

DRK Insight

PKK-PYD-ISIS, Interactions; Future Possibilities on the Regional Terrorism Developments

Key Takeaways

- The US-backed PKK, under the disguise of SDF, interacted with ISIS in many ways and emerged as a significant actor in the region. Gained during this interaction, PKK inherited various fighting tactics from ISIS and employed them in Turkey. PKK is expected to use ISIS's strategies and tactics in the upcoming seasons.

PKK-PYD-YPG Connection

PYD (Democratic Union Party) is the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorist organization. They have the same leadership cadres, tactics, strategies, resources, and the structure. It is controlling territories from Al Thawrah in the South, Al Arimah in the West and to Al Malikiyah in the East alongside the borders of Turkey.

Abdullah Öcalan, so-to-speak head of the PKK terrorist organization, instructed to establish "The Party of Unity of the Syrian Kurds," which was a step to accomplish



organization's Third Path strategy. That is actually how PYD terrorist organization emerged. PKK's change of the structure back in 2005 was a crucial step to reach the establishment of PYD. By PKK terrorist organization, advertising itself as PKK/KCK (Union of Kurdish Communities), extended its organizational umbrella to Syria, Iraq, and Iran. PYD became the military and political branch of PKK

operating in Syria. They both have the same commanding cadres, located in Qandil Mountains.

Before ISIS seized territories in Northern Syria, PYD was no more than a branch of PKK. That was ISIS which increased the mobility and visibility of PYD. In 2012, the Higher Kurdish Council and YPG (People's Defense Unit) were established in Syria with the aim of protecting the Kurdish entity living in the region. Since then YPG has become one of the fundamental armed forces located in Syria.

Ocalan – PKK and PYD;

Historical process tracing of PKK/PYD/YPG also makes us see that the relations between three are also explicit in the founding documents. A passage in these documents prescribes PYD's statue as follows:

"PYD regards Abdullah Ocalan as its own leader, the People's Congress as the umbrella organization of the people of Kurdistan and KCK- West as a democratic system for the Kurdish people of Syria."

Aforementioned founding document was written following the 8th Congress of the PKK held in 2002.

The modus operandi for Syrian Civil War was made clear by Öcalan and was implemented as a set of policies. In this regard, Bashar Assad was seen as a leader whom they might have reached as reconciliation. A collective policy action to be taken immediately with Kurdish factions in Syria for self-defense was also set out. PYD, at the same time, publicly expressed that it is the responsible organization to fight against ISIS. Yet, most of the tactical and strategic guidance has been provided by PKK leaders. During the fight against ISIS, steps to obtain the real goal of PYD, which is the establishment of autonomous government in the Northern Syria by implementing demographic engineering in favor of Kurds have been taken. YPG, to this end, was the



armed apparatus and its terrorists were advertised as so-called "freedom fighters." Many PKK members were appointed in PYD ranks during that period. Terrorists from PKK were also brought from different regions to join the YPG in the field. Such transfers were revealed by security forces of Turkey via the capture of arms, weapons, and terrorists.

Firat News Agency, which is subordinate to the PKK terrorist organization, brought the alliance of PKK and PYD terrorists to the forefront. Also, YPG terrorists, following the seizure of Raqqa and defeating ISIS terrorists, displayed their flags with Öcalan posters at the city center of Raqqa. It was also observed that supporters of PKK had used PYD/YPG flags during demonstrations within the Turkey.

Talal Silo, the spokesman of PYD who escaped from Syria, recently explained the details of the relation between PKK and its branches in an interview. He indicated that SDF, which is composed of PYD/YPG terrorists is just a name propounded to cover Western support to PYD. His statement also demonstrated that arms aids to SDF have sometimes ended up in PKK terrorists operating in Turkey.



PKK - ISIS Cooperation

It was in late September 2017 that the relation between ISIS and PKK/PYD was reported by news agencies. According to the visuals, in Suluk district near Raqqa, captives were exchanged between ISIS and YPG terrorists. YPG delivered 14 ISIS militants while taking 14 civilians back.



