal of the group as being a part of Syrian rebels who were carrying out a revolutionary fight against the Assad regime. So, the image constructed by Western media and employed to promote the international standing of Syrian Kurds was this time that of a rebel force.

At a time when the international public opinion was fiercely against the Syrian regime because of its violent repression of the uprisings in Syria, rebel groups who took up arms in an effort to overthrow the regime gained substantial sympathy from the international community. Aside from extremist groups such as the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front who adopted radical jihadist ideologies in their opposition to the Syrian government, moderate opposition groups who fought against the regime forces enjoyed legitimacy and their struggle was justified in the eyes of the international community. The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) that was established in November 2012 in order to incorporate opposition groups under one leadership was recognized by over 100 countries as the “legitimate representative” of Syria in

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<sup>411</sup> “Kurds Accuse Turks of Dropping Napalm”, VOA.



December 2012 at a conference in Morocco.<sup>412</sup> Interestingly, even the maps illustrating the military situation in Syria confirmed the legitimate position of the moderate Syrian opposition. The areas they controlled were shown in green while the regime-held areas in red and the IS areas in black. So, adopting an anti-Assad position and opposing the Syrian regime were essential for the groups fighting on the ground to gain legitimacy or at least to enhance their prominence internationally. That is why Western media characterized the YPG militia as a rebel group dissident to the Syrian regime in order to overcome the legitimacy crisis from which the YPG had been suffering for a long time. So, being rebel fighters was one of the many images invented by Western media to muster sympathy for the YPG and garner legitimacy for the Kurdish militants who were affiliated with the PKK. The BBC and VOA were also a part of this Western media effort.

A news article published by VOA in August 2016 portrays the YPG militia as an anti-Assad force by referring to the group as “the Kurdish rebels” while stating that they became “a source of tension between the U.S. [...] and Turkey.”<sup>413</sup> Another VOA news article released again in August 2016 describes YPG militants as “the rebels” while reporting on their likely advance on the IS-held town of al-Bab.<sup>414</sup> One last news article issued in October 2016 on the VOA website describes the YPG as “a Syrian rebel group” who was in the “move to isolate Raqqa soon [...] in the fight against the Islamic State.”<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> “Friends of Syria Recognise Opposition”, *Al Jazeera*, 12 December 2012, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212124541767116.html>, access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>413</sup> “Who are the Turkey-backed Syrian Rebels?”, *VOA*, 25 August 2016, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/who-are-turkey-backed-syrian-rebels>, access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>414</sup> “US-backed Syrian Fighters Targeting New IS-Held Town”, *VOA*, 14 August 2016, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/us-backed-syrian-fighters-targeting-new-held-town>, access date: 6 November 2019.

<sup>415</sup> “Raqqa Fight Starting 'Soon,' Isolation Operation to Include YPG”, *VOA*, 26 October 2016, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/raqqa-fight-starting-soon-isolation-operation-include-ypg](https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/raqqa-fight-starting-soon-isolation-operation-include-ypg), access date: 4 November 2019.

The BBC also pursued the same strategy to promote the image of the YPG and described the organization as a rebel force. In an article published by the BBC in July 2015, it was argued, “Kurdish rebels, the YPG, closely allied with the PKK, have represented Washington’s best hope for confronting IS on the ground in Syria.”<sup>416</sup> Another news article released by the BBC in September 2017 notes that the Turkish government objected to “US military support for the YPG Syrian Kurdish rebels.”<sup>417</sup> One last BBC news article from October 2014 goes to great lengths to portray the YPG as an anti-Assad rebel force and goes as far as to (falsely) claim that Kurdish troops had “expelled Syrian government forces” from the Kurdish areas of Syria.<sup>418</sup> However, as was explained earlier in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the Syrian government withdrew from these areas without being forced by any group, instead, it handed over their control to the YPG militia willingly. As was underlined in a news article published by *the Kurdish Institute of Paris* in July 2012, the regime withdrawal from the Kurdish areas of Syria “visibly took place without clashes between the Kurdish forces and the Syrian Army.”<sup>419</sup> So, even at the expense of the facts on the ground, it seems that it was deemed necessary by the BBC and VOA to frame the YPG as a rebel force opposing the Assad regime so as to gain legitimacy for the group and to justify the Western support given to the organization in fending off the IS offensive at a time when IS seriously threatened Western security and the initiation of a formal partnership between the US-led coalition and the YPG was in the offing.

Contrary to what the BBC and VOA have argued thus far in their coverage, it is not possible to characterize the YPG militia as a rebel group. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word ‘rebel’ as “opposing or taking arms against a government

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<sup>416</sup> “What Can Turkey Gain from NATO Meeting?”, *BBC*, 27 July 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33680049>, access date: 4 November 2015.

<sup>417</sup> “Turkey Signs Deal to Get Russian S-400 Air Defence Missiles”, *BBC*, 12 September 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41237812>, access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>418</sup> “Islamic State Crisis: Syrian Kurds Battle to Keep Hold of Strategic Kobane”, *BBC*, 4 October 2014, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29486130](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29486130), access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>419</sup> “Syria: The Kurds are Liberating their Regions”, *Institut Kurde de Paris*, 328 (July 2012): p. 3, available at: [institutkurde.org/en/publications/bulletins/328.html](http://institutkurde.org/en/publications/bulletins/328.html), access date: 4 November 2019.

or ruler.”<sup>420</sup> According to this definition, for the YPG to be regarded as a rebel force, it must have fought against the Syrian government. However, excepting some sporadic clashes, the YPG has not taken up arms against the Assad regime.<sup>421</sup> If anything, there exists an “implicit and partial alliance” between the YPG and the Syrian regime.<sup>422</sup> Hundreds of PYD prisoners were set free in the wake of the Arab uprisings in Syria in 2011.<sup>423</sup> The regime forces and the YPG militants co-existed in Qamishli and Aleppo.<sup>424</sup> The Syrian government kept paying for the social services undertaken in the PYD-held areas and the salaries of the government officials operating there.<sup>425</sup>

Besides, the YPG operated in cahoots with the regime on many occasions, especially in quelling the Arab Spring demonstrations in the Kurdish areas handed to them by the Syrian government in July 2012. If the regime retreated from these areas without a fight, it was not for nothing. Aside from making a headache out of a PKK-affiliated organization at the expense of Turkey, the regime made sure that the YPG was in control to “keep the Kurds out of the rebellion and sow dissension among anti-government groups.”<sup>426</sup> Finally, YPG forces “acted in concert with the Assad

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<sup>420</sup> “Rebel”, Merriam-Webster, available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rebel>, access date: 7 November 2019.

<sup>421</sup> Barfi, Barak, “Kurds Now our Best Ally against ISIS in Syria”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 October 2015, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria), access date: 19 July 2019.

<sup>422</sup> Gunter, Michael M., *Out of Nowhere. The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2014): p. 107.

<sup>423</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas, *Suriye Kürdistanı’nda Savaş ve Devrim. Rojava’dan Sesler, Analizler, Sevinç Altınçekiç* (trans.) (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2015): p. 110.

<sup>424</sup> Balanche, Fabrice, “The United States in Northeastern Syria”, *Hoover Institution*, 17 July 2018, p. 9, available at: [hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria](http://hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria), access date: 15 January 2019.

<sup>425</sup> “Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria’s North East”, *International Crisis Group*, Report No. 190, 5 September 2018, p. 27, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/190-prospects-deal-stabilise-syrias-north-east>, access date: 4 November 2019.

<sup>426</sup> Orton, Kyle W., “The Error of Arming the Syrian Kurds”, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2017, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/opinion/syria-kurds-isis-raqqa.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/opinion/syria-kurds-isis-raqqa.html), access date: 6 June 2019.

regime”<sup>427</sup> and the Russian Air Force in the battle of Northern Aleppo in February 2016<sup>428</sup> to the detriment of the Free Syrian Army while the latter was being pounded by the counter-revolutionary forces, i.e. the Syrian regime, Iranian militias, and Russia.

Interestingly, even the US administration has recently acknowledged the “tacit alliance”<sup>429</sup> established between the PKK offshoots in Syria and the Assad regime in 2011 within the context of the Syrian Civil War. According to a document entitled *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018* and published by the US State Department in November 2019, Syria is designated as a “state sponsor of terrorism” along with North Korea, Iran and Sudan partly because of the “Marxist groups, including affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) [which] operated on Syrian soil, presenting a security threat to Turkey.”<sup>430</sup> In addition to confirming the regime-PYD relationship, this report also verifies the PKK-PYD connection. It means that Western governments maintain their partnership with the PYD and YPG despite knowing that these Kurdish groups are closely connected to a US and EU-designated terrorist organization (PKK) and cooperate with the Syrian regime that they, themselves, condemned on many occasions for its human rights violations against Syrian citizens.

To sum up, taking into account the explanations given above, the YPG cannot be considered an anti-Assad group or a rebel force. On the contrary, it would be more appropriate and sensible to count the Kurdish militia among the counter-

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<sup>427</sup> Tabler, Andrew J., “The Syrian Opposition and the PYD”, in Patrick Clawson (ed.), *Syrian Kurds as a U.S. Ally. Cooperation and Complications* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016): p. 22.

<sup>428</sup> Casagrande, Genevieve, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 2015 – September 2016”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 21 September 2016, p. 92, available at: [understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-airstrikes-syria-september-30-2015-september-19-2016](https://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-airstrikes-syria-september-30-2015-september-19-2016), access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>429</sup> “Assad on the Offensive: The Encirclement of Aleppo Consolidates the Regime’s Comeback”, *The Economist*, 13 February 2016, available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/02/13/assad-on-the-offensive>, access date: 6 November 2019.

<sup>430</sup> “Country Reports on Terrorism 2018”, *U.S. Department of State*, October 2019, pp. 213-214, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018>, access date: 14 November 2019.

revolutionary forces fighting with the Assad regime for the extermination of the Syrian rebels. Therefore, the YPG image invented by Western media as a rebel group contradicts severely with the facts on the ground. The framing of the YPG as an anti-Assad force even when the group itself declared its neutrality with respect to the Syrian Civil War<sup>431</sup> is a vivid example of how Western media ignores the truth and diverts from the facts when it comes to revealing the true nature of the YPG. It also shows the extent to which Western media has gone to legitimize the PKK-linked organizations and the anti-IS fight they conduct alongside the Western coalition in Syria.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

In light of the discussion made in this chapter with references to the past and present Western rhetoric on Kurds, it is clear by now that the West, whether it is Kurdologues in the past or Western media in the present, sought to enhance the prominence of Kurds and improve their international standing by constructing new Kurdish images when their interests required to do so. The portrayal of the Kurds of Northern Syria was no exception to this practice. As defeating IS became the most pressing issue on the Western agenda at the time, Kurds of Syria who were fighting in the ranks of the YPG against the jihadist organization were covered extensively by Western media in accordance with the new images constructed to positively portray Kurds to international public opinion. So, it was Kurds again that served the Western interests in the Middle East and thus, it was Kurds whose reputation and standing Western media improved and enhanced in the eyes of the international community by means of creating new positive images.

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<sup>431</sup> Tejel, Jordi, "The Evolution of Kurdish Struggle in Syria: Between Pan-Kurdism and Syrianization", in Michael M. Gunter (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (New York: Routledge, 2019): p. 376.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **REINVENTION OF KURDS AS THE CHAMPIONS OF WESTERN VALUES**

As part of the Western media effort to legitimize the PKK-affiliated groups in Syria, the portrayal of Kurds as possessing Western values carries an important weight. By establishing similarities between Western societies and the Kurdish society built under the PYD rule with reference to shared values, democracy in particular, Western media sought to gain sympathy for Kurds in the eyes of the Western community and thus attempted to justify the partnership of the US-led coalition with the YPG militia in the anti-IS struggle. The PYD, for its part, declared itself the champion of Western values in order to maintain the alliance established with Western governments.

In effect, the adoption of the ideals and values of the potential or actual ‘patron’ states has been a common strategy followed by the Kurdish national movements with the objective of gaining external support. Today, the PYD seeks to obtain Western support by a narrative constructed on Western values. Western media, in turn, tries to give credibility to the PYD with a media coverage bent on affirming the PYD narrative. Before explaining in depth how this mutual strategy was carried out, it will be informative to analyze how a similar scenario was played out in the past.

## 5.1. Seeking International Support: From the PKK to the PYD

External forces have always been the main determinant of the chances of success or failure of secessionist and autonomist movements.<sup>432</sup> Without the backing of one or more foreign sponsors to support their causes in the form of political, economic or military assistance, it is extremely unlikely for these movements to accomplish their ultimate objectives of autonomy or independence. So, taking into account the history of national movements, it is safe to argue that “external involvement is part of secessionism.”<sup>433</sup> The historical background of the Kurdish national movements across the Middle East vindicates this argument about foreign engagement.

The examples are abundant. Great Britain and France played the ‘Kurdish card’ against the Turkish government by giving support to Kurds in Turkey and Syria in the course of the negotiations to draw the Turkey-Iraq and Turkey-Syria frontiers in the 1920s.<sup>434</sup> The United States, Israel, and Iran lent considerable support to the Kurdish revolts led by Mustafa Barzani in Northern Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s against the central government in Iraq.<sup>435</sup> It was the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ led by the United States and the United Kingdom which ultimately enabled Iraqi Kurds to secure *de jure* autonomy under the structure of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in 2005. The Soviet Union, Syria, and Iran held out substantial assistance to

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<sup>432</sup> Neuberger, Benyamin, “Kurdish Nationalism in Comparative Perspectives”, in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening. Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): p. 30.

<sup>433</sup> Neuberger, “Kurdish Nationalism”, p. 32.

<sup>434</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Berne: Peter Lang SA, 2007): p. 247.

<sup>435</sup> Tahiroglu, Merve and Taleblu, Benham B., “Kurd Your Enthusiasm: The U.S. Needs to Talk About its Favorite Allies”, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 November 2017, available at: [foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-08/kurd-your-enthusiasm](https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-08/kurd-your-enthusiasm), access date: 17 November 2019.

the PKK for the success of its fight against the Turkish state from the 1980s onwards.<sup>436</sup>

Today, it is the anti-IS coalition led by the United States and assisted by European countries which bolsters the YPG's authority and autonomy since September 2014 in the Kurdish areas of Syria and even beyond. So, there have always been external patrons lined up behind the Kurdish movements and gave support to the Kurdish cause in line with their national interests in the region.<sup>437</sup> The Kurdish groups, in return, sought to secure the backing of international powers by adjusting their ideologies in accordance with the ideology of the power whose assistance they wished to acquire. The PKK represents the paragon of this phenomenon. The party's jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan has always modified the party principles in accordance with the circumstances of the time in order to maintain international support.<sup>438</sup> Öcalan and his friends established the PKK as a Kurdish separatist party during the Cold War and based its ideology on the Marxist-Leninist principles.<sup>439</sup> It was the most certain way to secure the support of the Soviet bloc countries together with the fact that the PKK was to operate at the expense of the Turkish state which was a staunch ally of the opposing Western bloc.<sup>440</sup> However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the defeat of socialist ideologies vis-à-vis Western liberal

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<sup>436</sup> Çağaptay, Soner, "Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 April 2012, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>, access date: 17 November 2019.

<sup>437</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, pp. 148-161.

<sup>438</sup> Yinanç, Barçın, "Propaganda Warfare with the Outlawed PKK", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 5 September 2017, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/propaganda-warfare-with-the-outlawed-pkk-117563>, access date: 15 August 2019.

<sup>439</sup> Özcan, Ali Kemal, *Turkey's Kurds. A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York: Routledge, 2006): pp. 99-102.

<sup>440</sup> Yinanç, "Propaganda Warfare with the Outlawed PKK".



doctrines, the PKK had to modify its party principles so as to adapt itself to the ‘New World Order’ and thus espoused a democratic discourse in the 1990s.<sup>441</sup>

At its fifth congress held in 1995, the organization removed the symbols of hammer and sickle from its flag and sought to downplay its Marxist-Leninist credentials.<sup>442</sup> In an interview conducted by *Middle East Quarterly* with Öcalan in 1998, he stated that it was “not possible” for the PKK to be a communist organization and that communism adopted by the Soviet Union represented a system of government who did not give any value to human beings while the United States, on the other hand, stood for development and progress.<sup>443</sup> He also indicated that all he asked for was “real democracy in Turkey” and equality between Turkish and Kurdish citizens.<sup>444</sup>

This substantial shift in the PKK’s ideology from Marxism-Leninism to Western liberal values in the mid-1990s intended to “improve its image” and broaden its outreach to new allies.<sup>445</sup> From then on, the PKK would seek to gain new international sponsors and maintain its popularity among its Kurdish support base by declaring itself the champion of democratic liberal principles. It was indeed Europe and the United States that the PKK wished to court and whose support and backing it wanted to obtain for its regional ambitions. Now that the Soviet Union collapsed and socialist ideology lost its primary sponsor and then universal appeal, the PKK increasingly adopted Western values as its rallying cry to try to mobilize the Western world behind the Kurdish cause. Since the early 1990s, Western values such as democracy, secularism, human rights, and pluralism were in a global ascendance in the absence

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<sup>441</sup> For a detailed analysis of the transformation in the PKK rhetoric, see: Güneş, Cengiz, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey. From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012): pp. 124-151.

<sup>442</sup> Romano, David, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): p. 142.

<sup>443</sup> “We are Fighting Turks Everywhere”, *Middle East Quarterly*, 5/2 (1998): p. 80.

