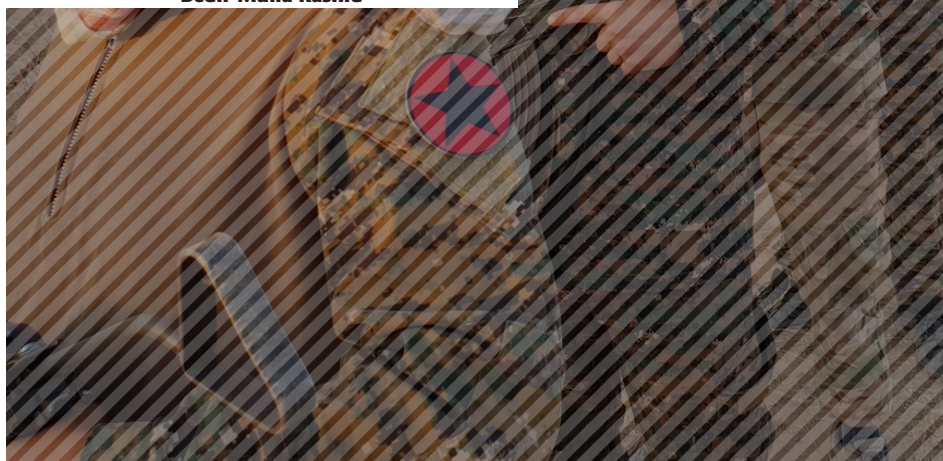


THE PHENOMENON OF YPG TRANSNATIONAL FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

April 2019

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Abstract: Even though foreign fighters are an age-old phenomenon, they have once again come to the fore with the outbreak of the war in Syria. The battlefield has attracted thousands of foreign volunteers who have joined militant groups and further increased the level of violence perpetrated against civilians. The rise of ISIS has led the international community to mainly focus on Sunni radicalism, ignoring the Shia or Leftist transnational insurgency. This paper attempts at analysing the phenomenon and current dynamics of YPG foreign fighters in Syria. In doing so, the paper has described the journey of these foreigners in three phases. A mobilisation phase during which a volunteer is motivated to travel to Syria, an engagement phase that describes his or her role and responsibilities vis-à-vis the YPG, and the third phase upon their return home, and the new roles they embrace afterwards.



Introduction

The Syrian conflict has energised extremists across the world and has led tens of thousands of transnational militants to join the fight. ISIS¹ and foreign Iranian-backed Shia militias² have attracted the vast majority of foreign fighters who came to Syria and Iraq, but hundreds of others have joined the ranks of another transnational actor in the conflict, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Established in Turkey in 1978, the PKK has traditionally attracted ethnic Kurds almost exclusively. Following its establishment, the group started recruiting Kurds not only from Turkey but also from Syria, Iran and Iraq. It is estimated that almost 20 percent of the organization's militants at its headquarters in the Qandil mountains of Iraq are Syrian.³ What is more, thousands of Syrian Kurds have died fighting within the ranks of the organization in the decades following the creation of the PKK.⁴ On the top of this, as time has passed, the organisation has managed to get the support of other leftist and communist parties and movements in Europe, but has only had relatively limited success in recruiting foreign volunteers to join the actual fight in Turkey.

In 2012, the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the People Protection Units (YPG) took control of a large swathe of lands following the withdrawal of regime forces from northeastern Syria and Afrin. It did not take a long time for the YPG to clash with Islamist extremists and their first encounter occurred in late December 2012 after bloody battles with the al-Nusra front. It is, however, their near defeat against

ISIS during the Battle of Kobani in September 2014, that triggered the phenomenon of foreigners arriving to re-enforce their ranks. The increased number of YPG foreign fighters in comparison to previous PKK endeavours is only partially due to the brutality of their opponents, but another important reason for this surge is the glorification of YPG militancy on international media and in domestic politics. Hence, the act of volunteering with the PYD was not only perceived as harmless, but as an act of bravery and valor.

