

## PYD-YPG: THE PKK in SYRIA

### PYD-YPG : Suriye'deki PKK

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#### **Abstract**

This study will briefly introduce the common ideology of the PKK and its affiliates in Syria. It also establishes the organic links between the PKK, which is internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, and the PYD-YPG, which has been active in Syria as a political and military force. It will conclude that given the PYD-YPG being controlled by the PKK leadership in Qandil, its ideological unity with the PKK and the shared organizational features, there are no grounds to see these two organizations as separate groups from each other. Recognizing one as a terrorist organization and the other as a legitimate political and military actor would therefore be an arbitrary and duplicitous approach.

**Keywords:** PKK, PYD, Terrorism, Turkey, Syria.

#### **Öz**

Bu çalışma özü itibariyle PKK'nın ve onun bağlı ortaklarının Suriye'deki ortak ideolojisini betimleyecektir. Ayrıca, terör örgütü olarak uluslararası alanda bilinen PKK ile Suriye'de siyasi ve askeri bir güç olarak faaliyet gösteren PYD-YPG arasındaki organik bağları da ortaya koymaktadır. Kandil'deki PKK'nın liderliği tarafından kontrol edilen PYG-YPG'nin PKK ile olan ideolojik bütünlüğü ve müşterek örgütsel özellikleri göz önüne alındığında bu iki örgütü birbirinden ayrı gruplar olarak görmenin hiçbir dayanağı bulunmamaktadır. Bunlardan birini terör örgütü olarak kabul etmek, diğerini ise meşru bir siyasi ve askeri aktör olarak tanımlamak, gelişigüzel ve aldatıcı bir yaklaşım olacaktır.

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## Introduction

PKK terrorist organization has been founded by adopting the model of party/front/army which is the typical organizational form of Marxist / Leninist organization. The PYD /YPG, which were established in accordance with Öcalan's directive at the eight congress of the PKK, use the same terrorism methods and administrative staff. Although PYD and YPG have acquired different names from that of PKK, they both work in cooperation with the latter to boost separatism and terrorism. The PYD and its military wing YPG, which are constantly supported by many western countries, mainly by the USA, are being tried to be seen as a separate organizations from the PKK; however, their organic link with PKK has always been obvious since its foundation. PYD and YPG are affiliates of the PKK enabling all its terrorist activities in northern Syria. The PKK, trying to create an autonomous structure in the north of Syria, operates under the name of 'Democratic Unity Party' (PYD) in the region in order to conceal its identity behind closed doors and cover up all the activities plotted beforehand.

Having started its activities in the 1980s, the PKK introduced its Syrian wing 'PYD' to the public as an independent structure by appointing Salih Muslim and Asya Abdullah as co-chairman. By means of this, PYD, which plans to establish an autonomous structure in Syria, has begun to identify itself with the armed structuring of YPG established by PKK's military wing.

Having secretly agreed with Assad Regime and established cantons in the northern part of Syria the PYD has developed some contacts with the US and some European countries because of the conflicts with the DAESH. Although Turkey has repeatedly stated that the PYD is the PKK-oriented organization in Syria, the USA and the western countries have continued to support the PYD terrorist organization in their fight against DAESH, and identified the PYD as a new organization having no organic ties with the PKK.

This study will focus on PKK terrorist organization's ideology and aims to shed light on how the organization has developed into a branch of the PKK throughout its transformation process. In addition, the PKK's main approaches, transformations and eventually its new phase displayed through KCK will be investigated in detail. Although PKK argues that it has transformed its main targets and ideology; in fact, there are no clear-cut signs that indicate what they have so far claimed absolutely true. The other arguments this study will foreground are that PYD and YPG are PKK's sub-

nits located in Syria. This study will also aim to reveal the fact that there is a direct and organic relationship between PKK and its affiliates PYD and YPG, and that PYD and YPG are military groups based in their locations to perform all the terrorist activities in accordance with the PKK's orders.

## 1. The PKK: History, Ideology and Its Transformation

The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) is a terrorist organization, founded in the 1970s under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. According to some sources, it was established in 1973 following a meeting held at the Dam situated in Çubuk, a town so close to the capital, Ankara. Another claim is that the PKK was formed in 1975 in the aftermath of a meeting held in Dikmen, Ankara, and established in the Fis village of Lice, Diyarbakır in 1978.<sup>1</sup> Since its establishment, the PKK has been an organization designed with full authority to develop and establish an independent Kurdish state within the provinces in the east and southeast of Turkey and some regions in Iraq, Iran and Syria. It has been killing, injuring, threatening, robbing, bombing and massacring people to reach its ultimate goal. It has been declared as a terror organization by national courts and Supreme Court of Appeals of Turkey as well as European Court of Human Rights.

The PKK has conducted its activities under a variety of names. Established in 1978 under the name of PKK, this outlawed terror organization named itself KADEK (Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress) in 2002, KONGRA-GEL (Kurdistan People's Congress) in 2003, KKK (Kurdistan Democratic Confederalism) in 2005 and KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) in 2007. After adopting the name KCK, the organization tried to achieve its target for establishing so-called "United Democratic Kurdistan State" through "democratic autonomy" and "democratic confederalism". The democratic autonomy project was first outlined by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the terrorist organization, and they were ordered to restructure the organization. It was then discussed by the Democratic Community Congress (DTK) in 2010, where the congress decided to establish organizations in some areas in the east and southeast of Turkey for social, political and security reasons (<http://www.haberler.com/ocalan-in-demokratik-ozerklik-projesi-7603622-haberi/>).