<sup>444</sup> “We are Fighting Turks Everywhere”, *Middle East Quarterly*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>445</sup> Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, p. 142.

of an opposing ideology, so the PKK responded quickly to the change of the zeitgeist by modifying its ideology accordingly.

It took Öcalan more than 10 years to come up with an overarching ideology to substitute the Marxist-Leninist framework of the PKK. In March 2005, he released the *Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan*<sup>446</sup> and announced from his prison cell that the ‘new’ PKK would be structured in accordance with the tenets of this new ideology which he called ‘democratic confederalism’ and described as “a non-state social paradigm [...] based on grass-roots participation.”<sup>447</sup> Democracy, human rights, multiculturalism, pluralism, freedom, social justice, ecology, and feminism constituted the main pillars of the newly invented PKK ideology.<sup>448</sup> It is no coincidence that these values are also the main components of Western liberal societies. It attests the conscious efforts on the part of Öcalan to gain Western sympathies by means of adopting their values.

As for the PYD, the offshoot of the PKK in Syria, it also adopts Öcalan’s democratic confederalism and employs this ideology as the building block of the Kurdish society in Northern Syria. So, it is not a coincidence that the letter “D” in the acronym “PYD” stands for “democratic” testifying the group’s adherence to democracy, albeit only in name. More importantly for the research question of this thesis, liberal ideas, and principles advocated by the new PKK ideology have been employed by the PYD as an instrument to reach out to the international audience.<sup>449</sup> The PYD’s media campaign to improve its image in the eyes of the world community thus comprised of Western, democratic and universalist principles such as “women’s rights, democracy, pluralism, diversity, economic justice, and even environmental

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<sup>446</sup> Wilgenburg, Wladimir V., “Kurdish Rebels Look to Form Transitional Government in Syria”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, 11/15 (2013): p. 5.

<sup>447</sup> Öcalan, Abdullah, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011): p. 33.

<sup>448</sup> Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, pp. 21-34.

<sup>449</sup> Orton, Kyle W., *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters. The PKK in Syria* (London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2017): p. 36.

sustainability.”<sup>450</sup> So, as claimed by Rana Khalaf, a senior researcher in *Chatham House*, the PYD’s rule in Northern Syria was representing the values that the West stood for. By employing these values and principles in its messaging and thus portraying itself as the champion of Western ideals, the PYD aimed to make a favorable impression on Western public opinion who was already sympathetic to the organization thanks to the fight it was conducting against IS as the Western partner on the ground in Syria.

## **5.2. Western Rhetoric of Democracy and Kurds**

It was not hard, therefore, for Western media to attribute a liberal and democratic character to Syrian Kurds and the PYD as the group already paved the groundwork for it with an effective media and public diplomacy campaign it conducted since taking control of the Kurdish areas of Syria. What also facilitated the framing of Kurds as such was their historical portrayal as a democratic nation by the West.

In the wake of the First World War, as part of the Western effort of rebranding Kurds with an image more suitable to the liking of the Western public, Kurds were depicted as a nation “closer to the Europeans than the Arabs”<sup>451</sup> and described as a society possessing characteristics similar to that of Western people. This discourse invented by Western Kurdologues presented the Kurdish society to the West as a civilized nation in which individual rights and freedoms were prevalent and Kurdish women had equal rights with Kurdish men.<sup>452</sup> There was also a particular emphasis on the ostensibly secular-leaning of the Kurdish society. It was historically argued by

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<sup>450</sup> Khalaf, Rana, “Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria”, *Chatham House*, December 2016, p. 22, available at: [www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria](http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria), access date: 15 August 2019.

<sup>451</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 206.

<sup>452</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 338.

Western circles that Kurds were a religiously tolerant nation on whose culture Islam exercised little weight.<sup>453</sup>

With the emergence of IS as a threat to Western security and the burgeoning alliance between the West and the PYD to counter the rise of the jihadists, Western media as well as some Western academic circles tapped into the same century-old strategy of reinventing a positive Kurdish image as a champion of Western values. Kurds were therefore characterized as a nation that possessed Western values and liberal democratic credentials with a significant emphasis on the empowerment of Kurdish women in Kurdish society. To give an example, David L. Phillips, a former senior adviser to the US Department of State, suggests that Kurds felt “kinship with the West” and had “secular pro-Western orientation.”<sup>454</sup> In the book he wrote in 2015 about the growing Kurdish influence across the Middle East, he claims that Kurds had “a long legacy of pluralism”<sup>455</sup> and that they were “the only champions of local democracy” in the region.<sup>456</sup> He concludes his book by arguing that Washington should support Kurds because “the United States has no friend but the Kurds” in Syria and Iraq.<sup>457</sup>

The representation of the PYD as a democratic front is also maintained by some pro-Kurdish reporters such as Mutlu Çiviroğlu, a Turkish Kurd working as a VOA journalist in Washington and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a pro-PYD freelance journalist currently residing in Northern Syria, in the articles or reports published or cited by Western-based newspapers and think-tanks. For example, according to an article co-authored by these two reporters and published by *the Atlantic Council* on 23 September 2014 (a week into the IS offensive on Kobane), Syrian Kurds were “ready to fight alongside any secular group that will work for a pluralist and

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<sup>453</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, pp. 208-212.

<sup>454</sup> Phillips, David L., *The Kurdish Spring. A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015): p. 227.

<sup>455</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. xx.

<sup>456</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. ix.

<sup>457</sup> Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring*, p. 235.

democratic Syria against ISIS and the Assad regime.”<sup>458</sup> They evidently bring to the fore the PYD’s alleged democratic, secular and pluralistic credentials in an effort to mobilize international support for the group. Therefore, it is clear that the Kurdish image is reinvented once more by the West as compatible with Western values and instrumentalized subsequently as a political discourse to bolster the argument that the United States and Europe should give backing to Syrian Kurds in their struggle.

As was explained in Chapter 2, after the IS offensive on Kobane in September 2014, Western media started its pro-PYD coverage and sought to legitimize the organization by employing various discourses. As in line with the historical depiction of Kurds by Western Kurdologues, Western media also played a key role in the transformation of the PYD image in the eyes of the international community from a dubious Kurdish organization to that of freedom fighters who not only conducted an effective struggle against the brutal and fearsome jihadists of the Middle East but also led “the Kurdish people’s fight for democracy”, gender equality and human rights.<sup>459</sup> Within the newly created Western narrative, Kurdish militants were framed as “the West’s lone partners in Syria defending humanity and Western civilization against the barbarism of IS.”<sup>460</sup> In the media campaign launched by Western media, the PYD represented a democratic, secular, egalitarian and progressive force in the face of IS who symbolized the embodiment of a radical, jihadist and extremist ideology. It was basically a confrontation of the good against the evil.

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<sup>458</sup> Çiviroğlu, Mutlu and Wilgenburg, Wladimir V., “Kurdish-Arab Rebel Alliance may Be Key to Obama’s Syrian Strategy”, *The Atlantic Council*, 23 September 2014, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/kurdish-arab-rebel-alliance-may-be-key-to-obama-s-syrian-strategy](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/kurdish-arab-rebel-alliance-may-be-key-to-obama-s-syrian-strategy), access date: 15 August 2019.

<sup>459</sup> “Father of UK Woman Fighting IS Praises Her Passion”, *BBC*, 17 February 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-39006606>, access date: 17 August 2019.

<sup>460</sup> Gürcan, Metin, “Is the PKK Worried by the YPG's Growing Popularity?”, *Al-Monitor*, 7 November 2019, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/turkey-syria-pkk-worried-by-growing-popularity-of-ypg-kurds.html>, access date: 7 November 2019.

### 5.3. BBC and VOA Coverage

The BBC and VOA took part in this media campaign and adopted a pro-PYD position in their coverage by depicting the Kurdish areas in Northern Syria as being administered by the PYD within a democratic, pluralist and secular structure. They attributed liberal Western characteristics to the PYD in an effort to garner international support for the group and legitimize its control over the peoples and areas in Northern Syria.

A 20 minute-long documentary broadcasted by the BBC in November 2014 with the title *Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution* is a vivid example of the effort on the part of Western media to embellish the PYD with a democratic character. In the video, the PYD control in Northern Syria is described to the audience as “an unprecedented experiment of democracy” based on “collective agreement, popular local assemblies, and grassroots decision-making.”<sup>461</sup> It is claimed that Kurdish revolutionaries forged a democratic, egalitarian and multiethnic mini-state from the chaos of the Syrian Civil War. The narrator also argues that the Kurds organized around the PYD established “a pluralist society, an ethnic mix made up of Kurds, Yazidis, Arabs, Turkmens and Christians that respect different religions.” The newly created Kurdish entity is granted a secular disposition as well with the narrator stating that there was a “separation of church and state” and “no religious restrictions on public behavior.”<sup>462</sup>

This particular emphasis on secularism is of the essence as it is juxtaposed with the radical Islamist and jihadist ideology of IS. An article issued by the BBC in January 2015 notes that the mainstream Kurdish politics was “mostly secular” and that “Kurdish nationalism, a largely secular tradition, is up against political Islam” in the new context of the Middle East since the so-called Arab Spring.<sup>463</sup> The article is

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<sup>461</sup> “Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution”, *BBC Our World*, 16 November 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04t0xnn>, access date: 8 March 2019.

<sup>462</sup> “Rojava”, *BBC Our World*.

<sup>463</sup> “Kurds Demand Unity amid Battle against Islamic State”, *BBC*, 14 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30784547>, access date: 3 September 2019.

concluded by the argument that the society established by the PYD “could be a blueprint for a more tolerant and stable region”, i.e. the direct opposite of the intolerant, rigid and ultra-conservative society created by IS.

The dichotomy drawn between the PYD and IS is clear. But another article posted on the BBC website in June 2015 also compares the PYD ideology with the ideologies of other opposition groups in Syria. The article points out that the PYD “shares the PKK’s secular, leftist-rooted ideology, which stands in stark contrast to the various shades of Islamist identity adopted by most other major Syrian opposition groups.”<sup>464</sup> As can clearly be seen, the ideologies of the PYD and other opposition groups are juxtaposed in the article and the secular character of the PYD is contrasted with the Islamist disposition of other groups. So, while trying to legitimize the PYD by bringing to the fore its characteristic features compatible with Western values, the BBC also seeks to delegitimize other Syrian opposition groups in the eyes of the Western public by underlining the ‘non-Western’ qualities they adopted.



**Fig. 11: A Syriac Orthodox Church in Derik, Northern Syria. The BBC depicts the PYD-held areas as “a sanctuary for all sorts of minorities.” *Rojava: Syria’s Secret Revolution, BBC.*<sup>465</sup>**

<sup>464</sup> “Is Tal Abyad a Turning Point for Syria’s Kurds?”, *BBC*, 16 June 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33146515>, access date: 3 September 2019.

<sup>465</sup> “Rojava”, *BBC Our World*.

VOA coverage also makes a comparison between IS and the PYD bringing to the fore the democratic and secular character of the latter. After the eviction of IS from the Syrian city of Tal Abyad by the YPG militia in July 2015, an article was published by VOA which reported that the residents of the city were “free of Islamic State rule”, but the arrival of the “new, secular leadership” was too late for the city’s Christians who were persecuted under the rule of jihadists.<sup>466</sup> Another VOA article released in October 2017 states that Washington had “found in the secular-leaning, disciplined fighters its main leverage in Syria.”<sup>467</sup> As can clearly be seen from the statements cited from the BBC and VOA, there is a conscious effort to give extra credit to the PYD for having a secular disposition in contrast to the other groups in Syria who adopted non-secular, jihadist or Islamist ideologies. This rhetoric is indeed destined to the Western audience who is itself secular and deeply hostile to jihadism.

The BBC also seeks to give the impression to the international community that the PYD administered Northern Syria with the partnership of other Kurdish parties operating there. An article posted on the BBC website in March 2016 states that it was “the PYD and other Kurdish parties” that “created autonomous administrations based in the enclaves, or cantons, of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira” in January 2014.<sup>468</sup> However, contrary to what is suggested here by the BBC, the autonomy declaration was a unilateral decision taken by the PYD itself without conferring with the local populations or other Kurdish parties organized under the KNC umbrella. Another BBC article published in October 2014 notes, “the Kurdish parties have governed the area [Kobane] since the Syrian army withdrew two years ago.”<sup>469</sup> What the BBC seeks to imply in these articles is the PYD administration of the areas under its control

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<sup>466</sup> “Armenian Syrian Remains After Most Fled”, VOA, 3 July 2015, available at: [voanews.com/middle-east/armenian-syrian-remains-after-most-fled](http://voanews.com/middle-east/armenian-syrian-remains-after-most-fled), access date: 17 August 2019.

<sup>467</sup> “It’s not Independence, but Syria’s Kurds Entrench Self-Rule”, VOA, 8 October 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/its-not-independence-syrias-kurds-entrench-self-rule](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/its-not-independence-syrias-kurds-entrench-self-rule), access date: 21 July 2019.

<sup>468</sup> “Syria Conflict: Kurds to Declare Federal System”, BBC, 16 March 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35826668>, access date: 19 August 2019.

<sup>469</sup> “Kobane: Civilians Flee IS Street-to-Street Fighting”, BBC, 7 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29515431>, access date: 19 August 2019.



sharing power with other Kurdish parties within a democratic and pluralist model. However, as was explained in Chapter 3, the PYD has ruled the areas it captured in Northern Syria with “an iron fist” and excluded other Kurdish parties from the decision-making mechanism.<sup>470</sup> Western media avoids covering the authoritarian practices of the PYD and instead prefers to create a positive image of the group as the advocate of Western ideals such as democracy, secularism, plurality, and tolerance. The reason why is that the PYD was the Western ally in Syria that needed to be portrayed favorably to the international community for the anti-IS fight to be legal and legitimate.

#### **5.4. The Syrian Democratic Forces and Western Values**

As was discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, the SDF was established in October 2015 as the formal partner group of the Western coalition in the anti-IS struggle. In addition to serving as an instrument to conceal the PKK-PYD connection and facilitate the YPG advance in Arab majority areas, the formation of this umbrella organization as a multiethnic and multireligious alliance made up of Kurdish, Arab, Christian, Armenian and Turkmen militias was quite significant also because it contributed substantially to the pro-PYD media campaign of the West by assisting in the portrayal of the coalition partners as democratic, pluralist, tolerant and secular forces.

The fourth and final reason for the creation of the SDF was, therefore, to bolster the invented image of the PYD as a democratic organization in the eyes of the international community. By integrating fighters from Syria’s various ethnic and religious groups in the ranks of the new organization and thus, creating an army of multiethnic and multireligious character, the coalition wished to enhance the democratic, pluralistic, diverse and secular credentials of the SDF and by extension the PYD. The portrayal of the PYD as adopting these liberal values espoused by most

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<sup>470</sup> Balanche, Fabrice, “The United States in Northeastern Syria”, *Hoover Institution*, 17 July 2018, p. 3, available at: [hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria](https://www.hoover.org/research/united-states-northeastern-syria), access date: 15 January 2019.

Western countries was meant to promote the international standing of the group in the West.

Besides, even the name of the organization serves a media purpose by means of the chosen words. Firstly, although the organization is dominated to a substantial extent by the YPG militants and thus, mostly serves the Kurdish agenda, it claims to represent the Syrian people as a whole by having the word “Syrian” in its name. Secondly, by including the word “democratic”, it is implied that the SDF abides by democratic values. However, no matter what name is given to the new organization, it is still the YPG, but only in a different brand. So, the SDF is no more than “a form of window dressing [...] aimed at legitimizing the YPG presence and its alliance with the US.”<sup>471</sup>

Even a US Army General confirmed this phenomenon in a press conference in July 2017 while answering questions from reporters about anti-IS operations. Raymond Thomas, the former head of Special Operations Command stated:

We literally played back to them: ‘You have got to change your brand. What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG?’ With about a day’s notice, they declared that they are the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a stroke of brilliance to put democracy in there somewhere. But it gave them a little bit of credibility.<sup>472</sup>

As is confirmed by the American general, in addition to avoiding the negative consequences of the YPG label, the SDF was established to also give credibility to the Kurdish militia by invented democratic credentials. So, the participation of the religious and ethnic groups in the umbrella organization is mostly irrelevant because it is the YPG who “still dominates the SDF’s command structure” and “call the shots”

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<sup>471</sup> Alaaldin, Ranj, “What’s Next for Turkey, the US, and the YPG After the Afrin Operation?”, *Brookings*, 26 January 2018, available at: [brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/26/whats-next-for-turkey-the-us-and-the-ypg-after-the-afrin-operation](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/26/whats-next-for-turkey-the-us-and-the-ypg-after-the-afrin-operation/), access date: 10 October 2019.

<sup>472</sup> “U.S. General Told Syria’s YPG: You Have Got to Change Your Brand”, *Reuters*, 22 July 2017, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-ypg/u-s-general-told-syrias-ypg-you-have-got-to-change-your-brand-idUSKBN1A62SS>, access date: 16 September 2019.

within the organization.<sup>473</sup> However, it did not hinder Western media from portraying the SDF as a democratic, pluralist and multiethnic organization.