However, it was not the beginning of the cooperation between two terrorist organizations. PKK, through its Syrian branch “PYD,” aims to have a region where it might have military control for future political gains. Opening up space, where regional dynamics could be altered in favor of Kurds, is the sign that they can move forward to accomplish so-called

“*Rojava Revolution.*” They have already caused forced migration of waves of Arabs and Turkmen people living in the region through employing oppressive and threatening policies. Their existence and policies in the region were welcomed by the West for the sake of fighting against ISIS. In this context, the western countries supplied a massive amount of military hardware to PKK and demanded a corridor for YPG fighters to reach Kobane from Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey was accused of supporting terrorism by the western political cycles and media because of its non-supportive stance against PYD/YPG to fight against ISIS.

Even though PYD demonstrated itself as a “*freedom fighters*” fighting against ISIS, approximately 80 percent of the people died in Raqqa were Arabs. They were deceived by PYD terrorists. So, only the pictures of Kurdish militants, who were alive, were taken while entering the city of Raqqa. Following the fall of Raqqa, an agreement between SDF and ISIS was made. According to the agreement, 300 ISIS terrorists and their

families who were around 3500 were permitted to leave the city. It was confirmed by Colonel Dillon, spokesman of the Global Coalition Against ISIS. SDF allowed those terrorists to leave Raqqa with their weapons and ammunition. A convoy of 100 vehicles including 50 trailer trucks were seen to leave the city under the auspices of SDF militants. Moreover, the agreement between ISIS and SDF was revealed by a news agency following the removal of ISIS terrorists and their families.

US-PYD/YPG Cooperation

The alliance between US and PYD, though it was denied at the beginning of the war in Syria, have become more visible through time. Obama administration started to support PYD in 2014 during the battle in Kobane.

The US then used PYD militants to fight against ISIS as a part of its retrenchment policy. US soldiers started to wear uniforms of YPG units to be protected from any further attack, which was criticized sharply by Turkish authorities. Moreover, US assisted the YPG to form the Syrian Democratic Forces-SDF in October 2015



as a disguise mechanism to alleviate Turkish pressure on Washington and Arabs' concerns about the coalition's reliance on Kurdish ground troops. Furthermore, in May 2017, a decision to send ammunition, machine guns, heavy machine guns, construction equipment and armed vehicles were made by US administration. By October 2017, arms aid to YPG and other affiliated groups was claimed to be around 700\$ million. In November, President Trump stated that they would withdraw their aid to YPG. However, YPG is still considered as a strategic partner in Syria.



Interactions among PYD and ISIS

The similarities between ISIS and PKK/PYD has become more apparent through the time. First of all, a wide range of military equipment including high-tech drones to gather



intelligence are used by both terrorist organizations. When Turkey started Operation Euphrates Shield and cleared its borders from ISIS terrorists, security personnel found weapons supposed to belong PYD. Security forces also reported that they have come across in Southeastern Turkey with the same types of traps set by ISIS terrorists in Northern Syria. Both ISIS and PKK/PYD used same-style tunnels. PYD dug tunnels in Kobane, Tel Abiad, and Afrin; ISIS dug in Jarablus and Azez. PYD did these to open up a line for PKK terrorists

while ISIS to be protected from air operations. PKK imitated ISIS' tactics such as hanging huge curtains over the streets to protect from sharpshooters and prevent air surveillance. Moreover, they employed similar tactics to escape from the battlefield or to be hidden from Coalition forces. Men wear women clothes to hide by walking through cities or border lines.

ISIS bomb attacks, explosives, and mine traps are all implemented by PKK terrorists in the attacks conducted in Turkey. Their focus is to give the highest possible damage to the other side by using car bombs, improvised explosive devices, and booby-trapped houses so that they can maximize damage with a little use of power. By doing so, they

have also caused forced migration of thousands of people within and without the territories.