Acting as a part of the PKK terrorist organization, the KCK (superior organization) has declared its strategies and targets on their agenda. In line with the decisions reached in the aftermath of the PKK's seventh and eighth congresses held in 2000 and 2002 respectively the KCK was given

1 For Details: İmset, İsmet, *PKK, Ayrılkçı Şiddetin 20 Yılı*, Turkish Daily News Yayınları, Ankara, 1993.

the full authority to perform its activities through its “four branches” located in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The seventh congress was expected to be held in 2002, but due to the capture of Öcalan it was held in 2000. In this congress, the PKK and KCK changed the strategy to prevent the disintegration of the organization after Öcalan’s capture and to get the ideology of the organization disseminated widely. The PKK and KCK wanted to develop their activities by following a new strategy well known as “civil disobedience” in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

The KCK has armed forces, and consists of the highest decision making body organ ‘People’s Assembly’ established as PÇDK (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party) in Iraq in 2002, PJAK (Kurdistan Free Living Party) in Iran, KCK in Turkey and PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria in 2003 in order to establish confederacy within the borders of the above mentioned states.

## **2. Ideology of the PKK/KCK**

The PKK’s ideology has undergone some transformation over the bygone years. As its name (Kurdistan Workers Party) implies, their working principles were firmly based on Marxist-Leninist ideology: it was Marxist because of the emphasis on class-based revolution, and it was Leninist because of the vanguard role it assumed. In addition to leftist ideas, Kurdish nationalism has always been strong in the PKK’s ideology from the very beginning. Its goal was liberating the Kurds in Turkey and establishing an independent state under these principles. The establishment of an “independent united Kurdistan” within the geographical boundaries of Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey was the PKK’s ultimate goal. The founding leaders believed that the road to reach this goal was through violence and revolution. The organization declared the following as its initial targets: “exploiting forces, feudal landlords, medieval traditions, and fascist-chauvinist movements,” (İmset, 1993). The organization thus started using violence on Kurdish targets first. In 1984, it launched a large-scale insurgency campaign against the Turkish Republic through terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare. Afterwards, Kurdish nationalism became more salient in the PKK’s ideology, while it also endorsed a Stalinist leadership cult developed around the figure of Öcalan. In order to popularize its movement, the PKK also gradually adopted a more accommodating posture regarding religion (Leezenberg 2016: 673).

Despite such gradual changes in its ideological character, the PKK claims to have transformed its ideology, target, and governing system first in 1995

and then after Öcalan's arrest in 1999, shifting its focus from separatism and forming an independent state to fighting for cultural rights and democratic governance. These claims are disputable and will be discussed below with due effort.

Up until the late 1990s, the PKK tried to prove itself by means of decisive violence. During the early 1990s it reached its peak in its fighting capacity and support from the public. In these years to come, however, it started to modify its methods of fighting and convey a milder image. The PKK's strength decreased dramatically after 1995. Following the capture of Öcalan in 1999, one can notice a sudden change in its declared objectives and methods of fighting. The main crash can be said to have begun with the proclamation of "Democratic Republic" and "Democratic Con-federalism and Ecological Model in Public" from the early 2000s onwards. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the PKK has occasionally shifted its ideological position and claims depending on the realities of the time. In other words, instead of undergoing a gradual and continuous ideological evolution, the PKK rather seems to have developed and acquired a pragmatic attitude.

In his defense, Öcalan declared that war was no longer of use and that he had given up the idea of independence. He also underlined the impossibility of federation.<sup>2</sup> The model he suggested was a "democratic republic", in which both the Turks and Kurds would live together as people endowed with equal rights. This idea was likely to be inspired by Leslie Lipson in her book entitled *The Democratic Civilization*.<sup>3</sup> According to Öcalan, a democratic republic based on the principles of freedom, democracy, and integration would serve as an alternative model to an independent Kurdish state. In this republic, the "Kurdish identity" was to be recognized by changing the concept of Unitarian state ideology from "one whole Turkish nation" to "the people of Turkey" referring to the whole 'people' composed of all the ethnic identities. This would also make it legally possible on their part to get education in their mother tongue (Öcalan, 2015; Karayılan, 2014: 461; Şimşek, 2006: 25-26).<sup>4</sup>

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2 It was published as Sümer Rahip Devletinden Halk Cumhuriyetine Doğru, Mem Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011

3 For Details: Leslie Lipson, *Demokratik Uygurluk*, çev. Haldun Gülalp ve Türker Alkan, Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, İstanbul, 1984

4 Öcalan composed his democratic republican thesis from seven sections which started with the negotiations of the lawyer in 1999 and lasted in 2004. First four sections of his thesis is comprise of Social reality and individual, Democratic ecological society, Chaos and possible solutions in middle-east civilization and The Kurdish case in the Middle East and the Kurdish issues. PKK terrorist organization is examined in five points with Ocalan's "self-interest" act; The concept of party, the understanding of power, the necessity of establishing a democratic program aimed at the cause, the quality of party staff and nation perception and in the new strategy it is drawn in parallel with five digits.

Öcalan developed his “democratic republic” thesis between the years 1999 and 2004. The first four sections of his thesis consists of social reality and individual, democratic-ecological society, chaos and possible solutions in the Middle East and the Kurdish issue. The PKK is examined by means of five points employed in Öcalan’s “self-interest” act: The concept of party, the understanding of power, the necessity of establishing a democratic program aimed at the cause, the quality of party staff and nation perception as formalized by five digits in the new strategy.