For this joint American-YPG initiative to fully bear its fruits, the media agencies' involvement was indispensable. So, the BBC and VOA sought to make sure that all the four objectives that the Western coalition was hoping to achieve were fulfilled subsequent to the establishment of the SDF in October 2015. In the BBC and VOA coverage, there was a particular emphasis on the diverse nature of the SDF alliance. Many news articles underlined the seemingly pluralistic, multiethnic and multireligious character of the newly created organization and sought to get it recognized as the legitimate partner of the US-led coalition in the eyes of the international community. A news article published by the BBC in November 2015 states that the Kurdish fighters were "supplemented by some Arab rebel elements and local Christian fighters" within the newly created SDF.<sup>474</sup> The incorporation of Christian fighters in the ranks of the SDF and the coverage thereof by Western media was highly important because the participation of the co-religionists of the West in the anti-IS fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the Kurdish militia helps the PYD be looked at more favorably by the Western community. As importantly, this coverage depicts the SDF as a multireligious organization and assists in the portrayal of the PYD as an organization tolerant towards the minorities in Northern Syria. Another BBC news article again from November 2015 highlights the ethnically diverse character of the SDF by describing the organization as a "multiethnic force."<sup>475</sup> One last news article released by the BBC in March 2017 goes a step further and includes

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<sup>473</sup> Tahiroglu, Merve and Gabel, Andrew, "Saving Northeastern Syria: How Washington Can Help Strike a Deal Between Turkey and the Kurds", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April 2019, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-04-09/saving-northeastern-syria>, access date: 5 November 2019.

<sup>474</sup> "Syria War: Attacks Fuel Search for Solution", *BBC*, 28 November 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34943729>, access date: 17 September 2019.

<sup>475</sup> "Islamic State Conflict: On the Frontline with a Multiethnic Force", *BBC*, 9 November 2015, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-34763647/islamic-state-conflict-on-the-frontline-with-a-multiethnic-force](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-34763647/islamic-state-conflict-on-the-frontline-with-a-multiethnic-force), access date: 17 September 2019.

the Turkmen and Armenians as well within the SDF by noting that the alliance was established by the “Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen and Armenian militias opposed to IS.”<sup>476</sup>

The VOA coverage was no different from the BBC’s in terms of emphasizing the diverse disposition of the SDF. A news article issued by VOA in January 2016 points out that the SDF alliance consisted of “a group of Kurdish, Arab and Christian fighters.”<sup>477</sup> Another news article released by VOA in February 2017 indicated that the SDF was “a multiethnic and multireligious alliance of militia fighters opposed to the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.”<sup>478</sup> As can be understood from the BBC and VOA coverage, Western media highlights the pluralistic character of the SDF with reference to its being made up of fighters from several ethnic and religious backgrounds. This particular emphasis on the SDF’s ‘seemingly’ diverse disposition contributes to the portrayal of the PKK affiliates in Syria as the champions of Western values and ideals such as democracy, pluralism, tolerance, and diversity.

## 5.5. Conclusion

If Kurds wish to gain international support for their cause of autonomy or independence in the Middle East, democracy is a principle “sine qua non”<sup>479</sup> which they have to apply or at least pretend to implement in the areas under their control. While administering the territories they captured in Northern Syria during the Syrian Civil War, the PYD selected the latter option and preferred to give the impression to international public opinion that they were governing the people under their control in accordance with the Western ideals of democracy, pluralism and human rights.

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<sup>476</sup> “Syria Fighters Take Control of IS-held Airbase Near Raqqa”, *BBC*, 27 March 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39401326>, access date: 17 September 2019.

<sup>477</sup> “Kurdish-led Forces Use Former Syrian Regime Base to Attack IS”, *VOA*, 11 January 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-led-forces-use-former-syrian-regime-base-attack](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-led-forces-use-former-syrian-regime-base-attack), access date: 18 September 2019.

<sup>478</sup> “Top US General Hears Turkey's Complaints About Kurdish Fighters”, *VOA*, 18 February 2017, available at: [voanews.com/europe/top-us-general-hears-turkeys-complaints-about-kurdish-fighters](http://voanews.com/europe/top-us-general-hears-turkeys-complaints-about-kurdish-fighters), access date: 18 September 2019.

<sup>479</sup> Bengio, Ofra, “Conclusion”, in Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, p. 274.

The group's desire to be the sole decision-maker outweighed the need for real democracy for gaining local and international acceptance. So, what they created and put into practice was solely a make-believe democracy.

However, even though the political system established by the PYD strongly showed the symptoms of an authoritarian rule with an iron fist, Western media presented the group to international public opinion as a democratic “alternative to an authoritarian regime and to an Islamist opposition.”<sup>480</sup> Western media agencies including the BBC and VOA made intensive efforts to demonstrate to the Western public that the PYD was a democratic, secular and pluralist organization that shared liberal Western ideals. By portraying the PYD as the champion of Western values, Western media sought to gain legitimacy for the organization and tried to legitimize the anti-IS struggle carried out predominantly by YPG militants.

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<sup>480</sup> Khalaf, “Governing Rojava”, p. 22.

## CHAPTER 6

### WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE OF KURDISH FEMALE FIGHTERS

As part of the Western strategy of promoting the label of ‘the Kurd’, Kurdish female fighters constituted one of the main components of the Western media coverage. This chapter will investigate how the PYD utilized Kurdish female fighters as an integral part of its international propaganda and how Western media likewise covered them extensively to muster sympathy for Syrian Kurds and promote the international legitimacy of the PYD.

It has become a common practice in military conflicts to publicize women as an effective way of winning the hearts and minds of masses. The conflict in Syria which started as a popular uprising in 2011, but led to a bloody civil war was no exception to this practice. During the war, women were widely displayed in the media outlets of the warring factions as well as in Western media agencies to make an impression on the international community who was watching the conflict closely. IS, for example, “recognized the importance of women and their role in producing and disseminating propaganda”<sup>481</sup> and thus, “featured women noticeably more” in its propaganda channels than any of the former jihadist networks.<sup>482</sup> However, there was one particular organization in Syria that utilized women as an instrument of propaganda more effectively than any other group on the ground fighting in the

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<sup>481</sup> “Women in Islamic State Propaganda: Roles and Incentives”, *Europol Specialist Reporting*, 14 June 2019, p. 13, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda>, access date: 14 August 2019.

<sup>482</sup> “Women in Islamic State Propaganda”, *Europol Specialist Reporting*, p. 3.

Syrian theatre of war. It was the PYD who, in addition to employing them on the military front against rival organizations, took advantage of Kurdish female fighters on the media front efficiently by producing a feminist narrative based on the emancipation of Kurdish women and by frequently distributing their images to the international media networks to promote the Kurdish cause in Northern Syria.

Western media, for its part, functioned as a conduit to deliver the messages of the PYD to the international audience and assisted the group in its effort to enhance its image and legitimize itself through the Kurdish women fighting against IS. Western media agencies also publicized Kurdish female fighters extensively to garner sympathy for Kurds and justify the Western partnership with the PKK-linked organizations who were conducting the Western battle in Syria.

Before any further elaboration, it will be informative to go back in time again and take a glimpse into how Kurdish movements in the past adopted the same strategy of drawing on Kurdish women to give credibility to Kurdish national ambitions and to obtain external support, particularly from Western governments. Besides, historical precedence will be provided as to how the West cultivated a positive image of the Kurdish woman in order to promote the reputation of Kurds in the West.

### **6.1. Western Portrayal of Kurdish Women**

Western travelers and orientalist have generally described “the beauty and the strong character of Kurdish women” who were represented to play an important role in Kurdish society as “mother, partner, political chief and sometimes fighter and bandit.”<sup>483</sup> According to their accounts, Kurdish women could walk around “freely and unveiled” and talk spontaneously with men, natives or foreigners

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<sup>483</sup> Galletti, Mirella, “Western Images of the Woman’s Role in Kurdish Society”, in Mojtaba Shahrzad (ed.), *Women of a Non-State Nation. The Kurds* (California: Mazda Publishers, 2001): p. 209.

notwithstanding.<sup>484</sup> The Kurdish woman was also depicted to “enjoy great authority” in family life to the extent that she was in fact “the one who ran the household.”<sup>485</sup>

Thomas Bois, a well-known French Kurdologue who worked in tandem with the exiled Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria to improve the Kurdish image among the Western public,<sup>486</sup> describes in detail the ‘elevated place’ women occupied in Kurdish society. He depicts the Kurdish woman as being “the pillar of the household” who “directs the affairs of the house [...] and controls household expenditure as she wishes.”<sup>487</sup> According to his accounts, the woman was as free as the man in the choice of a spouse, was “usually unveiled” and “enjoyed much more liberty than her sisters of other Muslim countries.”<sup>488</sup>

As part of the aforementioned Western strategy of “moral enhancement of some ethnic groups”<sup>489</sup> at the expense of others, a dichotomy was established by the West to draw a distinction between the Kurdish woman and the ‘Oriental’ woman who was often associated with “compliant obedience, subservience,”<sup>490</sup> harem, oppression and veil.<sup>491</sup> According to this categorization, Kurdish women were considered an “exception” in the Middle East in terms of the status of women due in part to the

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<sup>484</sup> Galletti, “Western Images of the Woman’s Role in Kurdish Society”, p. 210.

<sup>485</sup> Nikitin, Basil, “Quelques observations sur les Kurdes”, *Mercure de France*, 543 (1921): p. 670, available at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k201882n/f1.item>, access date: 20 October 2019.

<sup>486</sup> Tejel, Jordi, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)* (Berne: Peter Lang SA, 2007): p. 332.

<sup>487</sup> Bois, Thomas, *The Kurds* [Les Kurdes] (Beirut: Khayats, 1966): pp. 51-52

<sup>488</sup> Bois, *The Kurds*, p. 52.

<sup>489</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 205.

<sup>490</sup> Mehdid, Malika, “A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The ‘Oriental’ Female”, in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East. Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993): p. 40.

<sup>491</sup> Hamilton, Marsha J., “The Arab Woman in U.S. Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype”, in Joanna Kadi (ed.), *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994): p. 174.



“lesser weight Islam exercised on the daily life of the Kurds.”<sup>492</sup> They were regarded to enjoy more rights and freedoms in comparison with their Persian, Arab and Turkish sisters.<sup>493</sup> Even the way they covered themselves in compliance with the rules of Islam was considered unique and more moderate to bolster the invented image of Kurdish distinctiveness. In an article published in February 1921 by *Mercure de France*, an influential French journal of the time, to introduce Kurds to the French public, Russian diplomat and orientalist Basil Nikitin points out that Kurdish women did “not cover themselves like other Muslims.”<sup>494</sup> He goes on to argue in length how Kurds in general and Kurdish women in particular, differed vis-à-vis the other ethnic and religious groups present in the Middle East.

Kurdish women were then likened to Western women with respect to being “fit for civilization”<sup>495</sup> and being in equal standing with men. Thus, Kurds were described as being closer to Western civilization and belonging more to the Occident than the Orient “thanks to the place women occup[ied]” in Kurdish society as different from other Islamic societies.<sup>496</sup> As can be understood, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Western narrative sought to construct an image of the Kurdish woman as being “liberated and equal to man.”<sup>497</sup>

As will be explained presently, most of these themes employed by Western orientalist in the past to present the Kurdish woman in positive terms to the Western public have been equally utilized by Western media in the course of the Western involvement in Syria as part of the fight against IS.

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<sup>492</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 215.

<sup>493</sup> Hassanpour, Amir, “The (Re)production of Patriarchy in the Kurdish Language”, in Shahrzad, *Women of a Non-State Nation*, p. 227.

<sup>494</sup> Nikitin, “Quelques observations sur les Kurdes”, p. 670.

<sup>495</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 214.

<sup>496</sup> Nikitin, “Quelques observations sur les Kurdes”, p. 670.

<sup>497</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, p. 215.

From the 1920s onwards, and within the framework of the broader Kurdish national movement, Kurdish elites who were residing in Syria as political exiles from Turkey built their discourse on Kurdish women upon the narrative already constructed by Western orientalists. For these elites who organized the Kurdish struggle around the Khoybun League, women were the measure of the degree of progress in a nation.<sup>498</sup> Therefore, the improvement in the status of the Kurdish woman was deemed essential for the accomplishment of “the twin goals of Kurdish nationhood and modern progress.”<sup>499</sup> This particular emphasis on the advancement of womanhood and emancipation of women in Kurdish society was equally crucial for them to frame Kurds as possessing Western values in terms of the importance given to the woman issue and thus, to cultivate a positive Kurdish image in the eyes of the Western public in the hope that the governments of these ‘civilized nations’ could come to the help of Kurds when the necessity arose.<sup>500</sup> Therefore, by nourishing a narrative based on the similarity established between the modern, civilized, Western woman and the Kurdish woman, Kurdish propagandists aimed at gaining the support and sympathy of the Western community who, in turn, would pressure their respective governments to assist Kurds in their national struggle.

## **6.2. Kurdish Women in the PKK**

As for the PKK, the parent organization of the PYD/YPG, the approach it adopted vis-à-vis the Kurdish woman somewhat differed from the former Kurdish national movements. To start with, PKK propagandists “reinvented Kurdish national myths” to construct a narrative that centralized the status of women by associating Kurdish

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<sup>498</sup> Madenli, Ergani, “Kürtlerde Kadın Meselesi”, *Rojî Kurd*, 4 (1913): p. 12, available at: <http://kovarabir.com/y-c-ergani-madenli-kurtlerde-kadin-meselesi>, access date: 22 September 2019.

<sup>499</sup> Klein, Janet, “En-Gendering Nationalism: The ‘Woman Question’ in Kurdish Nationalist Discourse of the Late Ottoman Period”, in Shahrzad, *Women of a Non-State Nation*, p. 31.

<sup>500</sup> Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil*, pp. 214-215.

national liberation with the emancipation of the Kurdish woman.<sup>501</sup> According to this narrative, Kurds originally lived as an independent nation in a matriarchal society based on the equality of men and women.<sup>502</sup> However, when the Kurdish nation lost its matriarchal character with Kurdish women being dominated and oppressed by men, Kurds also lost their independence and national identity accordingly. So, the Kurdish liberation would be achieved only after the Kurdish woman was reinstated to her original place in society. Therefore, the emancipation of Kurdish women was made a prerequisite in order for the Kurdish nation to regain independence.

As a concrete manifestation of this narrative, the PKK heavily recruited Kurdish women into its ranks as “guerrilla fighters.”<sup>503</sup> This policy was the result of ideological compliance as well as a pragmatic consideration. It was ideologically-driven because the PKK discourse was heavily invested in the empowerment of women and the equality of the sexes. In addition, the incorporation of Kurdish women into the organization and their fighting alongside men were considered by the PKK leaders as an effective way to defy traditional Kurdish cultural norms and “challenge the religious and largely feudal Kurdish society.”<sup>504</sup>

The recruitment of women was equally an outcome of the PKK pragmatism as it was simply a means to increase the number of militants to be mobilized in the fight against the Turkish state.<sup>505</sup> At a time when the conflict escalated into a full-fledged war between the Turkish army and the PKK, the latter was obliged to resort to Kurdish women as a recruitment pool. Finally, as a further indication of the PKK’s pragmatism regarding the woman issue, the organization reinvented Kurdish women

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<sup>501</sup> Açıık, Necla, “Re-Defining the Role of Women with the Kurdish National Movement in Turkey in the 1990s”, Cengiz Güneş and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu (eds.), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey. New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation* (New York: Routledge, 2014): pp. 117-120.

<sup>502</sup> Açıık, “Re-Defining the Role of Women with the Kurdish National Movement”, p. 119.

<sup>503</sup> Muschara, Meagan, “Kurdish Women Guerrilla Fighters”, *History in the Making*, 8 (2019): p. 61.

<sup>504</sup> Basch-Harod, Heidi, “The Kurdish Women in Turkey”, in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening. Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): p. 181.

<sup>505</sup> Muschara, “Kurdish Women Guerrilla Fighters”, p. 61.

as freedom fighters and utilized their participation in the party ranks as a tool to appeal to Kurdish men and women to join the movement, and more importantly, to raise awareness of the Kurdish question in the international arena. So, “the radical actions taken by female activists, such as suicide bombings and self-immolations” were instrumentalized to bolster “the myth of free Kurdish woman” and to draw attention to the fight Kurds were conducting for their national liberation.<sup>506</sup>

### 6.3. Kurdish Women against the Islamic State

The attitude adopted by the PYD towards the Kurdish woman was no different from its parent organization, the PKK. Ideological and pragmatic considerations were of significance once again with regard to the place women occupied in society. Similar to the PKK, the PYD constructed a narrative that centralized the role of women in politics as well as in combat. In line with Öcalan’s ideology of democratic confederalism of which feminism was a “central pillar,”<sup>507</sup> new regulations were put into place in the Kurdish areas of Syria to promote the status of women such as “forbidding polygamy, marriage at a young age, and unilateral divorce.”<sup>508</sup> “The procedure of having a woman sit as co-chair alongside every chairman”<sup>509</sup> was adopted to increase women’s visibility in Kurdish politics. A “40 percent quota [was] set to encourage women to participate in institutions” established in the Syrian Kurdish areas.<sup>510</sup> These policies undertaken by the PYD concerning the advancement of Kurdish womanhood helped bolster the image of Kurdish women’s exceptionalism in the Middle East.

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<sup>506</sup> Açıık, “Re-Defining the Role of Women with the Kurdish National Movement”, pp. 118-120.

<sup>507</sup> Öcalan, Abdullah, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011): p. 21.

<sup>508</sup> Bengio, Ofra, *The Kurds in a Volatile Middle East* (Ramat Gan: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017): p. 23.

<sup>509</sup> Bengio, Ofra, “Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War”, *Middle East Journal*, 70/1 (2016): p. 39.

<sup>510</sup> Khalaf, Rana, “Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria”, *Chatham House*, p. 21, December 2016, available at: [www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria](http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/governing-rojava-layers-legitimacy-syria), access date: 15 August 2019.