The phenomenon of PKK/YPG foreign fighters has primarily been of concern to Turkey thus far. For one thing, the PKK is a militant organisation that has carried out many attacks in Turkey since its establishment 40 years ago. Second, the majority of foreign volunteers who have joined the ranks of the YPG are Turkish citizens. Nonetheless, Western states should be alarmed and concerned too. The level of reaction by Western countries to the threat stemming from the leftist fighters has been very low up until now.⁵ In addition to the diplomatic consequences of their indifference towards the phenomenon, there are no indications that the returnees will not engage in violent attacks or re-integrate into PKK networks back at home.

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Following the end of the Second World War, dozens of extreme communist and anarchist organisations sprouted across Western Europe and conducted bloody attacks against senior state officials and civilians. It took the European states almost three decades to gradually eliminate this threat and to end their vicious cycle of violence. The recent surge in nationalism and what is perceived as fascism by these individuals could easily awaken old demons. In 2017, in Charlottesville in the United States, a group of counter-protesters who identified themselves as ANTIFA took part in a bloody confrontation with white nationalist demonstrators during a “Unite the Right” rally. The same group is also known for sending volunteers to fight in Syria alongside the YPG. Additionally, the group is notorious in the U.S. for its harsh stance towards the current political system and specifically Donald Trump. It previously rioted in Washington DC⁶ and vandalized bus stops and engaged in confrontations with the police.

This paper attempts at analysing the phenomenon of the Leftist transnational insurgency in Syria. Accordingly, it defines foreign fighters as volunteers who hold the citizenship of a country external to the conflict and do not belong to a national armed force. The paper also looks at the phenomenon as a phased journey that starts with a mobilisation stage, then an engagement phase, followed by the return of the concerned individuals to their home countries. In doing so, the paper provides an analysis of the foreign fighters’ motivations, roles and contributions during the conflict,

their organisation and affiliations and concludes with a set of recommendations for dealing with this phenomenon.

The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters

Often associated with Muslims fighting with jihadi armed groups in conflicts far their homes, transnational insurgency and militancy are a much older global phenomenon. Up until the relatively recent establishment of national or mono-ethnic/religious armies, the practice of hiring foreign fighters or mercenaries was common among imperial and colonial powers. The French Foreign Legion is a living testament to this tradition. The contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon too, stretch beyond the realm of Muslim countries. For instance, Catholic fighters volunteered to fight Communism with Franco in the Spanish Civil War and nationalist Serbs fought in Croatia from 1991 to 1992. Similarly, American Jews joined the Israeli army in the 1948 war, while individuals have volunteered in Communist revolutions across the globe, in Latin America, Spain, Vietnam and others.

Nowadays, foreign fighters mostly join non-state armed actors engaged in asymmetric conflicts. This is mainly due to the nature of non-state actors as socio-political entities that operate outside international norms and laws, but also due to their perceived value vis-à-vis their comrades. Nevertheless, employing foreigners is not

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always an advantage: in many cases, they become a political or a security liability for the groups they join. In the case of insurgencies in Muslim countries, the arrival of foreign mujahideen is now a synonym for extremism and is often used as a pretext for adversaries to use disproportionate force against insurgents and their communities. Moreover, the protection of foreign fighters viewed as assets such as Westerners, intellectuals, skilled trainers and recruiters also come at a high price, hence reducing the agility of these groups. This is why it is essential to assess foreign volunteers' contribution off the battlefield and in other roles they play. In guerrilla wars, individuals with limited or no fighting experience are usually assigned to fulfil supportive roles through humanitarian aid, propaganda, media offices, political organisations and hospitals. Even when they are veterans or former soldiers, they are usually asked to train and equip domestic fighters, attributing a higher value to their ability to transfer their knowledge⁷ and technical skills to the organization at large.

There are many personal and subjective reasons for individuals to engage themselves in transnational insurgencies, but self-identification with the cause they are fighting for seems to be a common dominator among their different profiles. In the case of Muslim foreign fighters, their militancy for Islamic causes is a

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reflection of their worldview and their broader sense of identity that surpasses the shape of modern state borders. Likewise, Communism and anarchism also embrace transnational identities that challenge borders and the wider international order. Similar trends are also observed among Christian fighters volunteering in conflicts where Christianity is perceived as being at threat. During the Spanish Civil War, communists and anarchists mobilised their members to defend their broad transnational constituencies. French Christian and Communist activists sent volunteers to fight on both sides of the conflict, and so did Germany, Italy, Ireland and Portugal.