Allegedly abandoning the claim for independence, Öcalan based his approach to the resolution of the Kurdish issue on “Kurdistan Democratic Confederation”, which has a democratic-ecological perspective and a democratic-free union of the Kurds without proposing any change concerning the existing borders (Bila, 2016: 126-134). Here it is worth discussing the concepts of “democratic republic”, “democratic autonomy”, and “democratic confederation”. Öcalan brought up the thesis of “democratic confederation” in 2004 in his publication *Defending a Civilization*. His ideas were inspired by the social anarchist views of Murray Bookchin, an American political thinker. Particularly Bookchin’s books *The Ecology of Freedom* and *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* were influential on Öcalan.

Rejecting hierarchical structures of power and domination, Bookchin defends the replacement of the state with horizontal forms of governance, namely a loosely-connected federation of self-governing local communities. Referring to Bookchin, Öcalan claims to have designated a new ideology based on “ecological-communal-confederation” as opposed to hierarchy and domination. Declaring the PKK’s earlier efforts to establish a nation-state through the use of violence (i.e., terrorism) as a mistake, he focused on the democratization of the Middle Eastern people in general and the Kurds in particular. He endorsed the view that a collective transformation program that is not centered on power and war could bring a free, equal and democratic life for the people living in the region. His program brings together a wide range of social segments, from non-governmental organizations to environmentalist and feminist organizations with a common strategy. At the same time, it does not exclude the notion of “legitimate defense” (<https://www.pkconline.com/tr/>). According to Fikret Bila (2016; 156-167), regarding Öcalan’s strategic change Lipson and Bookchin put forward completely different views in that Lipson foregrounds the idea that Öcalan proposes an authoritarian state regime, an umbrella governing structure overarching all Kurdish people residing in four different coun-

tries, whereas Bookchin highlights the idea that the leader in fact aspires to communalist confederation as a more convenient governing system.

Murat Karayılan, the PKK's acting leader, defines democratic confederation in his publication *The Autonomy of a War* as the absence of federation or autonomy as independent democratic equality and united democratic community as opposed to nation-state governing system (Karayılan, 2014; Çandar, 2011; 199-201)

Some researchers have suggested that democratic autonomy is a confederal system with a bottom-up hierarchical structure and goes beyond the classical understanding of market and government (Özler, 2013:65-89). For others, a federation based on two nations suggests a decentralized structure of governance and politics with strong emphasis on individual and cultural rights. There are also some arguments that differ regarding local structures in democratic autonomy (Çiçek; 2015, 4). According to some scholars' claim, instead of division and breakup democratic autonomy is a remedy for unison. However, it must be pointed out here that "democratic self-defense" brought up with democratic autonomy also means a legitimized violence, which appears to be a problematic area.

Just as mentioned before by the PKK at the KONGRA-GEL's ninth meeting (also its establishment meeting) that Kurdish problem is apart from independence, separatism or discrimination but within the borders of countries experiencing it is declared that problems can be solved within framework of Kurdistan Democratic Confederation system based on free association principles in a democratic unity designed with a democratic-ecological society perspective. However, the establishment of the KCK and later developments in Syria has shown that the actions were not always in line with the proclaimed principles and objectives.

Since 2005, the PKK has formed a number of branches and ancillary organizations, each of which is responsible for different tasks assigned by the central committee. All these organizations have been working under the umbrella organization KCK since its establishment in 2007. The KCK has been organized as a confederation of four branches, each of which is active in a different country (KCK Assembly of Turkey, KCK-Rojava in Syria, KCK-Rojhilat in Iran and KCK Bashoor in Iraq). Unlike the PKK, which used to be active primarily in the countryside, the KCK has endeavored to be active in urban areas. Among the KCK's plans are to levy tax and grant citizenship status to its people (Bianet 2011).

The KCK has signed a contract, which serves as a quasi-constitution, covering 47 matters. In this text, legislative, executive and judicial powers are laid out just like those of a state (Sandıklı, 2012). Endorsing Öcalan's ideology of democratic confederalism (SDE, 2014), the KCK contract claims to have a liberalistic approach against ecological, gender and economic oppression. It aims to bring the whole Kurdish population under a single structure and system. The contract pertains to five main areas of life, i.e., ideology, politics, community, defense, and finance. Under democratic confederation and democratic modernity, concepts like democratic society, communal economy, communal life, ecological community, people's assembly, democratic autonomy, etc. are frequently emphasized.

In his preface to the KCK contract Öcalan sees the KCK as a new model that can achieve democracy in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. For him, the road to communal confederacy can be achieved through democratic autonomy. Accordingly, the Kurdish population living in these four countries will reunite under "Kurdish confederation". He even goes further to claim that this model can later transform itself into a democratic union in the Middle East, and even a structure that will replace the UN.

Once thoroughly examined, however, the recent shifts in the PKK/KCK's ideology do not really match with how it acts in practice. Despite voicing communal and confederative liberation, the KCK contract includes a number of concepts linked to the notion of nation state. These include flag, emblem, citizens, the powers of legislation, executive, and jurisdiction, ministers, and armed forces. This makes it clear that the KCK is in fact trying to form a new state structure. It can be said that the KCK is attempting to form a new nation state in line with the existing nation state model in the world. In addition, its legitimization of violence, embrace of a Pan-Kurdish approach, aim to merge the federations of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey, and attachment to a "great" and "unique" leader, Öcalan, gives the KCK a strictly hierarchical and anti-democratic character (Oran, 2013: 748).