Fig. 12: The SDF makes a special effort to publicize Kurdish female militants in its press conferences held to inform the international community of the progress in the anti-IS fight, *BBC*.<sup>511</sup>



Fig. 13: Kurdish female fighters are omnipresent in the SDF press conferences, *Ahval News*.<sup>512</sup>

<sup>511</sup> "Syria Conflict: Rebel Force Targets IS 'Capital' Raqqa", *BBC*, 6 November 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37889133>, access date: 14 November 2019.

<sup>512</sup> "ABD ve Rusya'ya Çağrı: Til Temir'deki Asuri ve Süryanilerin Hayatı Tehlikede", *Ahval News*, 1 November 2019, available at: <https://ahvalnews.com/tr/rojava/abd-ve-rusyaya-cagri-til-temirdeki-asuri-ve-suryanilerin-hayati-tehlikede>, access date: 14 November 2019.

More important than all in terms of reinventing an image of free Kurdish woman, however, was the measures taken by the PYD to enhance the role of Kurdish women in military service. To that end, the PYD established an all-female militia in 2012, the Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*, or YPJ).<sup>513</sup> The female fighters engaging in combat against IS militants quickly attracted the attention of the Western community who always had a “fascination with badass Kurdish women.”<sup>514</sup> However, it was with the IS offensive on the town of Kobane that Kurdish female militants gained “their greatest fame and worldwide support.”<sup>515</sup> Since then, Western media continues to publicize these female fighters extensively to the international audience with various motives in mind. So, during the course of the struggle against IS, the discourse on Kurdish women as freedom fighters was invigorated again and became one of the most recurrent themes employed by Western media as part of the information campaign to legitimize the PYD and to mobilize the international community behind the anti-IS efforts.

At a time when the international media networks were replete with the images of jihadist militants “parading with American weapons and vehicles and ridiculing American politics,” the images of Kurdish female fighters quickly replaced those that represented “the impotence and failure of American intervention.”<sup>516</sup> The defeat of the 60,000 strong Iraqi army<sup>517</sup> which was trained by American soldiers and equipped with cutting-edge American weaponry at the hands of “roughly 1,500 jihadists”<sup>518</sup> in

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<sup>513</sup> Taştekin, Fehim, *Rojava. Kürtlerin Zamanı* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016): p. 141.

<sup>514</sup> Dirik, Dilar, “Western Fascination with 'Badass' Kurdish Women”, *Al Jazeera*, 29 October 2014, available at: [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html), access date: 25 September 2019.

<sup>515</sup> Bengio, “Game Changers”, p. 39.

<sup>516</sup> Şimşek, Bahar and Jongerden, Joost, “Gender Revolution in Rojava: The Voices beyond Tabloid Geopolitics”, *Geopolitics*, 0/0 (October 2018): p. 6, available at: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2018.1531283](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2018.1531283), access date: 23 September 2019.

<sup>517</sup> “Iraqi Forces Attack Mosul, a Beleaguered Stronghold for ISIS”, *The New York Times*, 16 October 2016, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2016/10/17/world/middleeast/in-isis-held-mosul-beheadings-and-hints-of-resistance-as-battle-nears.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/17/world/middleeast/in-isis-held-mosul-beheadings-and-hints-of-resistance-as-battle-nears.html), access date: 15 September 2019.

<sup>518</sup> “The Capture of Mosul: Terror’s New Headquarters”, *The Economist*, 14 June 2014, available at: [economist.com/leaders/2014/06/14/terrors-new-headquarters](http://economist.com/leaders/2014/06/14/terrors-new-headquarters), access date: 15 September 2019.

Mosul in June 2014 caused public outrage in Western capitals. The images of Kurdish female fighters helped redirect the attention of the international community away from the rapid advance of IS whose emergence was in itself a result of the successive failures of the policies of Western governments in the Middle East.



Fig. 14: The IS militants waving black flags of jihad in an American Humvee, *Newsweek*.<sup>519</sup>

While the Western community was increasingly becoming concerned about the perceived inability of Western governments to take necessary measures in the face of the growing IS brutality, the images of Kurdish female fighters smiling to the camera in camouflage uniforms and carrying AK-47s were the perfect materials for Western media to produce a narrative of victory over IS and thus, appease the fears of the Western public. By releasing the images of these fighters, Western media assured the Western community that their governments were not staying idly by in the face of the

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<sup>519</sup> Brennan, David, "America Created ISIS, Top Iranian Official Claims", *Newsweek*, 22 June 2018, available at: [www.newsweek.com/america-created-isis-top-iranian-official-claims-990634](http://www.newsweek.com/america-created-isis-top-iranian-official-claims-990634), access date: 27 September 2019.

IS brutality and working with the “local, liberal Western” men and women and “beating the villain jihadists.”<sup>520</sup>



**Fig. 15: Kurdish female fighters equipped with AK-47s and wearing colorful YPJ patches, VOA.<sup>521</sup>**

Among the images given to the YPJ’s women combatants, perhaps the most powerful was that of freedom fighters. Kurdish female militants were depicted by Western media as “the revolutionaries, liberated and liberating, promising freedom not only for a people but also to women in general.”<sup>522</sup> Theirs was not only a battle to liberate the Kurdish nation from centuries-old oppression, but also a feminist struggle to emancipate Kurdish women from the chains of the patriarchal society. Their stories were told to the Western audience in detail portraying them to be fighting for freedom and equality. Their struggle was for the achievement of the ideals and values that Western society represented and possessed. This narrative was indeed addressed to

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<sup>520</sup> Şimşek and Jongerden, “Gender Revolution in Rojava”, p. 6.

<sup>521</sup> “Women’s Army Vows to Fight on in Syria After Briton’s Death”, VOA, 20 March 2018, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/womens-army-vows-fight-syria-after-britons-death](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/womens-army-vows-fight-syria-after-britons-death), access date: 5 October 2019.

<sup>522</sup> Alkan, Hilal, “The Sexual Politics of War: Reading the Kurdish Conflict through Images of Women”, *Les Cahiers du CEDREF*, 22 (2018): p. 70.



the Western audience and meant to muster support and sympathy from the Western public towards the Kurds fighting with the US-led coalition.

The dissemination of the images of Kurdish female fighters bringing to the fore their physical appearance and femininity were “used to juxtapose them to IS militants’ overemphasized masculinity.”<sup>523</sup> These images usually showed to the audience the most attractive and joyful Kurdish female fighters, with long and sometimes braided hair, making victory signs with their fingers. More often than not, they carried headbands or arm patches in yellow, red and green representing traditional Kurdish colors. All these seemingly insignificant details were in fact instrumentalized by Western media to create a contrast with the angry-looking, black-bearded and black snow-masked IS militants carrying black banners by their side. Thus, the images of good vs. bad and angel vs. evil/barbaric were invented by Western media according to the Western definition of friend and foe. The purpose of such coverage was clearly to justify the struggle against IS and legitimize those who were fighting against the jihadist organization.



**Fig. 16: A frightening image of the black-masked IS militants carrying automatic rifles, *BBC*.**<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Alkan, “The Sexual Politics of War”, p. 71.

<sup>524</sup> “Islamic State: Raqqa's Loss Seals Rapid Rise and Fall”, *BBC*, 17 October 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648>, access date: 4 October 2019.



**Fig. 17: Cheerful Kurdish women and men with colorful YPG banners, *BBC*.<sup>525</sup>**

Lastly, Kurdish female fighters were also contrasted with the stereotyped wives of the IS militants. An explicit comparison was made between the liberated, modern, strong and colorful Kurdish women and the subservient, ultra-conservative, religious and black-veiled IS brides. This juxtaposition helped bolster the myth of the free Kurdish woman and cultivate the image of Kurdish exceptionalism in the Middle East.

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<sup>525</sup> "Islamic State Suffers Biggest Setback as Kurds Take Key Town", *BBC*, 16 June 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33152153>, access date: 26 September 2019.



Fig. 18: A stereotypical image of IS wives dressed in black veils, *BBC*.<sup>526</sup>



Fig. 19: Joyful Kurdish female fighters, equipped with AK-47s, making V signs for victory, *VOA*.<sup>527</sup>

<sup>526</sup> "What Next for the Wives of Islamic State Fighters?", *BBC – The Real Story*, 2 March 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswkfk>, access date: 7 October 2019.

<sup>527</sup> "Women's Army Vows to Fight on", *VOA*.

#### 6.4. BBC and VOA Coverage

Among Western media agencies, the BBC and VOA played important roles in the framing of Kurdish female fighters the way that was explained above. There was a constant effort on the part of the BBC and VOA to highlight the participation of Kurdish women together with Kurdish men in the fight against IS. A BBC news article published in September 2014 stated that “the people of the region, both men and women,” were defending their homeland from the jihadi militants.<sup>528</sup> Another news article issued by the BBC in October 2014 notes that “the men and women defending Kobane [were] on their own.”<sup>529</sup> Lastly, a VOA article issued in March 2017 indicates that “Kurdish female fighters” from the YPJ were “operating alongside with the Syria Democratic Forces.”<sup>530</sup>



Fig. 20: Kurdish female and male militants singing together joyfully in Kobane, *BBC*.<sup>531</sup>

<sup>528</sup> “The Kurdish Women Fighting Islamic State in Syria”, *BBC*, 5 September 2014, available at: [bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-29073792/the-kurdish-women-fighting-islamic-state-in-syria](https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-29073792/the-kurdish-women-fighting-islamic-state-in-syria), access date: 2 October 2019.

<sup>529</sup> “Kurds Wary of Turkey Role in Fight against Islamic State”, *BBC*, 3 October 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29479615>, access date: 2 October 2019.

<sup>530</sup> “US Commander Downplays Chance of Big Iraq, Syria Troop Hike”, *VOA*, 1 March 2017, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-commander-downplays-chance-big-iraq-syria-troop-hike>, access date: 4 October 2019.

<sup>531</sup> “Inside Kobane”, *BBC World News*, 4 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3csxl5t>, access date: 5 October 2019.

One of the most powerful themes included in the BBC coverage was the portrayal of Kurdish female fighters as “the angels” fighting against “the evils” of the world. A news article published by the BBC in November 2014 narrates the detailed story of a Kurdish female fighter named Rehana, but known widely by the international media as the ‘Angel of Kobane’.



Fig. 21: The ‘Angel of Kobane’ or Rehana. Blonde hair, attractive smile, V sign for victory, *BBC*.<sup>532</sup>

Rehana is a Kurdish militant, fighting in the YPJ ranks who gained worldwide fame and recognition during the battle of Kobane. She is described in the BBC article as a brave fighter who joined the anti-IS struggle to avenge the death of her father who was killed by IS. The article notes that she came to “symbolize the female fighters” pitted against IS, a “barbaric force in the region” whose “respects for women’s rights are seen as severely limited.”<sup>533</sup>

The story of the ‘Angel of Kobane’ is told again in a BBC Sounds program released in November 2014, this time narrated like a fairy tale with dramatic music playing in

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<sup>532</sup> “Who is the Angel of Kobane?”, *BBC Trending*, 3 November 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-29853513>, access date: 8 October 2019.

<sup>533</sup> “Who is the Angel of Kobane?”, *BBC Trending*.

the background. She is described to the audience with an exotic female voice as following: “An angel, who is also a legend of the Syrian War. A brave female Kurdish fighter, the Angel of Kobane. Her picture has been tweeted and shared thousands of times: Locks of blonde hair, eyes that shine, military fatigues, an ammunition belt, with a left hand she makes the V sign for victory.”<sup>534</sup> It is also pointed out that she symbolized what everyone wanted to see: “women and men, standing up against a barbaric force in the region that wants to enslave women and confine them to their home.” Another article issued by the BBC in September 2016 refers to the statement of a female combatant about deceased female fighters as saying, “look at their pictures, they are all angels, all beautiful.”<sup>535</sup> It is clear according to the excerpts cited above, the BBC seeks to frame the conflict between Kurdish female fighters and IS as a struggle of the good against the bad and a fight conducted by the angels against an evil and barbaric force.

It was Carl Drott, a Britain-based Swedish journalist and freelance writer, who visited the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane in August 2014 and met the ‘Angel of Kobane’ there during a ceremony.<sup>536</sup> The photographs generally credited to Drott led to the emergence of the myth of the “Angel of Kobane” in September 2014. However, when people started to circulate her images on the internet with several heroic acts attributed to her such as the killing of 100 IS fighters with a sniper rifle, Drott shared a post on his Facebook account belying these claims:

There’s a Twitter rumour going around that this young woman is named “Rehana” and single-handedly killed 100 Islamic State (IS) fighters in Kobani. This is very unlikely since she’s not even a member of YPJ, but an auxiliary

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<sup>534</sup> “Myths of a Female Kurdish Fighter”, *BBC Sounds*, 1 November 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p029cx8m>, access date: 6 October 2019.

<sup>535</sup> “Kurdish ‘Angelina Jolie’ Devalued by Media Hype”, *BBC*, 12 September 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37337908>, access date: 6 October 2019.

<sup>536</sup> Drott, Carl (@carldrottpage), “There’s a Twitter rumour going around that this young woman is... [Facebook status update]”, *Facebook*, 18 October 2014, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/carldrottpage/photos/a.173088119553471/314701912058757/?type=3>, access date: 5 December 2019.

”home guard” unit. I met her during the ceremony when the unit was set up on 22 August. [...] [She] told me that she used to study Law in Aleppo.<sup>537</sup>

In light of Drott’s account, the ‘Angel of Kobane’ is a largely fictional character invented to bolster the image of Kurdish female militants as strong, brave, and attractive freedom fighters who were battling fearlessly against jihadists in Northern Syria alongside the Western coalition.



Fig. 22: ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’, wearing a colorful headscarf, carrying a machine gun, *BBC*.<sup>538</sup>

The case of the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ is also an important one. According to the news articles published by Western media outlets in September 2016, Asia Ramazan Antar (19) was fighting IS militants when she was killed in an IS suicide attack around Manbij in Northern Syria.<sup>539</sup> She was resembled to the famous Hollywood star Angelina Jolie because of her “glamorous looks and long brown hair.”<sup>540</sup> In Western popular culture, Angelina Jolie represents beauty and elegance. She is also widely known for her recent charity works, especially for Syrian refugees. So, she is

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<sup>537</sup> Drott, “There’s a Twitter rumour...”.

<sup>538</sup> “Kurdish ‘Angelina Jolie’ Devalued”, *BBC*.

<sup>539</sup> “Angelina Jolie of Kurdistan Dies While Battling ISIS”, *Daily Mail*, 7 September 2016, available at: [dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3777518/Angelina-Jolie-Kurdistan-dies-battling-ISIS-Woman-fighter-resembling-Hollywood-superstar-killed-clash-jihadists-Syria.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3777518/Angelina-Jolie-Kurdistan-dies-battling-ISIS-Woman-fighter-resembling-Hollywood-superstar-killed-clash-jihadists-Syria.html), access date: 15 November 2019.

<sup>540</sup> “Female Soldier Dubbed the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ Dies while Fighting ISIS in Syria”, *Daily Mirror*, 8 September 2016, available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/female-soldier-dubbed-kurdish-angelina-8791408>, access date: 15 November 2019.

a prominent American celebrity Western citizens can easily identify with. Western media, therefore, benefitted from her worldwide fame to garner sympathy for Syrian Kurds and their struggle against IS in Syria. That is why Asia Ramazan Antar came to be known as the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’.

The death of the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ was broadly covered especially by the British media networks. According to the BBC, she was “a team leader and machine-gunner [...] admired as much for her striking good looks as her military prowess.”<sup>541</sup> *The Times* described her as the “Heroine of the Kurds.”<sup>542</sup> Other British media outlets such as *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Metro*, *Daily Star*, and *Daily Express* reported on her death in detail and published her images extensively in their coverage. However, there was not much coverage of her death in the American media. The only influential American news website to cover her story was *HuffPost* who described her as a “fearless Kurdish woman fighter.”<sup>543</sup>



**Fig. 23: ‘Heroine of the Kurds’ – Poster girl for Kurdish female fighters, *The Times*.**<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> “Kurdish ‘Angelina Jolie’ Devalued”, *BBC*.

<sup>542</sup> “Heroine of the Kurds Dies Fighting Isis Suicide Attack”, *The Times*, 9 September 2016, available at: [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/heroine-of-the-kurds-dies-fighting-isis-suicide-attack-gv2hk878x](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/heroine-of-the-kurds-dies-fighting-isis-suicide-attack-gv2hk878x), access date: 15 November 2019.

<sup>543</sup> “The Kurds are Betrayed Again — Never Mind Angelina Jolie”, *HuffPost*, 9 September 2016, available at: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-kurds-are-betrayed-ag\\_b\\_11929624](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-kurds-are-betrayed-ag_b_11929624), access date: 15 November 2019.

<sup>544</sup> “Heroine of the Kurds Dies”, *The Times*.



It was Alberto Hugo Rojas, a Spanish freelance war reporter, who photographed the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ in October 2015. Rojas indicated to the author in a correspondence conducted through *Facebook Messenger* that it was not him who nicknamed Asia Antar Ramazan as ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’. Interestingly, he was not even aware of such a nickname until the photographs of Ramazan he took back in October 2015 were released by Western media networks after her death in September 2016.<sup>545</sup> Therefore, it is highly possible that it was Western media, in the first place, who created the nickname ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ subsequent to her death. Internet searches also verify this argument since no results can be found about the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ on the internet prior to her death in September 2016.