Beyond all the strategic and tactical similarities, some terrorists are identified to operate for PKK inside Turkey and ISIS inside Syria. A terrorist captured in İzmir was carrying both ISIS and PKK identity cards. A neutralized ISIS terrorist had a flight ticket showing he passes through Qamishli, which is under PKK control. The Turkish security forces reported that a group of ISIS terrorists used the same arsenal with PKK terrorists. When combined, most of the evidence indicates that PKK has evolved through ISIS in terms of strategies and tactics and transformed into a new entity.

Conclusions

The internal Syrian war and the emergence of the ISIS radically changed the geopolitical considerations concerning the region, since it created new conditions and de-facto situations. We can mainly conclude the followings:

- The conflicts in both states paved the way for the PKK to fill the void and increase its sphere of influence.
- A new paradigm emerged in the international relations: **alliance formation between a state and terrorist organization.** The US collaboration with PYD, namely with PKK, is a unique example in the political literature.
- Emerged as “*the neighborhood effect*”, Turkish government hardly managed the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war starting from 2014 with the rise of the ISIS threat.
- The “*open-border policy*” and the difficulties in controlling 900 km long Syrian border enabled the infiltration of the PKK terrorists into Turkey and Kurdish youths to Syria, who were trained and mastered by PKK in urban warfare.¹
- The experienced PKK terrorists have commanded, and trained Kurdish youths organized under YPS (The Civil Protection Units) in Turkey.
- First time in its bloody history, PKK was able to mobilize masses and conducted an ISIS- style war, in which it put to use new tactics and technics. This new form of war was the outcome of the new doctrine called “urban warfare based on the rural existence.” The doctrine provisions to concentrate the terrorist acts in the cities backed by the terrorist positioned in the rural.
- While PKK’s defeat of ISIS in Mosul as well as in Sinjar, Kobane Manbij and Raqqa made it a dominant political and military actor in the Northern Syria.

¹ Kobane attack of DAESH transferred the Syrian civil war in Turkey, consequently the street clashes in the country incited by PKK on 6–7 October 2014, which tended to mobilize Kurds and polarize Turkish society.

- Consequently, gained enormous amount of military hardware, and increased its acceptance among the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Moreover, PKK developed new fighting skills inspired by ISIS.
- There is substantial evidence that PKK and ISIS formed some covert relations:
 - ✓ ISIS created the necessary conditions for the establishment of the Kurdish Region through ethnic/demographic cleansing.
 - ✓ It seems that PKK's recent tactics and strategies have been shaped to target civilians with more brutal attacks to give the highest possible damage. ISIS's violence might set up a mindset that could lead PKK to plan more IED explosions or booby-traps. (For the detailed version of PKK attacks see DRK's [Snapshot on PKK Strategies Against Civilians](#)). Furthermore, the timing of the attacks seems to be coordinated with ISIS.
 - ✓ When compared its resistance against Turkish army and the Free Syrian Forces (FSA) during the campaign of Operation Euphrates Shield, ISIS displayed weak resistance against PKK. ISIS's recent evacuation from Raqqa verified the existence of this relation.
- A possible increase in PKK's dominance over Northern Syria ranging to the Mediterranean Sea may constitute an existential threat to Turkey.
- Thus it may be expected in the near future an upsurge in the terrorist attacks conducted either by PKK or ISIS, particularly against the economic targets including tourism, energy and industry sector.
- Due to intensive and efficient operations in the rural areas, PKK might tend to attack to weakest and soft targets in some cities using ISIS's tactics, where it has local supporters, such as Mersin, Antalya, Mugla, and Izmir.
- PKK might shift the center of gravity to the Southern Turkey, transfer more terrorists and allocate additional resources to intensify and widen the fights. PKK may also be expected to conduct more efficient attacks against the Turkish Security Forces in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.
- Remnants of ISIS terrorists located in Syrian-Iraqi border could benefit from a possible security vacuum. Also, ISIS and the PKK might collaborate further in order to inflict more pressure on Turkey.
- If and when continues, the military and political support for PKK may turn it to an ultra-treacherous terrorist organization similar to the emergence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.