Leezenberg (2016: 677-679) rightly highlights the mismatch between the PKK's recent ideology and actions with two general observations. First, the PKK's control over all the ancillary organizations putatively working for Öcalan's democratic confederacy suggests that the Leninist notion of vanguard party is still present. Thus, the practice of horizontally-organized, bottom-up communalism is paradoxically orchestrated under the sway of a strongly centralized and hierarchical party. The KCK and all its affiliates strictly follow Öcalan's doctrine without questioning any aspect of it. Even the powerful figures in the leadership cadres of the PKK cannot go

beyond this ideology. Second, while Bookchin's ideology does not involve violence as a means of political change, Öcalan's conception of "legitimate self-defense" leaves room for the use of arms. The result is the use of hybrid warfare involving both peaceful (e.g., political parties, civil society organizations) and violent (e.g., terrorism, guerrilla warfare) means.

Having been established on the Marxist-Leninist ideology as well as Maoist and nationalist strategies, the PKK has undergone ideological changes depending on the conditions of the day. Despite the survival of its predominantly nationalistic ideology, the PKK's Marxist-Leninist outlook has been replaced by other socialist elements. This change is observable in their symbols (see appendices). Regardless of occasional ceasefires, the PKK has never given up violence, as its existence specifically depends on violence. This is why it has kept changing its ideology and methods of rule. On the one hand, it pronouncedly opposed the idea of feudal system; on the other hand, it did not refrain from cooperating asheerats (tribes). It has voiced ideas like democratic autonomy, and democratic republic at the same time as pursuing separatism. PKK has begun adopting the views, concepts; ideologies took the blame for being "revisionist" and therefore fought against before. It should be emphasized here that although there seems to be an evolution in the PKK's objectives and strategies, this was actually not an evolution but a re-adaptation depending on conjectures and detente/moderation. All of the thesis it has put forward clearly suggest an entirely independent structure of governance under its leadership.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The PYD

Despite formally operating as a political party, the PYD is in fact an element of the KCK-Rojava experience of the PKK/KCK terrorist organization. In early 1990s, the PKK had made its initial efforts for synchronous pro-Kurdish movements in neighboring countries. In 1991, it opened its first sister organization in the north of Iraq under the name PAK (Kurdistan Freedom Party) (Leezenberg 2016: 673). However, these efforts did not progress much until the early 2000s. After his capture, Öcalan recommended his sympathizers in Turkey and neighboring countries to establish political parties, unions, and front lines. Upon his recommendations, the first

5 Some pro-PKK sources claim that this is only for a transitional period. For details, see Ali Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, London, 2006, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies; Nihat Ali Özan, *PKK (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi) Tarihi, İdeolojisi ve Yöntemi*, Ankara, 1999, ASAM Yayınları; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya ve JP jongerden, *Yeni Bir Politika Arayışı, PKK'nin Demokratik Özerklik ve Demokratik Konfederalizm Projeleri, Gezi'nin Yeryüzü Kardeşliği, Direnen Arzu Coğrafyaları*, Sinem Özler (ed.), 2014, İstanbul, Otonom Politika; Hüseyin Yayman, *Şark Meselesinden Demokratik Açılıma Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Hafızası*, Ankara, Şubat 2011, Ankara SETA Rapor

congress of KADEK in April 2002 decided sub-organizations to be established in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Accordingly, the PYD was founded on 17 October 2003 with the idea of uniting and liberating the Kurds in Syria (Milliyet 2016). The PYD has also claimed that it would be fighting for the resolution of Kurdish issue in line with “democratic civilization”. It later got included in the KCK-Rojava through the quadripartite KCK contract (Bila, 2016).

Evidence showing the PYD’s direct relationship with the PKK is abundant. Actually, examining the party’s statute only is enough to notice this relationship regarding organization, ideology and objectives. References to the concept democratic confederation was directly borrowed from Öcalan’s ideas. For instance, the objectives section of the statute includes statements such as<sup>6</sup>

- The fight for democratic liberation “in all parts of Kurdistan” will be supported.
- Kurdistan should be united under democratic confederation.
- In order to structure democratic confederation in the Middle East, works should be actively undertaken for social ethics, democratic politics, ecology, and gender freedom.

The PYD’s website openly mentions democratic autonomy, encourages the support for the fight for liberation in all parts of Kurdistan, and declares its resolve for uniting Kurdish people through democratic confederalism.

Under the umbrella of the KONGRA-GEL,<sup>7</sup> Abdullah Öcalan’s Kurdistan community supports the Kurdish community in Rojava Kurdistan fighting for freedom. Members are over 18 years of age adults who believe in so-called leader Öcalan’s ideology of democratic civilization. Amongst the aims of the members, they must not only be devoted to Öcalan and fight for his freedom but also they must be fighting for democratic confederacy.

The contract of the KCK-Rojava is almost identical to that of the KCK. In the principles, Articles 2-4 declare Abdullah Öcalan as the “philosophical and theoretical founder” and the leader of the PYD, the KCK, and the KCK-Rojava, and bases the KCK-Rojava’s ideology on Öcalan’s ideas

6 For details: [http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=24&Itemid=73](http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=24&Itemid=73)

7 PKK terrorist organisation has used various names such as PKK, PKK KADEK, KONGRA-GEL, KCK. As this study will not focus on this in particular, neither the names mentioned above nor the periods they used each name separately will be extensively discussed. KCK is the upper organisation of PKK. KCK/Rajava is the Syria branch of quadripartite KCK model.

of ecological and gender-based liberation and democratic communalism. Article 23 makes it clear that the KCK-Rojava is an organization in west Kurdistan that which is the extension of KKK Kurdistan organizations union of west Kurdistan Kurdish community congress. The idea of quadripartite is also the same as in the PKK/KCK contract.