As was the case with the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’, the British media networks were particularly enthusiastic about publicizing Kurdish female fighters in comparison with the US mass media. They narrated the detailed stories and released the images of Kurdish women combatants because they aimed to counterbalance the publicity of the British females joining the IS group by creating a counter-narrative that could function as a positive alternative to the jihadist and extremist propaganda.

Another theme employed frequently by the BBC was the contrast established between the Syrian Kurdish society built on the equality of men and women and the ultra-conservative society of IS in which the role of women was more limited. A documentary entitled *Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution* and released by the BBC in November 2014 explains to the audience in detail the political and social system established under the control of the PYD in Northern Syria. Aside from portraying this experiment as a “mini-state of representative democracy based on equality, pluralism, and secularism,” the coverage describes this society as being governed by both “men and women” in which “women can dress as they want” without suffering from “religious restrictions on public behavior.”<sup>546</sup> The Syrian Kurdish society

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<sup>545</sup> Author correspondence with the reporter through *Facebook Messenger*, 7-10 December 2019.

<sup>546</sup> “Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution”, *BBC Our World*, 16 November 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04t0xnn>, access date: 7 October 2019.

described by the BBC constitutes the direct opposite of the conservative society established under the IS rule.



**Fig. 24: Kurdish female sniper observing enemy movement through the scope of her rifle, *Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution*.<sup>547</sup>**

Another juxtaposition is made between Kurdish women and the female militants of IS or more generally Muslim women. According to a news article published by the BBC in March 2015, it is stated that the Kurdish female fighters, “bareheaded and smiling,” drew a red cross on an illustration of a woman in hijab. The writing beneath the illustration says in Arabic, “the hijab will save you from hell.”<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> “Rojava”, *BBC Our World*.

<sup>548</sup> “Volunteering with the Kurds to Fight IS”, *BBC*, 15 March 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31878803>, access date: 7 October 2019.



Fig. 25: The illustration claimed to be crossed out by Kurdish female fighters, *BBC*.<sup>549</sup>

Yet another article contrasting the Kurdish woman with the Muslim woman was issued by the BBC in January 2015. The article reports on the funeral of a Kurdish female fighter and notes that the headscarves the wailing Kurdish women wore in the funeral “more closely resembled Venetian handkerchiefs than Islamic veils.”<sup>550</sup> Venetian handkerchief is a piece of white, napkin-like and rectangular-shaped cloth embroidered with laces on the sides just like the headscarves worn by Muslim Kurdish women. By resembling these two and depicting white Kurdish headscarves as more like a woman’s accessory than Islamic clothing, the BBC seeks to de-Islamize Kurdish women and thus integrate the covered Kurdish women into its narrative of secular, modern and empowered Kurdish women. As can be seen, the BBC makes a distinction between the Kurdish woman and the Muslim woman with reference to their covering style just as the Russian orientalist Basil Nikitin did in 1921 while he was introducing the Kurds to the Western community.

One last BBC article written in March 2016 to report on the declaration of a federal system by the PYD publishes an image placed just under the news headline. Against

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<sup>549</sup> “Volunteering with the Kurds”, *BBC*.

<sup>550</sup> “Kurds Demand Unity amid Battle against Islamic State”, *BBC*, 14 January 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30784547>, access date: 8 October 2019.

a background full of colorful Kurdish flags, the image features an attractive, bareheaded Kurdish girl smiling to the camera and making a V sign with her fingers, as well as the head of an older Kurdish woman wearing a black and white headscarf. Interestingly, the camera focuses on the young girl while blurring the image of the older woman. Even though it cannot be known for sure if it was a deliberate effort on the part of the BBC, the image clearly promotes the modern and secular Kurdish woman at the expense of the conservative and religious Kurdish woman.



**Fig. 26: The image of two different Kurdish women: Modern vs. conservative, BBC.**<sup>551</sup>

Western media portrayed Kurdish female fighters to be playing “a leading role” in conducting two fundamental battles: “They defend their territory and their people with the military fight” and are “laying the foundations for the construction of a different order.”<sup>552</sup> According to this narrative adopted by the BBC and VOA on Kurdish female combatants, they were freedom fighters who not only fought against IS and the ideology it represented but also struggled for Western ideals such as freedom, democracy, equality and most importantly women’s rights. An article

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<sup>551</sup> “Syria Conflict: Kurds to Declare Federal System” *BBC*, 16 March 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35826668>, access date: 29 September 2019.

<sup>552</sup> Dean, Valentina, “Kurdish Female Fighters: The Western Depiction of YPJ Combatants in Rojava”, *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, 1 (2019): p. 25.

released by the BBC in September 2016 states, “despite resistance from conservative religious groups, female fighters pushed Syrian Kurdistan to pass progressive laws that make violence against women, forced marriage and polygamy illegal.”<sup>553</sup> The article goes on to indicate that the reason behind the establishment of the YPJ was “to fight sexism and prevent using women as a sexual object” and “to give women their rightful place in society and for them to own their own destinies.”<sup>554</sup> Another news article released by the BBC in February 2017 points out that strong female fighters were “battling for freedom, democracy, and equality, in the midst of a terribly troubled region.”<sup>555</sup> Their struggle was about “much more than picking up a gun,” it was “for humanity and the freedom of all people.”<sup>556</sup> A BBC Sounds program broadcasted in July 2017 and entitled *the Battle for Raqqa*, notes that the women who fought against IS were taking down “not only IS fighters but also the very idea that a woman cannot be equal to a man.”<sup>557</sup> It was “not just a battle for the long-held dream of Kurdish independence, but a social revolution, a personal battle, and uprising against the norms of a conservative society; a battle against conservative belief and way of life.”<sup>558</sup>

Albeit not as fervent as the BBC has been in its coverage, VOA sought to describe Kurdish female fighters to the international audience in a similar portrayal. A news article published by VOA in November 2016 indicates that along with defending the Kurdish homeland, Kurdish female fighters were “also fighting for women’s

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<sup>553</sup> “Kurdish 'Angelina Jolie' Devalued”, *BBC*.

<sup>554</sup> “Kurdish 'Angelina Jolie' Devalued”, *BBC*.

<sup>555</sup> “UK Woman Kimberley Taylor Joins Fight against IS”, *BBC*, 10 February 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38928886>, access date: 30 September 2019.

<sup>556</sup> “UK Woman Kimberley Taylor Joins Fight against IS”, *BBC*.

<sup>557</sup> “The Battle for Raqqa”, *BBC Sounds*, 20 July 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p058jh19>, access date: 2 October 2019.

<sup>558</sup> “The Battle for Raqqa”, *BBC Sounds*.

rights.”<sup>559</sup> Another news article published by VOA in March 2018 notes that the YPJ was the “the first women’s army, fighting for women’s freedom and a democratic Syria.”<sup>560</sup> It is clear that the BBC and VOA seek to portray Kurdish women combatants as freedom fighters who were conducting a double struggle, one against IS and the ultra-conservative ideology it embodied, other for the liberal ideals and values represented by the West.



**Fig. 27: A Kurdish female fighter with long-braided hair, a colorful scarf, and an AK-47. Remarkably, She does not cover her hair with her scarf. Instead, she uses it like an accessory, VOA.**<sup>561</sup>

## **6.5. Journalists in Northern Syria: Providers of Images**

To better understand how Western media consciously utilized Kurdish female fighters as a tool to draw the sympathy of international public opinion in favor of the anti-IS fight in Syria and to figure out how the PYD was equally instrumental in this

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<sup>559</sup> “Kurdish Women Battle IS With Songs — and Machine Guns”, VOA, 4 November 2016, available at: [www.voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-women-battle-songs-and-machine-guns](http://www.voanews.com/middle-east/kurdish-women-battle-songs-and-machine-guns), access date: 2 October 2019.

<sup>560</sup> “Women’s Army Vows to Fight on”, VOA.

<sup>561</sup> “Syrian Regime Forms All-female Military Force in Kurdish Heartland”, VOA, 31 January 2017, available at: [www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syrian-regime-forms-all-female-military-force-kurdish-heartland](http://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/syrian-regime-forms-all-female-military-force-kurdish-heartland), access date: 3 October 2019.

media effort, it is crucial to shed light on how Western media networks provided the images of Kurdish female fighters from the combat zones in Northern Syria. But before doing so, the media landscape of Syria in general and the PYD-held areas in particular will be discussed in the first place.

Considering the general difficulties of conducting journalism in conflict zones, it was no easy task for reporters, local or foreign notwithstanding, to cover the Syrian Civil War without having trouble with the warring factions on the ground. According to Jean Philippe Rémy, a *Le Monde* reporter, “Every war is dangerous and in Syria, journalists are exposed to the same risks as in comparable wars in the past.”<sup>562</sup> As for *Reporters Without Borders* (*Reporters Sans Frontières* in French, or RSF),<sup>563</sup> Syria was “the world’s most dangerous country for journalists.”<sup>564</sup> RSF indicates that the PYD was one of the organizations in Syria that cracked down on journalism in the areas under its control:

Syrian and foreign journalists are persecuted not only by the regular army but also by armed opposition groups in the “liberated areas” in the north, and by the security forces of the PYD, the main political force in the regions with a mainly Kurdish population.<sup>565</sup>

The PYD’s attempt to oppress freedom of expression and freedom of the press turned into systematic repression with the establishment of the Union of Free Media (*Yekîtiya Ragihandina Azad* in Kurdish, or YRA) in 2013.<sup>566</sup> In a report published in

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<sup>562</sup> “Journalism in Syria: Impossible Job?”, *Reporters Without Borders*, 6 November 2013, p. 3, available at: [rsf.org/en/reports/journalism-syria-impossible-job](https://rsf.org/en/reports/journalism-syria-impossible-job), access date: 4 December 2019.

<sup>563</sup> Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization based in Paris, France. Its mission is to improve the standards of freedom of information and freedom of press worldwide. It also assists journalists reporting from conflict zones in material and financial means. For more detailed information about RSF, see: “RSF: For Freedom of Information”, *Reporters Without Borders*, undated, available at: [rsf.org/en/presentation](https://rsf.org/en/presentation), access date: 4 December 2019.

<sup>564</sup> “Journalism in Syria”, *Reporters Without Borders*, p. 3.

<sup>565</sup> “Journalism in Syria”, *Reporters Without Borders*, p. 3.

<sup>566</sup> “Freedom of the Press 2017 – Syria”, *Freedom House*, undated, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/syria>, access date: 5 December 2019.

May 2014, RSF resembled this union to an “information ministry seen as the only body that oversees media organizations that want to work in Rojava.”<sup>567</sup> The establishment of this new institution meant that journalists had to “request and obtain a permit from this body in order to be able to operate and work there [in Northern Syria].” So, “through granting the licenses, the council [YRA] has often been used to put pressure on media outlets or to hinder their reporting on the field.”<sup>568</sup>

What is the worst for freedom of media in Northern Syria, however, is the fact that the YRA “respond[ed] not only to the authorities but also to their security forces (Asayish)” and maintained an “organic relationship” with the PYD.<sup>569</sup> In many cases, the PYD was “said to be forcing journalists to register with them via the ‘free media center’ [YRA] while also forcing them to abide by certain regulations like disclosing their sources.”<sup>570</sup> Reporters also had to “keep the Asayish informed of their movements” which meant that the PYD could “arrest or even abduct journalists whom they see as too critical in order to silence them and intimidate the others.”<sup>571</sup> There were some red lines put in place violation of which was “out of question” such as “criticism of the political system.”<sup>572</sup> So, “if a journalist or an outlet does not abide

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<sup>567</sup> “How Kurdistan’s PYD Keeps the Media and News Providers in Line”, *Reporters Without Borders*, 1 May 2014, available at: [rsf.org/en/news/how-kurdistan-pyd-keeps-media-and-news-providers-line](https://rsf.org/en/news/how-kurdistan-pyd-keeps-media-and-news-providers-line), access date: 5 December 2019.

<sup>568</sup> De Angelis, Enrico and Badran, Yazan, “Journalism in Rojava (I): Media Institutions, Regulations and Organisations”, *OpenDemocracy*, 5 April 2019, available at: [opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/journalism-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations](https://opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/journalism-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations), access date: 6 December 2019.

<sup>569</sup> De Angelis and Badran, “Journalism in Rojava (I)”.

<sup>570</sup> Khalaf, “Governing Rojava”, p. 20.

<sup>571</sup> “How Kurdistan’s PYD Keeps the Media and News Providers in Line”, *Reporters Without Borders*.

<sup>572</sup> De Angelis, Enrico and Badran, Yazan, “Journalism in Rojava (II): Independent Media between Freedom and Control”, *OpenDemocracy*, 12 April 2019, available at: [opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/journalism-rojava-ii-independent-media-between-freedom-and-control](https://opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/journalism-rojava-ii-independent-media-between-freedom-and-control), access date: 7 December 2019.



by the rules [established by the PYD], they can be expelled and cannot operate in the area anymore.”<sup>573</sup>

As can be clearly seen, it was the PYD who had the sole authority to decide which reporters could conduct journalism in Northern Syria and which could not. It goes without saying that the PYD would give permission to operate in Northern Syria only to those reporters whose coverage would not damage the narrative constructed meticulously by the PYD as part of its propaganda campaign to influence international public opinion. It was against such a backdrop that ‘authorized’ Western and local journalists operated in the PYD-held areas in Syria and introduced Kurdish female fighters to the international community through the lenses of their cameras just as Western travelers and orientalists did in the past with their books and articles penned to influence Western public opinion in favor of Kurds.

Being aware of the importance of international visibility and recognition particularly in the eyes of the Western public, the PYD worked actively to facilitate the entry of Western journalists into the Kurdish areas of Syria. In fact, it was with the assistance of the YRA that “many foreign journalists from different countries” and “international news agencies throughout the world” could enter Northern Syria.<sup>574</sup>

With the growing role of the YPG militia in the anti-IS struggle in 2014, the number of Western journalists who traveled to the area to report on the fight against IS from the ‘ground zero’ increased accordingly. These journalists who operated in Northern Syria with the authorization from the PYD constituted one of the main providers of the images of Kurdish female fighters. For example, Alberto Hugo Rojas, the Spanish war correspondent who photographed the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ went to Syria through Iraq in October 2015 and operated in both countries for a couple of months as a war reporter covering the fight against IS carried out by Kurdish militias. In the

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<sup>573</sup> De Angelis and Badran, “Journalism in Rojava (II)”.

<sup>574</sup> Çiviroğlu, Mutlu, “Press Release of the Union of Free Media (YRA) regarding ‘Reporters Without Borders’ (RWB) Report on Rojava”, *civiroglu.net*, 8 May 2014, available at: <https://civiroglu.net/2014/05/08/press-release-of-the-union-of-free-media-yra-regarding-reporters-without-borders-rwb-report-on-rojava>, access date: 6 December 2019.

correspondence conducted on *Facebook Messenger*, he told to the author that he was “helped”, “looked after” and “protected” by Syrian Kurds during his stay in Northern Syria.<sup>575</sup> He also stated that he went to the trenches where he photographed the ‘Kurdish Angelina Jolie’ with “the coordination of the YPG” and “in an authorized group” with “people from different places in Europe.” So, as is confirmed by Rojas, the PYD authorizes the entry of Western journalists into Northern Syria and facilitates their travels in the area by giving them protection and providing accommodation. That is because the PYD needed visibility and recognition in the West that would be provided by Western journalists.

As for Carl Drott, the Swedish journalist who was credited with the iconic photograph of the ‘Angel of Kobane’, he made his “third visit to Northern Syria” in August 2014 where he “was met with enormous friendliness, helpfulness, and generosity.”<sup>576</sup> When asked by the author in a correspondence conducted on *Facebook Messenger* about the details of his travels to the PYD-held areas in Syria, Drott refused to comment without telling the reason why. However, when asked about the viral photograph of the ‘Angel of Kobane’, he said, contrary to what was claimed on the internet, that it was not him who took the shots of her. But he “was there” when that photograph was taken by “someone else”, probably an “unknown local”.<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Author correspondence with the reporter through *Facebook Messenger*, 7-10 December 2019.

<sup>576</sup> Drott, Carl (@carldrottpage), “In August-September, I made my third trip to North Syria/West Kurdistan. This time I visited Kobanî, where I was met with enormous friendliness, helpfulness, and generosity! ZOR SIPAS KOBANÎ! [Facebook status update]”, *Facebook*, 14 September 2014, available at: [www.facebook.com/carldrottpage/posts/303518896510392](https://www.facebook.com/carldrottpage/posts/303518896510392), access date: 6 December 2019.

<sup>577</sup> Author correspondence with the journalist through *Facebook Messenger*, 7-9 December 2019.

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# Grammar school revolution

Hundreds of comprehensives to select in biggest shake-up for 50 years

**Sam Coates** Deputy Political Editor  
**Greg Hurst** Education Editor

Hundreds of comprehensive schools will be allowed to select the brightest pupils and turn away under-achievers as part of the most radical reform of the education system in 50 years.

Theresa May will promise today to let comprehensives apply to choose their pupils based on ability, potentially creating hundreds more grammar schools and abandoning the central tenet of David Cameron's education policy. The prime minister will also

allow the existing 163 grammar schools to expand, while changing the law so that a new generation can open.

The reforms would mark the biggest change to the English education system since the late 1960s when grammar schools began to be converted to become all-ability comprehensives. The creation of new grammars was outlawed by Tony Blair in 1998.

Mrs May will also announce that she wants to relax restrictions on faith schools. Present rules barring them from selecting more than half of their intake on the basis of faith have failed,

she will say. The prime minister wants to boost the number of Catholic schools, declaring them more successful, ethnically diverse and popular than any other type of state school.