In the verdicts of Ağrı high court prosecutor dated 19.11.2012 (file no: 2012/3873) and Ağrı 1. Magistrate's court dated 19.11.2012 (file no: 2012/115), it clearly lays out the organic connection between the PKK and the PYD. Especially in the statements and confessions of the terrorists arrested, this interconnection is clearly seen. So far a number of captured PKK terrorists have confessed that PKK/KCK terrorists were carrying out organizational activities together with the members of the PYD and the KCK-Rojava, that representatives of all these bodies attended joint congresses, meetings, conferences, assemblies and other activities especially in Qandil, that the PYD was connected to the KONGRA-GEL, that the PYD's ideology and aims reflected those of the KCK, and that Salih Muslim, the chairman of the PYD, was under direct influence of the KCK.<sup>8</sup>

There is also evidence that the PYD submits reports to top executive rulers of PKK/KCK with regard to their activities, and that the PKK/KCK is guiding the PYD regarding the steps to be taken in the political arena.<sup>9</sup>

The PKK/KCK and the PYD are very similar in terms of their statutes, ideology, objectives/strategies, as well as their organizational structures. The common objective of establishing a democratic confederal structure under the frame of democratic, ecological and sexually liberal community paradigm is found in the statutes of both the PKK/KCK and the PYD. The statutes of both organizations have. The only difference in this regard is that while it is the main objective to achieve democratic autonomy and confederacy in so-called Kurdistan pieces PKK- KCK bylaw, PYD's objective to achieve democratic autonomy in Syria takes part in the bylaw as a part of the organizations activities and efforts to set objectives, strategies and structural organizations under its political organization.

Accepting Abdullah Öcalan as their founder and leader, both organizations have 40% quota for women participation. Looking at the general organization form of PKK/KCK and PYD, there is a 'Party Congress' in the PKK's statute, a 'Party Congress' in that of the PYD and 'KONGRA-GEL' in that of the KCK. Considering the general organizational form as an executive

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8 Noted within the scope of the interview made with the Counter-Terrorism Expert A.Ç

9 Noted within the scope of the interview made with the Counter-Terrorism Expert A.Ç

body, the executive body of the PKK is called ‘PKK Executive Council’, that of the KCK is called ‘KCK Executive Council’, and that of the PYD is called ‘Party Council’. Despite minor differences among these names, it is considered that the PYD has organic relationship with KONGRA-GEL and acts in line with the instructions and purposes of the latter.<sup>10</sup> However, Salih Muslim has denied these organic links and claimed that they had only ideological and philosophical similarities with the PKK. For him, the reason why the flag of PKK was hoisted in the zones under their control was PYD members’ sympathy towards this organization (T24 2012).

The comparison of the PYD’s statute with the basic documents of the KCK and PKK below shows further parallelisms among these organizations.

PYD STATUTE	KCK CONTRACT	PKK STATUTE
<b>NAME OF SYSTEM:</b> Partiya Yekitiya Demokratîq (PYD)	<b>NAME OF SYSTEM:</b> Koma Ciwaken Kürdistan (KCK)	<b>NAME OF ORGANIZATION</b> Partiya Karkeren Kürdistan (PKK)
<b>Party’s Objective</b> To bring a democratic solution to Kurdish problem in Western Kurdistan, have democratic autonomy, democratic ecology, sexual freedom and democratic socialism; democratic liberation in all parts of Kurdistan by developing Kurdistan National Unity through Democratic confederal system.	<b>NATURE</b> KCK is a confederal system; it is based on democracy, sexual freedom and ecological living Principles: Having democratic organization based on sexual freedom and ecology in Kurdistan society based on the principles of democratic confederacy.	<b>ORGANIZATION’S OBJECTIVE</b> Establishing the democratic confederal organization based on democratic, ecological and sexual freedom society paradigm and democratic socialism line; bringing Autonomous Democratic Kurdistan-based solution to countries which have Kurdish issue

10 Noted as a result of the interview made with the Counter-Terrorism Expert A.Ç

<p>What is the organization?</p> <p>PYD accepts Abdullah Öcalan as its leader. In the paradigm of PYD, the quota of women representation is 40%. Women and youth have a leading role in the party.</p>	<p>General bodies</p> <p>The founder and leader is Abdullah Öcalan. There is 40 % gender quota for all fields of activity.</p>	<p>Organizational Structure</p> <p>PKK, accept Abdullah Öcalan and his opinions as the leaders. There is 40 % gender quota for men and women in all the top executive management bodies.</p>
<p>Sympathizer</p> <p>Accepts the objectives of the party and struggles for his rights, provides financial support for the party.</p>	<p>Sympathizer</p> <p>Accepts the objectives of the party and struggles for his rights, provides financial support for the party.</p>	
<p>Organization Members</p> <p>Those over 18 believe in Leader Apo's democratic civilization opinion, the party program and guideline, and practice it in his/her life.</p>	<p>System Citizenship</p> <p>Those who were born and live in Kurdistan or everyone who is loyal to KCK system.</p>	<p>Organization Members</p> <p>The member of party who has his/her own style, pace and method in the path of leader Apo, and who sets an example as an ideal person for his/her fellows and the whole community with his/her activities in the party.</p>
<p>Aim of the Members</p> <p>Should know the honor of loyalty to the Kurdish people leader Abdullah Öcalan and fight for his freedom.</p> <p>-Should strive for the formation of a system of democratic confederacy. Gender struggle must be carried out and they should believe in the liberty of women.</p>	<p>Establishing the democratic confederal organization based on democratic, ecological and sexual freedom society paradigm and democratic socialism line; bringing Autonomous Democratic Kurdistan-based solution to countries which have Kurdish issue</p>	<p>Establishing the democratic confederal organization based on democratic, ecological and sexual freedom society paradigm and democratic socialism line; bringing Autonomous Democratic Kurdistan-based solution to countries which have Kurdish issue</p>

<p>ORGANIZATIONAL Structure</p> <p>-Leader of PYD: Abdullah Öcalan</p> <p>-Congress: Highest decision organ of the party. Congress can gather before its time with the approval of party leader or executive commissioners' decision. Also it can protract one year for a while in accordance with the request of the party leader or council members.</p> <p>-Conference: It holds regional and state conferences before the party conference.</p> <p>-Party Leader</p> <p>-Party Council Member: Set their goals between two congresses. Congress members are chosen by the congress.</p>	<p>-KCK leader: Abdullah Öcalan</p> <p>-Kongra-Gel: Kurdistan (Kurdistan public assembly)-Kongra-Gel: It is the highest decision-making body that operates according to the internal regulations.</p> <p>-KCK Executive Council</p>	<p>Party Leader: Abdullah Öcalan</p> <p>Congress: It is the highest decision-making body. It can hold a meeting earlier than the scheduled date with the approval of the party leader, decision of two-thirds of party council or with the approval of one-third of the staff. Again with the approval of the party leader and decision of two-thirds of party council, it can be postponed maximum one year for one time.</p> <p>Conference: Party affiliated organizations hold their own conference if necessary.</p> <p>Party Council</p>
<p>Duties: It approaches to oppressed identities, especially women with the principle of positive discrimination and struggles against woman massacre, oppression, violence, exploitation and humiliation.</p> <p>-Every citizen is responsible for protecting and developing natural environment for every living creature while maintaining cultural and historical wealth.</p>	<p>It is essential to be loyal to KCK system.</p> <p>-Every KCK citizen is responsible for sustaining equal rights and decent life based on gender freedom.</p>	

#### 4. The Civil War in Syria

##### The YPG: PYD's Military Wing

When the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, the KCK-Rojava started to prepare the grounds for future autonomy. It established TEV-DEM (Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement), which would spearhead “democratic autonomy” in the north of Syria. Local councils and schools to teach the Kurdish language were opened afterwards. In the meantime, the PYD formed military forces under the name “People’s Defense Committees”. In summer 2012, these forces took control of the towns Kobane and Afrin. On July 20, the day of Afrin's capture, the military forces of the PYD were renamed as YPG (People's Protection Units) (Firatnews 2012). Under the name YPJ (Women’s Protection Units), units of women militias were also formed as a part of the YPG.<sup>11</sup>

The YPG can be said to be the Syria branch of the HPG (People's Defense Forces), which is the PKK’s military wing. Since its establishment, the bulk of the YPG’s manpower has been supplied from HPG terrorists in Turkey. Military and ideological training of Syrian recruits have been provided by HPG members and includes subjects such as the history of the PKK, leadership, Öcalan’s biography, and the history of Kurdistan. During the trainings, which are mainly conducted in the Turkish language, Öcalan’s own writings and Turkish translations of foreign political thinkers are read and discussed (Leezenberg, 682-683).

In the region, the PKK’s ideology is strictly followed and Öcalan’s leadership cult is revered. An anonymous security guard said in an interview that the “revolution” in Kobane would affect the whole Kurdish community in the Middle East and the YPG would be effective in Turkey as well, from Şanlıurfa to Suruç. A text that YPG members carry with them reads that with the leadership of Öcalan they “take the oath to use weapons for the democratic autonomy of the people of Kurdistan and for the values of revolution.” The YPG’s procurement of equipment, recruitment of personnel and provision of logistical support are all decided by the KCK’s executive council.<sup>12</sup>

The quick advancement of PYD-affiliated forces from 2012 onwards can be attributed to the support it received from the Syrian regime. In the early

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11 Although PYD/YPG advocates that it embrace and adopt “ecological and democratic society model”, it is accused for war crime.( <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allies-raiding-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/have-the-syrian-kurds-committed-war-crimes/>)

12 The said information was gained as a result of the interview made with terror expert O.H.

phase of the Syrian civil war, there were direct contacts between Bashar al-Assad and Salih Muslim, and it was reported that the Syrian government released many PYD members from prison (Acun and Keskin 2017: 11-12). As the PYD consolidated its power in the towns Qamishlo, Kobane, and Afrin, the regime virtually withdrew its authority from these regions as a tactical move. By provisionally leaving the northern front to the PYD-YPG, the Assad regime was able to prevent the joining of this organization in the opposition. As a result, no serious clash between the PYD and regime forces took place (Leezenberg 2016: 681).

In the early 2014, the PYD declared autonomy in the three provinces of Jazirah, Kobane, and Afrin, and TEV-DEM assumed the role of government (Acun and Keskin 2017: 21). Even though this movement includes Arabs, Turkmens, and Assyrians as well as the Kurds, the PYD is the leading political actor in it. This is not only because of the lack of strong popular support for the other parties, but also because of the fact that the armed objective of the PYD is to set up a corridor of its own in the north of Syria along the Turkish border. The fact that the PYD is an affiliate of the KCK makes it obvious that this corridor would be under Qandil's control and function as the experiment area of Öcalan's governance model. By gaining experience in the provinces in the north of Syria, the KCK's objective is to implement this model later in the north of Iraq and southeast of Turkey.