Mrs May, who was educated at grammar school and briefly attended a Catholic school, believes that the present system is unfair because it allows selection by house price: the richest can afford to move close to the best schools.

She wants to turn the system into an engine of social mobility, she will say in a speech at the British Academy in London. "We are going to build a coun-

try that works for everyone, not just the privileged few. A fundamental part of that is having schools that give every child the best start in life, regardless of their background."

In comments likely to anger senior figures in Mr Cameron's regime, she will insist: "For too long we have tolerated a system that contains an arbitrary rule preventing selective schools from being established — sacrificing children's potential because of dogma and ideology. The truth is that we already have selection in our school system and its selection by house price, selection

by wealth. That is simply unfair. That is why I am announcing an ambitious package of education reforms to ensure that every child has the chance to go to a good school... This is about being unapologetic for our belief in social mobility and making this country a true meritocracy — a country that works for everyone."

There are about 3,400 secondary schools in England. One source said that "hundreds" could become selective although Downing Street believes the number would depend on appetite. **Continued on page 2, col 3**

## Police defeat Isis-inspired bomb plot

**Fiona Hamilton** Crime and Security Editor  
**Duncan Gardham**

A suspected Islamic State-inspired bomb attack was foiled by police yesterday in what was described as the most significant terror plot against the capital for two years.

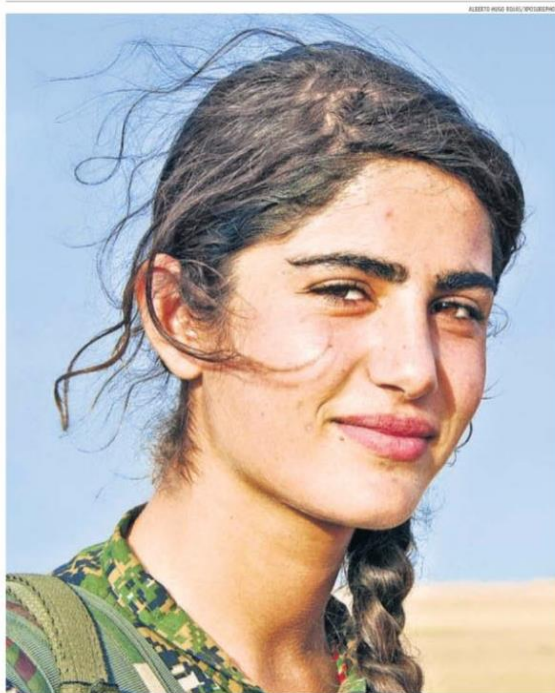
Counterterrorism detectives arrested two brothers, aged 19 and 20, over fears that they were trying to get hold of chemicals to construct an explosive device in west London. Their alleged targets were unclear but were thought to be random members of the public rather than the military or police.

The alleged plot was said to be in the very early stages but sources said that it was more sophisticated than a knife attack carried out at a Tube station in east London last year by a mentally ill man who had been downloading Isis material. It is possible that the brothers were also trying to get hold of guns and other weapons, raising fears of a Paris-style attack on several targets.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Metropolitan police commissioner, said in July that it was a matter of "when, not if" an Isis attack took place in the UK. He pointed to a number of terror plots that had been foiled since the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013, including one targeting US soldiers in East Anglia.

Security sources indicated that the latest suspected plot could be the most serious in the capital since two Isis supporters, Tarik Hassane and Suhail Majeed, were held for planning a drive-by shooting of a west London police station in October 2014. They said it was "highly significant" but warned that the nature and scale of the plot would remain unclear until searches in London and the Thames Valley were complete.

Scotland Yard said that two men were arrested at an address in west London as part of a "pre-planned, intelligence-led investigation" by the Met's SO15 Counter-Terrorism Command and the South East Counter-Terrorism Unit. They were thought to have **Continued on page 4, col 1**



Heroine killed Asia Ramazan Antar, the 19-year-old Kurdish machinegunner who became a poster girl for her people as she fought against Isis in Syria with an all-female brigade, has been killed in a car bomb attack **Page 30**

## Statins really are safe to use, experts insist

**Tom Whipple** Science Editor

Statins are safe and effective, the world's most comprehensive study has found — but millions of people are at risk of heart attacks and strokes after heeding "poor quality" research about side-effects.

Thousands of deaths could be avoided if more Britons took the cholesterol-lowering drugs, scientists who reviewed data on 100,000 patients said.

They attacked previous studies for exaggerating the dangers. Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, which published the review, said that he wanted to "correct the public record about the safety and efficacy of statins" after misleading research had harmed patients' health.

About six million Britons take statins, which cost about £2 per person per month. Those who have suffered a heart attack or stroke, or who are considered at risk, can take the drugs on the NHS. Yet scientists said that many were turning them down, while some GPs were reluctant to prescribe the drugs.

"This is really serious stuff," Professor Liam Smeeth, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said. "Cardiovascular disease is going down but it remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality. Heart attacks and strokes are devastating events and anything you can do to prevent them really matters. I'm all for debate but the problem with statins is that misleading claims are not supported by scientific evidence. We know these have influenced both clinicians and patients."

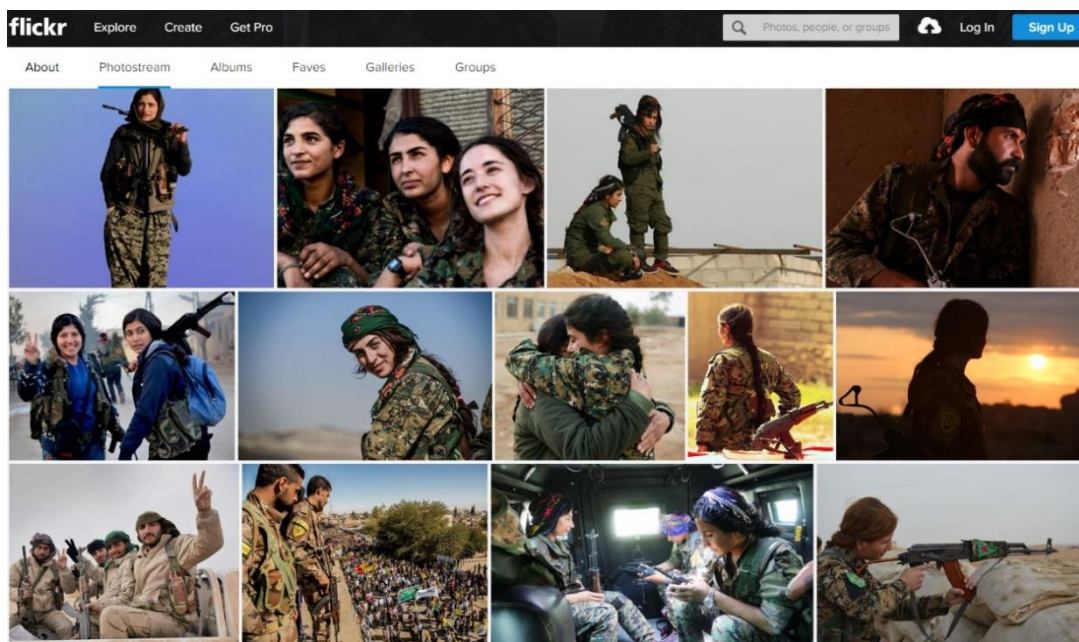
A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2013 made a claim, subsequently withdrawn, that 20 per cent of statins users suffered side-effects. Following that publication, about 200,000 patients stopped their treatment, resulting in an estimated 2,000 extra heart attacks.

Dr Horton said that medical journals had **Continued on page 2, col 3**

**Fig. 28:** The obituary of Asia Antar Ramazan was published on the front page of the printed version of *the Times* magazine on 9 September 2016. The iconic image of the 'Kurdish Angelina Jolie' seen above was captured by the Spanish war reporter Alberto Hugo Rojas in October 2015, *Twitter*.<sup>578</sup>

<sup>578</sup> Rojas, Alberto H. (@albertohrojas), "Kurdish heroine Asia Ramazan Antar dies fighting ISIS, thetim.es/2c3Wxkd, Foto: @albertohrojas, portada @thetimes", *Twitter*, 9 September 2016, 10:57, available at: [twitter.com/albertohrojas/status/774336039913680896](https://twitter.com/albertohrojas/status/774336039913680896), access date: 6 December 2019.

It is remarkable that the image of the ‘Angel of Kobane’ captured by an “unknown local” made it to a news article published by such a significant media broadcaster as the BBC. However, it was not an unusual phenomenon since one of the sources that Western media has frequently benefitted as providers of images and videos has been the social media accounts of local PYD supporters operating as PYD propagandists who publish pro-PYD or pro-Kurdish contents with high-quality images and videos. Since the people who managed these accounts were generally well-connected and had close contacts with the PYD officials and the YPG militants in the war zone, the contents that they shared on social media included striking, close-up images of attractive Kurdish female fighters that featured them in combat zones smiling to the camera in full military fatigues and equipped with automatic rifles. These images were exactly what Western media networks needed to consolidate the narrative of Kurdish female fighters discussed above in detail.



**Fig. 29: The Flickr page of the pro-Kurdish and pro-PYD account of ‘Kurdish Struggle’, Flickr.<sup>579</sup>**

Some of the pro-PYD social media outlets whose contents are often used by Western media networks in their coverage are as follows: ‘YPG International’ (@YpgInt), ‘Rojava’ (@AzadiRojava) and ‘Rojava Information Center’ (@RojavaIC) from

<sup>579</sup> Kurdish Struggle, “Photostream”, Flickr, undated, available at: [flickr.com/photos/kurdishstruggle/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/kurdishstruggle/), access date: 6 December 2019.

*Twitter*, 'Biji Kurdistan' and 'We Want Freedom for Kurdistan' from *Facebook* and 'Kurdish Struggle' from *Flickr*. All these social media accounts have been utilized by PYD propagandists to convey the PYD propaganda to the international audience. Western media, for its part, assisted this PYD effort greatly by sharing these pro-PYD contents including the images of Kurdish female fighters on their websites and social media outlets. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the international community watched the fight against IS partly from the lenses of PYD propagandists.

Finally, the most important provider of the images of Kurdish female fighters was by far the local photojournalists who were officially working for Western news agencies. Only two of them will be mentioned here as they were clearly the most successful among others in terms of the number of images published in the Western media coverage since the beginning of the Western partnership with the PYD.

Delil Souleiman is a Syrian Kurdish photojournalist based in Qamishli, Syria and works for *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), a French international news agency headquartered in Paris. Rodi Said is also a Syrian Kurdish photojournalist based in Ras al-Ayn, Syria and works for *Reuters*, a British international news agency headquartered in London. These two photojournalists have a lot in common: They are both Syrian Kurds from Northern Syria and operate in the PYD-held areas. They officially work for two of the most influential Western news agencies. Judging from the images captured by them of the most senior YPG, PYD and SDF officials, they are close and have easy access to the administration controlling the Kurdish areas of Syria. Most importantly, they are professional photographers whose striking images of perfect quality of especially Kurdish female fighters have been released many times by countless Western media networks including the BBC and VOA.

In a news article titled *Kurdish Women Fighters* that he wrote for AFP in March 2017, Delil Souleiman noted that he "love[d] focusing on the women fighters and

photographing them, recording for history how brave these women [were].”<sup>580</sup> Hence, it appears that they took an extra interest in photographing Kurdish female fighters. Lastly, judging from the substantial amounts of images available on the internet of Kurdish female fighters captured by them, it is highly possible that they are complicit in the joint PYD-Western media effort to publicize Kurdish female fighters to the international audience for propaganda purposes.

The author tried to get in touch with both photojournalists through social media to discuss the issue of Kurdish women and their extensive publicity in Western media thanks to their professional photojournalism. But these attempts did not yield any fruit since Rodi Said instantly blocked the author on *Twitter* and Delil Souleiman did not respond to his messages on *Facebook*.

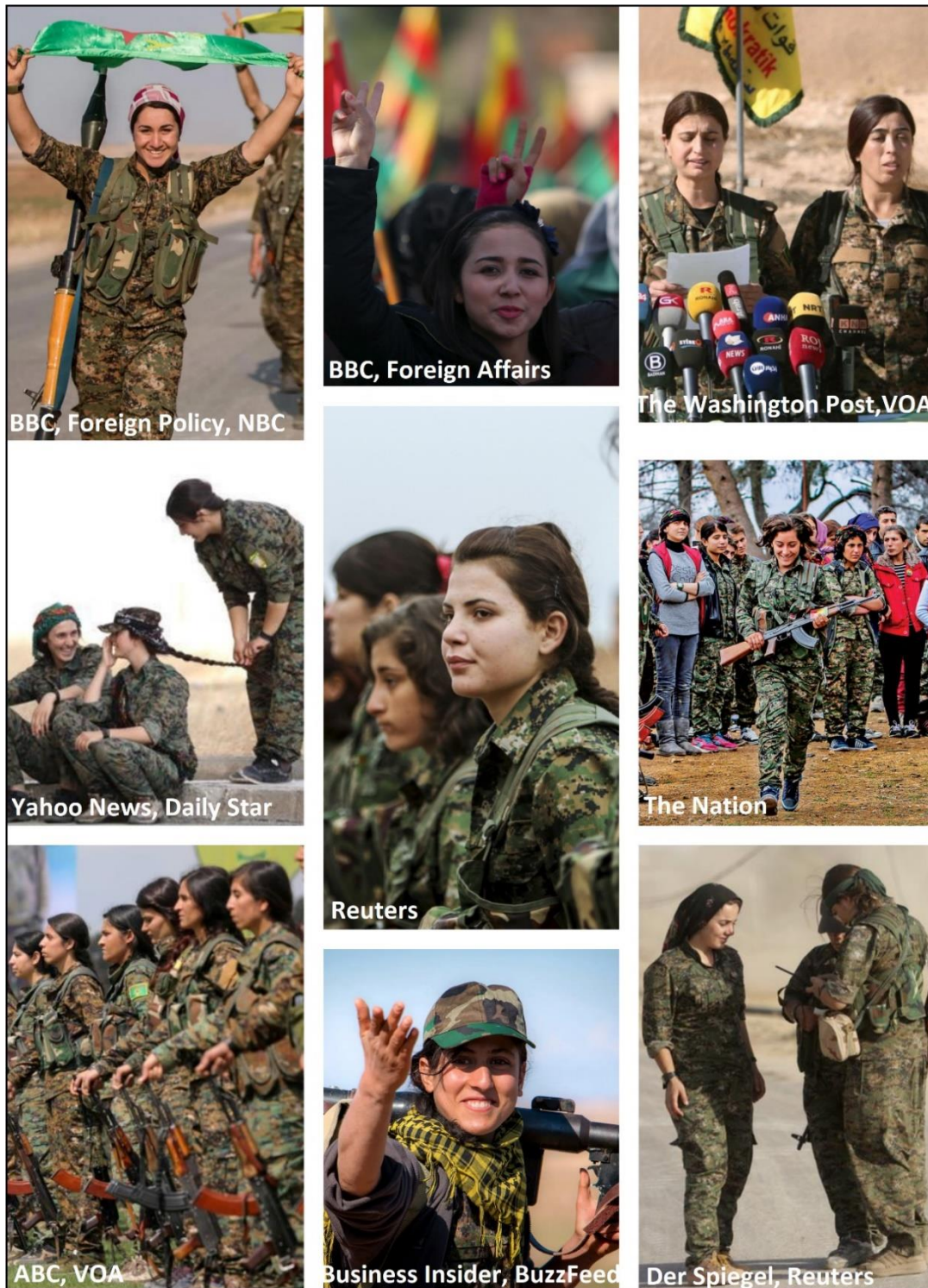
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<sup>580</sup> Souleiman, Delil, “Kurdish Women Fighters”, *AFP*, 30 March 2017, available at: <https://correspondent.afp.com/kurdish-women-fighters>, access date: 10 December 2019.



Fig: 30: Some iconic images of Kurdish female fighters captured by the AFP photojournalist Delil Souleiman. All of these were released by influential Western media networks, the names of which are respectively written below the photographs, *Google Images*.<sup>581</sup>

<sup>581</sup> "Delil Souleiman: Kurdish Female Fighters", *Google Images*, available at: <https://bit.ly/38vvg2b>, access date: 10 December 2019.



**Fig: 31: Some striking images of Kurdish female fighters captured by the Reuters photojournalist Rodi Said. All of these images were released by significant Western media networks, the names of which are respectively written below the photographs, Google Images.<sup>582</sup>**

<sup>582</sup> "Rodi Said: Kurdish Female Fighters", *Google Images*, available at: <https://bit.ly/2t7N3wp>, access date: 10 December 2019.