However, comparable to the continuation of centralized command in the PKK, the PYD's "Rojava experiment" is also directed and orchestrated by a strongly militarized and hierarchical center, which contradicts with its self-proclaimed principles of grassroots mobilization and democratic governance. Having assumed the leading political and military role in the north of Syria, the PYD-YPG does not allow any other Kurdish party or movement that could contest its authority. Arrests of non-conforming civilians and relocations of population have been commonplace. International human rights observers and other Kurdish factions in Syria have accused the PYD-YPG of abuses of civilians such as members and supporters of other Kurdish parties and critical journalists. Observing such evidences, Leezenberg (2016: 681-683) concludes,

This heavily militarized and highly hierarchical character of regional one-party rule is strongly at odds not only with the PYD's own propaganda, but also with the enthusiastic and virtually entirely uncritical reports about its alleged efforts at creating a 'stateless democracy', or 'grassroots self-organization', that may be found among both liberal commentators and leftist activists in the West. Most of those reports ignore, or whitewash, the

striking discrepancy between the ideal, ideology or discourse, of stateless democracy and autonomous self-organization and the practical realities of a Leninist vanguard party with a strictly hierarchical organization.

## 5. Repercussions in Turkey

The links between the PYD in Syria and the PKK and its affiliates in Turkey became clearer after DAESH launched a campaign of expansion in the north of Syria in the spring of 2014. In response to DAESH, the PYD-YPG sought the support of the Kurds in Turkey, particularly those living in the provinces near the Syrian border. Calling them to join their cause, it propagated the idea that Ankara's policy facilitated DAESH offensives in Kurdish-inhabited towns of Syria (Lawson 2016: 486). As the DAESH expanded at the expense of the PYD-YPG, the PKK and its supporters in Turkey developed an increasingly ambivalent posture regarding the on-going Solution Process. PKK leaders, whilst encouraging Kurds in Turkey to cross into Syria to fight DAESH, used a strong language calling Ankara to support the Kurds in Syria (Lawson 2016: 487). Some members of the political party HDP joined in this discourse. When the town Kobane was under DAESH attack, an MP of this party declared that if the town fell, the Solution Process would be over. Increase of tensions between the PKK-affiliated groups and another, Islamic, pro-Kurdish political movement called HÜDAPAR was used by the former as a pretext to call its sympathizers to arms in early October 2014, which quickly led to skirmishes causing dozens of deaths (Lawson 2016: 488). The 6-7 October incidents was an important milestone damaging the Solution Process and mobilizing a considerable number of people by PKK leadership.

The suicide bombing incident that took place in Suruç on 20 July 2015 marked the final breaking point of the Solution Process. Following this attack, which was committed by an DAESH militant and killed more than 30 pro-Kurdish activists, PKK leaders accused the Turkish government of not fighting DAESH effectively. Announcing that the Solution Process was over, the PKK resumed armed attacks on Turkish military and police. As the violence in the Southeast escalated, the PKK declared autonomy in some towns and municipalities in the region. To counter the intervention of the security forces, the PKK prepared ditches and barricades in urban areas (Lawson 2016: 488-489).

Evidently, the boost of morale and confidence with the PYD's "Rojava experiment" induced the PKK and its sympathizers to take action for the implementation of Öcalan's democratic confederacy in the Southeast of

Turkey. However, their plans did not bear any result. Leezenberg (2016: 683-685) lays out two main miscalculations on their side: First, different from the north of Syria, where there was no state control, the Turkish government and armed forces would not tolerate such a *fait accompli*. Second, contrary to the PKK's expectations, the majority of the Kurds in the region would not support this effort. As a result, Turkish armed forces suppressed the armed insurgency within a few months' time. In retaliation to the suppression of the insurgency, the terrorist organization TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) carried out bombings in large cities including Ankara and İstanbul, causing the death of dozens of civilians, police officers, and military personnel.

As is seen above, the dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and PKK terrorism in Turkey were directly related to each other. The strengthening of the PYD-YPG in Syria brought favorable outcomes for the PKK in terms of combat experience, armament, political-ideological motivation and self-confidence. These outcomes paved the way for the termination of the Solution Process and later for follow-up uprisings and terrorist incidents.

## 6. US Support to the PYD-YPG

Since August 1997, the PKK has been officially designated by the USA as a foreign terrorist organization (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>). Despite the clear organic links between the PKK and the PYD-YPG, however, the US government has developed a different approach to the latter. Claiming that the two are separate entities (Sözcü 2016), the USA has supported the PYD-YPG politically and militarily during the Syrian Civil War. This support has progressed in such a way that the YPG is operating almost as the land forces of the US-led coalition against the DAESH, and the US regards the PYD as a legitimate political party on the ground (Self and Ferris 2016; Bila 2016: 163-191).

The YPG's resistance to the DAESH attack on Kobane in 2014 not only boosted the morale of the KCK-led movement as a whole, but also increased international sympathy to the PYD in Syria. Many international actors that had recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization<sup>13</sup> began to praise and support its affiliates in Syria in their campaign against the DAESH. For the US government, which was leading the international coalition against the DAESH but at the same time unwilling to use its own land forces in Syria, the YPG became a suitable armed group to support for

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13 In addition to the United States, the European Union has formally declared the PKK as a terrorist organization: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002D0334&from=EN>

fighting the DAESH. Despite the fact that the PYD-YPG had been designated since June 2013 in NATO's Strategic Intelligence Documents as one of the PKK affiliates and hence a terrorist organization (Likoğlu 2017), the USA began to supply armament and equipment for the YPG and assisted it with air support (Acun and Keskin 2017: 13). Russia and Iran did not oppose the PYD-YPG's activities either, partly because of its tacit agreement with the Assad regime (Leezenberg 2016: 681-683). All this provided the PYD-YPG with a suitable atmosphere to consolidate their rule in the north of Syria and later to launch assaults on the DAESH. As the YPG captured more territories from the DAESH, more militias were deployed in these regions and trained by the US Special Forces (Öztürk 2017).

In response to Turkey's protests, US officials have argued that they were not supporting the PYD-YPG *per se*, but a coalition of political and military actors representing different ethnic and religious groups. The re-branding of YPG forces in October 2015 under the name Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has worked as a convenient justification for the USA. Even though there are a number of military forces of Arab, Assyrian and other ethnic backgrounds in the SDF, their size and strength is relatively minor, which makes the YPG the leading force in it. In this respect, the structure of the SDF is comparable to that of TEV-DEM (Acun and Keskin 2017: 41). Despite this fact, some US officials have denied any link between the SDF and the PKK (TRT Haber 2017).

In 2016, the SDF started a two-pronged attack on the DAESH. While proceeding towards Al-Raqqa in the south, it crossed the Euphrates in the west and captured the town of Manbij. Despite all the warnings given by Turkey, which has declared any land possession by the PYD-YPG in the west of the Euphrates unacceptable, the USA continued to claim that it was not the PYD-YPG but the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who kept Manbij under control. The difference of opinion regarding PYD-YPG has deteriorated the relationship between Turkey and the USA, which are two NATO allies. Turkey, being threatened by the terrorist groups along its Syrian border and growing suspicious about the short- and long-term aims of the USA in the region, launched Operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016. The straining of relations with the USA also led Turkey to develop an understanding and tactical cooperation with Russia regarding the affairs in Syria.



## Conclusion

The PKK was founded as a Marxist-Leninist and Kurdish nationalist movement with the objective of carving out a foothold that would develop into an independent Kurdish state established in the territories of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. After the capture of its leader, it has claimed to have changed its ideology and objectives dramatically. From the early 2000s onwards, Öcalan began to advocate communalism against all forms of hierarchically top-down organized regimes and emphasized a democratic and non-hierarchical form of governance respecting the environment and gender diversity. In 2004, he conceptualized these ideas under “democratic confederacy”. The PKK continuously declared that it had given up the idea of independence and was working for democratic autonomy instead.

However, in reality, the official documents and actions of the PKK and its affiliates do not reflect such a dramatic change in terms of ideology or objectives. Even though this model is allegedly against the idea of nation state, leadership culture and hierarchy, the KCK contract consists of an absolute state structure. The use of a pan-Kurdish language, the strong leader cult around Öcalan as a leading figure, and the centralized decision making mechanism are only a few characteristics that contradict Öcalan’s new ideology.

Moreover, the PKK’s continuation of using political violence indicates that this is just a window dressing arguably to legitimize its existence and obtain more external support. This is obviously seen in the KCK contract, the demands of PKK terrorists, their threatening speeches, their violent attacks against Turkish armed forces, and constant pressure they put on the local people. Whilst still debating over whether PKK is separatist or not, the fact that they changed their approach and claims with regards to separatism, the evolving international conjectures and also the fact that they have realised the benefits of staying in Turkey, they still conceal their ultimate goal behind their verbose discourse no matter how well they pretend to have changed their mainstream ideology.

Again, from early 2000s on, the PKK started to operate more actively in countries neighboring Turkey. Today, the KCK-Rojava is the PKK/KCK’s branch in Syria, while PYD is its political arm and YPG is its military wing. KCK-Rojava’s ideology, symbols, organization, and objectives are all in line with those of the KCK, the umbrella organization based in Qandil. The PYD follows the PKK in its doctrine and a substantial part of PYD and YPG members are recruited from Turkey. The YPG’s land mechanism operates depending on the Qandil leadership, while its forces are largely trained by the HPG, the PKK’s armed forces.

The dynamics of the civil war in Syria enabled the PYD to consolidate itself as a political actor in the north of the country, while the achievements of its armed forces, supported by international actors, augmented the morale and self-confidence of this movement. Since then, Öcalan and the acting leadership of the PKK/KCK have frequently declared that the model of governance implemented in this region would be followed by the Kurdish-populated towns in the east and southeast of Turkey. These developments quickly made its repercussions in Turkey, bringing the Solution Process to an end and re-generating PKK terrorism.

In accordance with its interests in the Syrian Civil War, the USA has overlooked the fact that the PYD-YPG was a PKK affiliate and supported it as an ally on the ground. Whether this tactical decision will be in the benefit of the USA and the region in the long term is very questionable. First, the US support to the PYD-YPG has strained its relations with Turkey, which on the one hand moved on to adopting a more pro-active security policy and on the other hand developing its relations with third countries including Russia. Considering that Turkey is a key country in NATO's South-eastern flank and a regional actor in the Middle East, its alienation will likely be costly for the USA in the long term. Second, the regions that the PYD-YPG took over during the war used to be populated mostly by Arabs. In order to establish a "Kurdish corridor" loyal to its authority, the PYD-YPG undertook a population management strategy involving methods like forced emigration and resettlement. As a result, the demographics of the north of Syria changed dramatically, creating grievances among a large group of people. These grievances may bring new disputes and conflicts in the future. Third, the strengthening of the PKK as a result of the USA support to the PYD-YPG will increase the threat of separatist terrorism in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (Sly 2017).

More generally speaking, applying double standards for terrorism will do nothing but encourage terrorist groups. Today, the lack of a commonly-agreed and binding definition for terrorism in international law is allowing states to act pragmatically in approaching the issue of terrorism. While one country designates a group as terrorist, another country may regard it as "national salvation fighters", "freedom fighters", or merely "political criminals". This is mainly because states often prefer to use terrorist groups for their own interest and benefit. However, as terrorist groups can easily go beyond control, their strengthening can lead to grave complications jeopardizing international system and security. To avoid this, states should develop more sincere and resolute cooperation in fighting terrorism.

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