In light of the discussion conducted above regarding the relationship of the PYD with Western journalists, it is understood that the organization worked actively to facilitate their entry into and travels in Northern Syria for they would supply international news agencies with reports, images, and videos conducive to the improvement of the PYD image and increase in its international recognition. As for local journalists, the organization gave permission to operate only to those whose coverage was not critical of the political system constructed in Northern Syria in line with the PKK ideology. Local photojournalists close to the PYD who were working for Western news agencies were, on the other hand, privileged by the PYD authorities and given access even to the most senior officials within the administration. Thus, Western media networks had no trouble providing news materials from the combat zones in Northern Syria, particularly those that featured attractive Kurdish female fighters with cheerful expressions on their faces, in full military uniforms, equipped with AK-47s, with colorful scarves and long-braided hair that brought to the fore their femininity. These images made it extremely easy for Western media to muster sympathy for the Kurds of Northern Syria and to create a positive public opinion in favor of the Western intervention against IS.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

As understood from the news articles and images taken from Western media, Kurdish female fighters participating actively in the military operations against IS militants constituted one of the most significant materials at the disposal of Western media agencies in their quest to create a positive PYD image. Western media, the BBC and VOA in particular, made a lot of effort since September 2014 to portray Kurdish female militants as freedom fighters battling for both the Kurdish liberation and women's rights in the face of the IS group. The discourse and themes employed in their media campaign showed sharp similarities to those used by Western orientalist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this media effort, the PYD has been significantly instrumental by assisting both Western and local journalists to operate in Northern Syria and capture the close-up and quality images of Kurdish female fighters in war zones.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The Kurds in the Middle East, according to McDowall, the author of *A Modern History of the Kurds*, “remain a potential cat’s paw” for those states wishing to use them as a tool to further national interests in the Middle East.<sup>583</sup> It was 1992 when he wrote these words. Today, more than a quarter-century later, it is all the same.

Within the context of the Syrian Civil War, the Kurds of Northern Syria organized to a considerable extent under the PYD authority were used by Western governments since September 2014 to destroy a Western enemy in Syria, i.e. the Islamic State. In addition to the military, financial, political and diplomatic assistance held out to the PYD in the area, the organization was also endorsed by Western media, the BBC and VOA in particular. During the whole episode of the US-led coalition’s Syria intervention, it became the primary responsibility of Western media networks to adapt to the altering Western strategies and adjust press coverage in accordance with the changing Western policies in order to make sure that their audience was supplied with the ‘proper’ information with regard to Syrian Kurds and the PYD.

The analysis conducted in this research demonstrates that the BBC and VOA employed a common discourse and similar rhetoric vis-à-vis the Kurds of Northern Syria in their media coverage. They both adopted an unswervingly pro-Kurdish and pro-PYD position while reporting on Syrian Kurds in their media outlets between

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<sup>583</sup> McDowall, David, “The Kurdish Question: A Historical Review”, in Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds. A Contemporary Overview* (London: Routledge, 1992): p. 24.

September 2014 and March 2018. The themes used and the strategies pursued by them in an attempt to create a positive PYD image showed similarities as well. The only minor distinction between the BBC and VOA coverage was perhaps the former's more significant emphasis on Kurdish female fighters and the battle they conducted against the IS jihadists. However, at the end of the day, whether it is the BBC, which is reputed to be an independent and objective media network, or VOA, which is associated more with the American propaganda, they were both equally partial and selective in their media coverage of Syrian Kurds.

The backing of Western media was essential for the image of the PYD since it was in fervent need of being rebranded due to its troubled past and present practices. The image of the organization had been in negative terms mainly because of its affiliation with a terrorist organization (PKK) and collaboration with the Assad regime. Therefore, along with the rest of Western media, the BBC and VOA launched a pro-Kurdish and pro-PYD media campaign in an attempt to erase this unfavorable PYD image and replace it with a more positive one. This campaign was highly crucial for the legitimacy of the PYD and by extension of the US-led Western coalition as the former was the partner of the latter in the anti-IS fight. As the West could not risk jeopardizing the legitimacy of the struggle against jihadists, Western media worked diligently to construct a brand-new PYD image to the liking of the international community, de-emphasized what might delegitimize the organization and emphasized what could legitimize it by having recourse to selective and partial coverage. By doing so, Western media aimed to have the PYD recognized as a legitimate political organization in Northern Syria and legitimize the fight against IS in the eyes of the international public.

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## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKKÇE ÖZET

İslam Devleti'nin (İD) Ayn el-Arab'a (Kobani) karşı Eylül 2014'te başlattığı saldırı, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin (ABD) uluslararası toplum tarafından tecrit edilen Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki Kürtlere yönelik önceki tutumunu tamamen değiştirmesi sonucunu doğurdu. ABD ve birçok Avrupa ülkesi tarafından terörist olarak tanınan bir örgüt (PKK) ile bağlantıları ve Suriye rejimi ile yakın ilişkileri nedeniyle, Kuzey Suriye'de bulunan Kürt gruplara karşı özellikle Batılı hükümetlerin uyguladığı siyasi bir abluka söz konusu idi. Ancak, İD'nin Batılı ülkeler için ciddi bir güvenlik tehdidi oluşturmasına müteakiben, Suriyeli Kürtler ve cihatçılara karşı o bölgede mücadele veren Kürt gruplar, onları İD'ye karşı başlatılan savaşta kullanmak isteyen Batılı hükümetler için önemli aktörler haline geldi. Kobani savaşından bu yana Batı kamuoyu nezdinde artan önem ve itibarlarına paralel olarak Batılı medya organları Suriyeli Kürtlere medya platformlarında daha kapsamlı bir şekilde yer vermeye başladı. Bu tez tam olarak bu konuyu incelemek maksadıyla kaleme alınmıştır ve dolayısıyla Batı medyasının, özellikle BBC ve Amerika'nın Sesi (VOA) adlı İngiliz ve Amerikan medya kuruluşlarının, Eylül 2014 ile Mart 2018 tarihleri arasındaki süreçte, Suriye Kürtlerini ve bölgede faaliyet gösteren Kürt grupları nasıl ele aldığını anlamaya ve anlamlandırmaya çalışmıştır.

Bu tez, ayrıntılı ve uzun bir incelemenin ardından, Suriyeli Kürtlerin Kobani Savaşı'ndan bu yana Batı medyası tarafından uluslararası kamuoyuna olumlu bir şekilde yansıtıldığını savunmuştur. Batı medyasının böyle bir yayıncılık politikası takip etmesinin ardındaki sebep, Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki Kürtlere uluslararası destek

ve sempati kazandırmak ve bölgede faaliyet gösteren Kürt örgütlerin meşruiyetlerini artırmak şeklinde sıralanabilir. Nihai amacın ise, İD'ye karşı Suriye'de Batılı ülkelerin başını çektiği bir koalisyon tarafından yürütülen askeri mücadeleyi, meşruiyet sorunlarına maruz kalmadan başarılı bir şekilde tamamlamak olduğu ifade edilebilir.

BBC ve VOA'nın, bu tezde yararlanılan temel kaynaklar olarak, önemli ve etkili birçok Anglo-Amerikan medya kuruluşu arasından seçilmesi, bu ikilinin İngiltere ve ABD'nin dolaylı güdümünde uluslararası kamuoyunu etkilemek için kullanılan birer araç olarak oynadıkları tarihi rollerden ileri gelmektedir. Bu iki medya organı, sahip oldukları bu tarihsel rollerden ötürü, belirli bir dış politika sorunu karşısında hükümetlerinin benimseyeceği pozisyonu en iyi biçimde yansıtabileceklerdir. Dolayısıyla, Amerikan ve İngiliz devletlerinin, İD ile mücadele bağlamında Suriyeli Kürtlere ve PYD'ye karşı benimsedikleri tutumu gösterme açısından BBC ve VOA önemli bir konumda bulunmaktadır.

Bu tez, Batı medyasının, özellikle de BBC ve VOA'nın, Suriyeli Kürtleri medya organlarında nasıl ele aldığını konunun farklı boyutlarına yer vererek tartışmıştır. Bunu yaparken, Batı medyasının Suriyeli Kürtleri olumlu bir şekilde işleminin ardında yatan siyasi sebepleri ortaya koymak adına, içinde bulunulan uluslararası siyasi ve askeri bağlam ayrıntılı bir şekilde analiz edilmiştir. Bu çalışma ayrıca, Batı'nın Kürtleri geçmişteki ve günümüzdeki temsil biçimlerine ilişkin olarak bir karşılaştırma yapmak ve ikisi arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları anlamak üzere, Kürtlerin Batı'daki tarihsel tasvirini de geniş bir biçimde incelemiştir. Tez bölümlerinin aşağıda yer alan özetleri tezin birinci bölümünde aktarılan tüm bu konuları kısaca ele alacaktır.

İkinci bölümün temelini teşkil eden tartışma konusu, ABD tarafından 1997 yılında terörist ilan edilen ayrılıkçı bir Kürt militan grup olan PKK ile Suriye'nin kuzeyinde halen aktif bir şekilde faaliyet gösteren yine bir Kürt örgüt olan PYD arasındaki bağlantıdır. Bu bölümde, PKK ve PYD'nin tarihleri hakkında kısa bir arka plan bilgisi verildikten sonra, bu iki örgütün aralarındaki mevcut bağlantılar veri ve

kanıtlara dayanarak gösterilmiştir. Bu bölüm temel olarak, Batı medyasının PKK'nın terörist olarak tanımlanmasının PYD'nin imajını ve uluslararası meşruiyetini baltalamasını önlemek maksadıyla bu bağlantıyı önemsiz göstermeye ve hatta gizlemeye çalıştığını ifade etmiştir.

PYD'nin PKK ile yakından bağlantılı bir örgüt olduğu iddiası, Batılı hükümetlerin İD ile mücadele kapsamında PYD ile kurmuş oldukları müttefiklik ilişkisine dair en sorunlu konuyu teşkil etmektedir. Bu ilişkinin neden tartışmalı bir mesele olduğu ortadadır: 1984 yılından bu yana Türk devletine karşı silahlı bir mücadele içinde olan PKK, ABD, İngiltere ve Avrupa Birliği (AB) tarafından terör örgütü olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Eğer Türk hükümetinin ısrarla dile getirdiği üzere, PYD aslında PKK ile bağlantılıysa, Batı'nın İD'ye karşı mücadele bağlamında müttefiki olan PYD ve dolayısıyla Batı'nın İD'yi yok etmek üzere kurduğu koalisyon, Batılı ülkelerin PKK'nın uzantısı olan bir örgüt ile iş birliği yaptığı gerekçesiyle sorgulanır hale gelecekler ve uluslararası toplum nezdinde meşruiyetlerini kaybetme riski ile karşı karşıya kalacaklardır. Yani, İD'ye karşı mücadelede önemli bir rol oynayan Kürt grupların ve bu mücadeleyi organize eden Batı koalisyonunun meşruiyetleri PKK ile PYD'nin bağlantılı olup olmamasıyla yakından ilgilidir.

Amerikan, İngiliz ve Fransız hükümetleri ve Batılı medya ajanslarının Türk tarafının savlarıyla tezatlık teşkil eden iddialarına göre, PKK ve PYD birbirinden farklı iki ayrı örgüt olmakta ve bu örgütler arasında ideolojiden öte bir bağlantı bulunmamaktadır. Ancak bu iddialar gerçeği yansıtmıyor. PKK ve PYD, Batı'nın öne sürmüş olduğu iddiaların aksine farklı iki örgüt değil, bilakis, birbirleriyle yakından ilişkili, organik anlamda bağlantılı, aynı liderin (Abdullah Öcalan) ideolojisini uygulayan ve benzer amaçlara ulaşmaya çalışan iki örgüt olma özelliği gösteriyor. Kısaca ifade etmek gerekirse PYD, PKK'nın Suriye'de örgütlenen ve faaliyetlerini bu ülkede devam ettiren uzantısı olarak nitelendirilebilir. Fakat, BBC ve VOA Batı medyasının diğer önemli kuruluşlarıyla birlikte, PYD'yi PKK'dan ayırmaya çalışmış ve bu iki örgütü farklı iki organizasyon gibi gösterme konusunda yoğun bir çaba harcamıştır. Bu çaba ve faaliyetlerin yöneldiği temel maksat ise PYD'nin, ABD ve Avrupa tarafından terörist olarak ilan edilen ve dünya kamuoyu nezdinde sorunlu bir itibara



sahip olan PKK ile beraber anılmasına mâni olmak ve dolayısıyla PYD'nin, PKK sebebiyle gayrimeşru kılınmasının önüne geçmektir.

PKK ile yakın ilişkisinin bir sonucu olarak PYD'nin uluslararası ve yerel meşruiyetten yoksunluğu, İD ile mücadele etmek için PYD ile Batı'nın ittifak kurmasından evvel örgütün zayıf karnını oluşturmaktaydı. Bu derin ilişki, PYD'nin Batı ülkeleri tarafından desteklenmesini etkili bir şekilde engelliyor ve kontrol ettiği alanlarda Suriye Kürtleri tarafından yetkisinin sorgulanmasına neden oluyordu. Bu nedenle, uluslararası toplum tarafından meşru bir aktör olarak tanınmak ve Suriyeli Kürtlerin gerçek temsilcisi olmak için PYD kendisini PKK'dan uzaklaştırmalı ve karar alma mekanizmasını PKK kadrolarından ayırmalıydı. Ancak örgüt her ikisini de yapmadı. Yine de PYD, Batı medyası sayesinde uluslararası toplum nazarında meşru bir organizasyon olarak kabul görmeyi başardı.

İD militanlarına karşı kazandığı zaferlerin ardından ABD yönetiminin PYD'ye yönelik tutumunu değiştirmesinden sonra, BBC ve VOA'nın Suriyeli Kürtlerle ilgili yaptığı haberlerde PKK-PYD bağlantısı konusunda kademeli bir söylem değişikliği oldu. Bu haberlerde bu iki medya kuruluşu PYD'nin PKK ile sürdürdüğü bağlantıları gizlemeye yönelik bilinçli bir girişim içinde yer aldılar. Bunu yapmalarındaki amaç oldukça açık: PYD'nin imajının, PKK'nın terörist etiketi tarafından uluslararası toplum gözünde gölgelenmesini önlemek. Çünkü PYD Orta Doğu'daki en yeni Batı müttefiki ve Batı'ya karşı o dönemdeki en büyük tehdidi oluşturan terör örgütüne karşı Batı'yla birlikte Suriye'de bir savaş yürütmekte. BBC ve VOA'nın bu söylem değişikliği, medya kuruluşlarının devletlerin değişen ulusal çıkarlarına paralel bir şekilde yayın politikalarını nasıl değiştirdiklerini gözler önüne sermek noktasında önemli bir örnek oluşturmaktadır.

Tezin 3. bölümü, Batı medyasının PYD'yi uluslararası toplum nazarında Suriye'de faaliyet gösteren siyasi bir aktör olarak meşrulaştırma çabalarını incelemiştir. Bu bölüm, Batılı medya kuruluşlarının, PYD'nin uluslararası meşruiyetini artırmak ve PKK'nın bir kolu olan bu örgütün Suriye'nin kuzeyinde meşru bir siyasi aktör olarak

tanınmasını sağlamak için çeşitli stratejiler izlediklerini ve yayınladıkları haberlerde bu amaca yönelik olarak çeşitli söylemler benimsediklerini iddia etmiştir.

Önceki bölüm, Batı medyasının PYD'nin PKK ile sürdürdüğü bağlantıyı gizleyerek PYD'nin gayrimeşru bir örgüt haline gelmesinin nasıl önünü aldığını açıklamıştı. Bu bölüm ise, Batı medyasının uluslararası toplum nezdinde PYD'yi nasıl meşrulaştırmaya çalıştığı sorusu üzerinde durmuştur. İlk olarak, Batılı medya kuruluşları PYD'yi dünya kamuoyuna Suriyeli Kürtlerin meşru bir temsilcisi olarak lanse etti ve böylece Suriye'nin kuzeyinde yaşayan halklar üzerindeki PYD kontrolünü meşru gösterdi. İkinci olarak, Batı medyası İD'ye karşı ortaklaşa yürütülen mücadeleyi sık sık ön plana çıkararak ve bu savaşta PYD'nin oynadığı kilit rolü tekrar ve tekrar uluslararası kamuoyuna hatırlatarak PYD'nin siyasi varlığını meşrulaştırmaya çalıştı. Üçüncü ve son olarak Batı medyası, Suriye Demokratik Güçleri'ni (SDG), PYD'nin Suriyeli Araplar üzerindeki kontrolünü meşrulaştırmak ve YPG ilerleyişini Suriye'nin Arapların çoğunlukta olduğu bölgelerinde kolaylaştırmak üzere söylemsel bir araç olarak kullandı.

PYD ve Batı hükümetleri arasında tesis edilen ittifakın bir sonucu olarak PYD, İD'ye karşı kurulan Batı koalisyonunun önemli bir parçası olarak Suriye'de Batı'nın çıkarlarına hizmet etmeye başladı. Ancak, PKK ile bağlantıları bulunan ve Esad rejimi ile iş birliği yapan PYD gibi bir örgütle kurulan bu ortaklığın meşru olabilmesi için, örgütün Batı medya kuruluşlarının da katkısıyla uluslararası kamuoyu gözünde meşrulaştırılması hayati önem taşıyordu. Bu bölümde yapılan tartışmalar Batı medyasının, özellikle BBC ve VOA'nın, PYD'nin yerel ve uluslararası meşruiyetini artırmak için büyük çaba sarf ettiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bu iki medya kuruluşu, çeşitli söylemlere ve argümanlara başvurmak suretiyle, PYD'nin Suriye'nin kuzeyinde meşru bir aktör olarak tanınmasını sağlamıştır. Başlattıkları medya kampanyası ile BBC ve VOA, PYD'yi Suriye Kürtlerinin meşru temsilcisi olarak tasvir etmiş, grubun İD karşıtı mücadelede oynadığı kilit rolü ön plana çıkarmış ve SDG'nin bünyesinde meydana getirilen Arap-Kürt ittifakını söylemlerine dahil ederek PYD'yi muhatap alınması gereken siyasi bir Kürt aktör olarak kabul ettirmeye çalışmıştır.

Tezin 4. bölümü, Suriyeli Kürtler hakkında kapsamlı ve bütüncül bir hikâye oluşturulurken Batı medyası tarafından inşa edilen çeşitli Kürt imajlarını ele almıştır. Bu bölüm, Suriye düzleminde gerçekleşen siyasi ve askeri olaylar ışığında, Batılı medya kuruluşlarının Suriye özeli ve Orta Doğu genelindeki Batı çıkarlarına uygun olarak Suriyeli Kürtleri 'icat edilmiş' farklı imge ve imajlarla tasvir ettiğini ortaya koymuştur.

PYD'yi ve İD karşıtı mücadeleyi meşrulaştırmak için başlatılmış olan medya kampanyası kapsamında Batılı medya örgütlerinin takip ettiği temel stratejilerden bir tanesi Suriyeli Kürtlerle ilgili olarak yapılan haberlerde kullanılmak üzere yeni Kürt imgelerinin inşa edilmesi ya da önceden yaratılmış imgelerin tekrardan kullanılmaya başlanması olmuştur. Kobani savaşından bu yana, Kürtlerin İD'ye karşı yürüttükleri mücadeleye uluslararası sempati kazandırmak ve Batı'nın Suriye'de gerçekleştirmiş olduğu askeri müdahalesini meşru kılmak amacıyla yönelik olarak Batı medyasının en sık kullandığı yöntem, Suriyeli Kürtleri Suriye'de yaşanan çatışma ve savaşların en büyük kurbanı olarak tasvir etmek olmuştur. Buna ek olarak, PYD'nin yaşadığı meşruiyet krizinin üstesinden gelmek için Batı medyası Suriyeli Kürtleri, Esad rejimine karşı savaş vermekte olan isyancılar olarak lanse etmiş ve YPG'yi, ABD ve Avrupa'dan gelecek askeri yardımlarla İD'yi yenebilecek yegâne etkili güç ve disiplinli bir militer grup olarak göstermiştir. İlginç bir biçimde, bu tezde anlatıldığı üzere Batı'nın günümüzde Kürtleri kendi amaçlarına uygun olarak değişik imgelerle tasvir etmesi, Batı'nın geçmiş uygulamalarıyla paralellik göstermektedir. Zira, tıpkı bugün olduğu gibi geçmişte de Batılı oryantalistler Batı'nın Ortadoğu'daki çıkarlarına uygun olarak Kürtleri, uluslararası ve Batı kamuoyunun Kürtlere sempati duymasını sağlayacak değişik imge ve imajlarla tasvir etmişlerdi.

Bu bölümde ele alınan ve Kürtlerle ilgili olarak kullanılmak üzere yaratılmış geçmiş ve günümüz Batı söylemleri dikkate alındığında görülmüştür ki, ister 20. yüzyılda Batılı Kürdologlar vasıtasıyla olsun, ister günümüzde Batı medyası aracılığıyla olsun, Batı kendi çıkarlarına uygun düştüğünde, Kürtlerin uluslararası imaj ve itibarını yarattığı imaj ve imgeler yoluyla artırmaya gayret göstermiştir. Bu çalışmanın ortaya koyduğu bulgular ışığında görülebileceği üzere, Suriye'nin kuzeyinde yaşayan

Kürtlerin Batı medyasındaki temsilleri bu geleneksel Batı uygulamasının önemli bir örneğini teşkil etmiştir. 2014 yılı yazından itibaren İD'nin Suriye ve Irak'taki hakimiyetine son vermek Batı'nın en önemli ve acil gündem maddesi haline geldiği için, YPG saflarında cihatçı örgütlenmeye karşı savaşan Suriyeli Kürtler Batı medyası tarafından, yaratılan çeşitli imge ve imajlar doğrultusunda dünya kamuoyuna olumlu bir şekilde gösterilmişlerdir. Kısacası, Kürtler yine Ortadoğu'da Batı'nın çıkarlarına hizmet etmiş ve yine bunun karşılığı olarak Batı, yeni pozitif imajlar yaratarak Kürtlerin uluslararası kamuoyu nezdindeki saygınlık ve itibarını artırmak üzere gayret sarf etmiştir. Batı'nın bu çabası, Kürtlerle kurulan ittifak ilişkisinin meşru bir zemine oturması için elzem görülmüştür.

Tezin 5. Bölümü, Batı medyasının PYD'yi Suriyeli Kürtler ile ilgili yaptığı haberlerde nasıl Batılı değerlerin ve demokratik ideallerin savunucusu olarak gösterdiğini ele almıştır. Bu bölüm, özellikle Batı kamuoyunun gözünde olumlu bir PYD imajı oluşturmak için, Batı medyasının PYD'yi ve PYD kontrolü altında bulunan Kuzey Suriye toplumunu – gerçeği yansıtmayan bir biçimde – demokratik, laik ve çoğulcu özelliklere sahip olarak tasvir ettiğini göstermiştir.

Suriyeli Kürtlerin Batı'nın değer ve ideallerini temsil ediyormuş gibi tasvir edilmesi, Batı medyasının Suriye'deki PKK'ya bağlı grupları meşrulaştırma çabasının önemli bir parçasını oluşturmaktadır. Batı medyası, Batılı toplumlar ile PYD yönetimi altında inşa edilen Kürt toplumu arasında özellikle demokrasi gibi sözde ortak değerlere referans ile benzerlikler kurarak, Batı toplumunun gözünde Kürtlere sempati kazandırmaya çalışmış ve böylece ABD'nin önderliğinde kurulan İD karşıtı koalisyon ile PYD arasında tesis edilen ortaklığa meşruiyet tevdi etmeye gayret göstermiştir. PYD ise Batılı hükümetlerle kurulan müttefiklik ilişkisini sürdürebilmek ve kendini Batı kamuoyu nazarında kabul edilebilir kılmak için, kendini Batı değerlerinin savunucusu ilan etmiştir.

Eğer Kürtler Ortadoğu'da özerklik ya da bağımsızlık davaları için uluslararası destek elde etmek istiyorlarsa, demokratik yönetim ilkesi kontrol ettikleri alanlarda uygulamak ya da en azından uyguluyormuş gibi yapmak zorunda oldukları 'olmazsa

olmaz' nitelikte bir prensiptir. Suriye İç Savaşı sırasında Suriye'nin kuzeyinde elde ettikleri bölgeleri yönetirken PYD, ikinci seçeneği uygulamayı tercih etmiş ve yani uluslararası kamuoyuna, kontrolü altındaki halkları demokrasi, çoğulculuk ve hoşgörü ilkelerine uygun olarak yönettiği izlenimini vermeyi seçmiştir. Örgütün, karar alma mekanizmaları üzerinde yetki sahibi olan yegâne aktör olma arzusu, yerel ve uluslararası anlamda kabul görmek için gerekli olan demokratik bir yönetimi uygulama isteğinden daha fazlaydı. Dolayısıyla PYD'nin, Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki halkları yönetim tarzı demokratik değer ve ilkelerden oldukça uzaktı.

PYD tarafından kurulan siyasal sistem otoriter bir rejimin tüm belirtilerini güçlü bir şekilde göstermesine rağmen, Batı medyası yine de bu örgütü uluslararası kamuoyuna otoriter Esad rejimine ve İslamcı bir muhalefete 'demokratik' bir alternatif olarak sundu. BBC ve VOA da dahil olmak üzere Batı'nın önde gelen medya ajansları, Batı kamuoyuna PYD'nin liberal Batı ideallerini savunan ve uygulayan demokratik, laik ve çoğulcu bir örgüt olduğunu göstermek için yoğun çaba harcadı. PYD'yi Batı değerlerinin şaşmaz bir savunucusu olarak göstererek Batı medyası, örgüte bu şekilde meşruiyet kazandırmaya çalışmış ve ağırlıklı olarak YPG militanları tarafından yürütülen İD karşıtı mücadeleyi meşrulaştırmaya gayret göstermiştir.

Tezin 6. bölümü, Suriyeli Kürt kadın savaşçılara Batı medyasında ne şekilde yer verildiğine dair bir inceleme sunmuştur. Bu bölüm kısaca, Batılı medya kuruluşlarının Kürt kadınları ve bunların fotoğraflarını, PYD'nin uluslararası meşruiyetini güçlendirmek ve Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki Kürtlere uluslararası destek ve sempati kazandırmak amacıyla bir araç olarak kullandığını iddia etmiştir.

PYD, bünyesine dahil ettiği Kürt kadın savaşçıları yürüttüğü uluslararası propaganda faaliyetinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak kullanmıştır. Benzer şekilde Kürt kadın savaşçıları ve onlara medyada geniş yer verilmesi, Batı medyasının Kürtlerin uluslararası imajını geliştirme stratejisinin önemli bir bileşenini oluşturmaktadır.

Kadınlar tarih boyunca askeri çatışmalar sırasında kitleleri ikna etmek ve onları belli amaçlar doğrultusunda etkilemek, yani propaganda faaliyetleri için yaygın bir şekilde

kullanılmıŒtır. 2011 yılında kitlesel bir ayaklanma olarak baŒlayan ve fakat kanlı bir i savaŒa evrilen Suriye krizi, bu tarihsel uygulamanın bir rneđini teŒkil etmektedir. SavaŒ sırasında kadınlar, atıŒmayı yakından izleyen uluslararası toplum zerinde olumlu bir izlenim yaratmak isteyen rgtler tarafından propaganda aracı olarak istihdam edilmiŒtir. rneđin İD, kadınların bir propaganda malzemesi olarak sahip oldukları nem ve deđeri iyi idrak etmiŒ ve onları bu maksatla nceki cihat rgtlerin hepsinden daha ustaca kullanmıŒtır. Ancak Suriye krizi esnasında PYD, kadınlardan propaganda malzemesi olarak, sahadaki diđer btn rgtlerden ok daha fazla istifade etmiŒtir. PYD, onları rakip rgtlere karŒı askeri cephede militan olarak kullanmanın yanı sıra, Krt kadınlarının zgrleŒmesine dayalı feminist bir anlatı geliŒtirmiŒ ve onların fotođraflarını sık sık uluslararası medya kuruluŒlarına servis etmiŒtir. Bylece Suriyeli Krt kadın savaŒıları, Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki Krt mcadelesine uluslararası sempati ve destek kazandırmak ve kendisine meŒruiyet sađlamak iin kullanmıŒtır. Batı medyası ise, PYD'nin propaganda mesajlarını uluslararası kamuoyuna iletmek zere taŒıyıcı bir kanal vazifesi grmŒ ve rgtn, İD'ye karŒı savaŒan Krt kadınlar aracılıđıyla olumlu bir imaj yaratma ve kendini meŒrulaŒtırma abalarına bu yolla dođrudan katkı sunmuŒtur.

Tezin bu blm ayrıca, 20. yzyılın baŒlarından bu yana Krt kadınların eŒitli Krt hareketleri tarafından, Krt ulusal mcadelesine zellikle dıŒ destek sađlamak maksadıyla tıpkı gnmzde PYD'nin uyguladıđı stratejiye benzer bir Œekilde propaganda amacıyla kullanıldıđını gstermiŒtir. Yine paralel bir Œekilde Batılı Krdolog ve oryantalistler, Batı kamuoyu nazarında Krtlerin itibar ve saygınlıđını artırmak ve Krtlerin olumlu bir imaj kazanmasını temin etmek iin Krt kadınların blgede yaŒayan diđer Mslman kadınlara kıyasen daha zgr oldukları ve onların Batılı kadınlara gerek zihinsel gerek de dıŒ grnŒ itibariyle daha yakın oldukları gibi geređi pek de yansıtmayan argmanları kullanagelmiŒlerdir.

Batı medyasında yayınlanan haberlerden ve fotođraflardan anlaŒılacađı zere, İD militanlarına karŒı askeri operasyonlara aktif bir Œekilde katılan Krt kadın savaŒılar, pozitif bir PYD imajı oluŒturma arayıŒındaki Batı medya ajanslarının sık olarak kullandıđı aralardan biri haline geldi. Batı medyası, zellikle de BBC ve VOA, 2014

yılıının Eylül ayından bu yana Kürt kadın militanları, İD karşısında hem Kürt ulusunun kurtuluşu hem de kadın hakları için mücadele eden özgürlük savaşçıları olarak göstermek için çok çaba sarf etti. Medya kampanyalarında kullanılan söylem ve temalar, 20. yüzyılda Batılı oryantalistler tarafından kullanılanlarla keskin benzerlikler gösterdi. Bu medya projesinde PYD, gerek Batılı ve yerel gazetecilerin Kuzey Suriye’de faaliyet göstermelerini kolaylaştırarak gerek de bu gazetecilere çatışma bölgelerindeki Kürt kadın savaşçıların yakından ve kaliteli fotoğraflarını çekmelerine yardımcı olarak önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Tüm bu çalışma ve çabaların yöneldiği amaç ise uluslararası toplumun Kürtlere sempati duymasını sağlamak ve Orta Doğu’daki en yeni Batı müttefiki olan PYD’nin Suriye’de meşru siyasi bir aktör olarak tanınmasını temin etmektir.

Suriye İç Savaşı sırasında önemli ölçüde PYD otoritesi altında örgütlenmiş Suriyeli Kürtler, Eylül 2014’ten bu yana Batılı hükümetler tarafından Batı’nın o dönemdeki en azılı düşmanının, yani İD’nin Suriye’deki varlığına son vermek üzere hava destekli kara birlikleri olarak istihdam edildi. Bölgede siyasi olarak etkinlik gösteren PYD’ye ve onun askeri kanadını temsil eden YPG’ye yapılan askeri, mali, siyasi ve diplomatik yardımların yanı sıra, bu örgütlere Batılı medya kuruluşları özellikle de BBC ve VOA tarafından medya desteği sağlandı.

ABD liderliğinde kurulan İD karşıtı koalisyonun Suriye müdahalesi boyunca Batı medyası Batılı hükümetlerin değişen Suriye ve Orta Doğu stratejilerine uyum sağlamış, yayıncılık politikasını değişen Batı siyasetine göre kalibre etmiş ve yaptığı haberlerde Suriyeli Kürtlere bu strateji ve politikalara uygun bir şekilde yer vermiştir. Başka bir deyişle Batı medyası Suriyeli Kürtleri Batı’nın çıkarları ile uyumlu bir biçimde haberleştirmiştir.

Bu araştırma sonucu elde edilen bulgular, BBC ve VOA’nın medya platformlarında Suriyeli Kürtler için ortak bir söylem kullandığını göstermektedir. Her iki medya kuruluşu ayrıca Eylül 2014 ile Mart 2018 tarihleri arasında Suriyeli Kürtler ile ilgili yaptıkları haberlerde Kürt ve PYD yanlısı bir tutum benimsemişler ve böylece tarafsız bir habercilik anlayışı sürdürememişlerdir. Bu medya organizasyonlarının

olumlu bir PYD imajı yaratmak maksadıyla izledikleri strateji ve taktikler de büyük ölçüde benzerlik göstermiştir. BBC ve VOA'nın Suriyeli Kürtler ile ilgili yaptığı haberler arasındaki belki de tek küçük fark, BBC'nin Kürt kadın savaşçılara ve onların İD'ye karşı yürüttükleri mücadeleye daha fazla önem vermesi ve vurgu yapmasıydı. Günün sonunda, gerek bağımsız ve tarafsız bir medya kuruluşu olarak bilinen BBC, gerek de Amerikan propagandası yapmakla suçlanan VOA, Suriyeli Kürtlerle ilgili olarak yaptıkları haberlerde oldukça taraflı ve seçici bir yayıncılık anlayışı izlemişlerdir.

Batı medyasının desteği, sorunlu geçmişi ve günümüz uygulamalarından ötürü yeni bir imaja şiddetli bir şekilde gereksinim duyan PYD için olmazsa olmaz bir nitelikteydi. Örgütün imaj ve itibarı, birçok Batı ülkesi tarafından terör örgütü olarak tanınan PKK ile ilişkisi ve ülkesindeki ayaklanmaları kanlı bir şekilde bastırarak bir iç savaşın çıkmasına önyak olan Esad rejimi ile iş birliği sebebiyle oldukça kötü bir durumdaydı. Bu nedenle BBC ve VOA, Batı medyasının diğer önde gelen kuruluşlarıyla birlikte, bu olumsuz PYD imajını ortadan kaldırmak ve bu imajı daha olumlu bir imajla ikame etmek maksadıyla kapsamlı bir medya kampanyası başlattı. Böylece, cihatçılara karşı yürütülen mücadelenin meşruiyetini tehlikeye atmayı göze alamayan Batı, Batı medyasının seçici ve taraflı yayıncılığı vasıtasıyla uluslararası toplumun kabul edebileceği ve sempati duyacağı yepyeni bir PYD imajı oluşturmak için yoğun bir gayret sarf etti. Bu amaçla örgütü meşru kılabilecek etkenler üzerinde durulurken, örgütü gayrimeşru hale getirebilecek faktörler de es geç geçildi ya da önemsiz hale getirildi. Batı medyası tüm bunları yaparken, PYD'nin Suriye'nin kuzeyinde meşru bir siyasi aktör olarak tanınmasını ve İD ile mücadelenin uluslararası kamuoyu nazarında meşru bir zemine oturmasını sağlamayı amaçlıyordu.



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**TEZİN ADI / TITLE OF THE THESIS (İngilizce / English) :**

THE KURDS OF NORTHERN SYRIA IN WESTERN MEDIA: THE BBC AND VOA COVERAGE (2014-2018)

**TEZİN TÜRÜ / DEGREE:** **Yüksek Lisans / Master**  **Doktora / PhD**

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