In studying the phenomenon of transnational insurgencies, a critical distinction needs to be made between “near” and “far away” foreign fighters. Near foreign volunteers are individuals that share additional links beyond ideology and self-identification in the cause with domestic insurgents, such as ethnicity and language. The depth of the latter engagement, the volume of their participation and the degree of their assimilation are far greater than their “far away” colleagues. In conflicts where ethnicity is at the centre of the conflict, recruiters of foreign fighters tend to manipulate identities to make them more salient in an attempt to create an alternative sense of obligation and duty towards the collective. In such cases, framing distant conflicts as a threat to a transnational identity is a common practice. Recruitment messaging thus tends to emphasise the necessity of defensive actions to preserve the existence of the community.



Ultimately, the degree of involvement of foreign fighters in a given conflict is highly dependent on their ability to access the theater of war and their post-war prospects at home or in their current destination. In conflicts where the incumbent state and its neighbors maintain tight control over their borders, the infiltration of fighters onto the battlefield becomes extremely difficult and dangerous, while in cases where they not it is only natural to witness an increase in the flow of foreign fighters joining the conflict. More interestingly, for ideological-driven individuals with a possibility of volunteering in multiple conflicts, the ease of access to a specific theater in comparison to others often shapes their final destination. This is, for instance, seen in the case of PKK militants who volunteered in Syria and Iraq rather than Turkey or Iran. Similarly, foreign fighters' rationale also includes the ramifications of their engagement. In cases where their communities or national laws celebrate their participation, or are more tolerant of this kind of activities, the costs of their endeavour is considerably lower than the contrary. During the Spanish Civil War, Andre ´Malraux recruited over 100 French pilots in support of Franco despite the neutrality of his government. His ability to return to France and even serve in the French military encouraged him and others to persist with their intervention.

Transnational militancy in the Syrian conflict is a rich case study in the different manifestations of this phenomenon. In addition to the

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proliferation of radical Islamists within ISIS, the al-Nusra Front and a myriad of other non-armed state actors, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and their allies too have welcomed thousands of foreign fighters. Among the volunteers who joined the YPG/PYD cause, some are ideologically driven, while others are seeking the protection of the population from ISIS threats; some are Westerners, others are from Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Their contributions to the group are also very diverse; some have assumed support roles in media⁸, training and medical assistance. The next sections of the study delve in detail into the manifestation of the phenomenon of foreign fighters within the YPG.

The Mobilization Phase

Most of the foreign fighters that have joined the YPG are ethnic Kurds from neighboring countries, but surprisingly some Western volunteers from the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece, Canada, Australia and the United States have also joined. It is claimed that there are about 800 foreign fighters within the ranks of the organisation.⁹ However, in reality, the number could be much higher as there is no precise data on the number of Turkish and Iraqi militants who have joined the group. The profiles of the fighters are diverse: some are veterans with fighting experience looking for revenge or excitement; others are ordinary individuals devoted to the cause. Studying the mobilisation phase allows us to better assess the foreign fighters' profiles, motivations and recruitment tactics.



Motivation

As with the proliferation of transnational Muslim insurgents in Syria, a clear series of events that triggered the motivation of foreign volunteers to join the YPG. The most important event of them all is the Battle of Kobani, as it represents the peak of the group's troubles in their bloody confrontation with ISIS. The gruesome pictures of ISIS brutality and the PYD's pleas for international intervention to prevent the fall of this small city on the Syrian-Turkish borders generated worldwide sympathy and eventually pushed the International Coalition to assist the YPG in overcoming the jihadi assault. Other events are also often cited as catalysts for the volunteers, such as the live burning of a Jordanian pilot by ISIS¹⁰ and the persecution of thousands of Yazidis and Christians during the ISIS campaign in nearby Sinjar.¹¹ Analysis of the content of interviews conducted with these individuals has revealed six distinct recurrent motivations as follows:

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1. Fighting ISIS

Throughout their blitz-like expansion in Syria and Iraq, ISIS deliberately used social and new media to diffuse their propaganda with the hope of achieving two principal objectives. Firstly, to terrorise their opponents, and secondly, to attract recruits to

join their ranks. After taking over large parts of Syria and Iraq, ISIS declared a caliphate, and the areas under the organization's control became a center of attraction for jihadists around the world. Paradoxically, the tactics of the organization also provoked sentiments of deep hatred among their enemies. Their attacks in Paris, London and Brussels aggravated these sentiments, carrying their threat beyond the Middle East to Europe and the U.S. Thus, Syria and Iraq became a natural battlefield for individuals seeking confrontation and revenge against ISIS. The Levant did not only offer an opportunity to fight them; it was also one of the few areas where the jihadists were a visible and tangible target.

Fighting ISIS is a motivation often cited by veterans. In a video interview with Reuters, Brian Wilson, a former U.S. Air Force officer from Ohio¹² said he had come to Syria to join Kurdish fighters to battle the Islamic state.¹³ For other veterans, it was the feeling of an unaccomplished mission that drove them to return to the region. Nonetheless, a common sense of duty emerges when foreign fighters discuss their motivations. For instance, Reece Harding, an Australian national, volunteered "because he couldn't sit around any longer watching innocent women and children being raped and slaughtered by ISIS."¹⁴





Picture 1: Michael Enright

Another example is Michael Enright, a British actor whose biggest regret was not fighting Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after 9/11.¹⁵ For many, joining the fight against ISIS in Syria was an opportunity to confront “Islamic fundamentalism”.

2. Pursuing a Leftist Paradise

Unsurprisingly, a large host of foreign fighters volunteering with the YPG are ideology-driven individuals.¹⁶ Their ideological tendencies vary from one case to another, some are anarchists, while others are Marxist-Leninists or Stalinists,¹⁷ but they generally share leftist tendencies and eventually fully or at least partially embrace the “Democratic Confederalism” championed by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK’s emblematic leader. This was the case for Kevin Jochim (A.K.A. Dilsoz Bahar), a German YPG fighter killed in Syria. In a video published by Ronahi TV, Jochim delivered a testimony on his motivations to join the group, stating that Marxism-Leninism had failed over the past 150 years and that Democratic Confederalism

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gave him new hope.¹⁸ He then added that the “Rojava Revolution provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to carry out Öcalan’s theories.” This type of volunteers is usually the most committed to the fight. Their convictions re-enforce a common transnational identity and ease their integration within the YPG.



Picture 2: Alina Sanchez

For many, coming to Syria is an opportunity to put their ideas into practice. Unlike at home where they are confronted with a rigid legacy political order, in Syria, everything is to be built from scratch. The territories under the control of the YPG have become a “dreamland” for the foreign fighters of the YPG. The struggle for Kurdish autonomy under the authority of the PYD represents the perfect setting for establishing a Leftist Eldorado. This was the case for Alina Sanchez, an Argentinian medical student who first came to Qandil in 2011 “to meet her socialist comrades with a great passion for freedom and democracy that she longed for.”¹⁹

After spending an unidentified period in the mountains, she returned home and started spreading the PKK message as an international representative for the party and movement. In 2015, Sanchez came to Syria this time and joined the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) as

a health worker. She remained loyal to the group until her death in a car accident.²⁰



Picture 3: Mario Nunes

Ideology-driven individuals are profoundly attached to their cause. They follow it until they die. A striking example of this situation is Mario Nunes. Mario Nunes, a Portuguese fighter for the YPG, is believed to have committed suicide in order not to fall into the hands of ISIS.²¹ Lorenzo Orsetti (A.K.A. Tekoşer Piling) is another significant example to the ideology-driven foreign fighters. In a video²² released by the YPG Press Office, his decisiveness concerning the war is seen clearly. The Italian anarchist fighter of the YPG participated in the war in Baghouz, a small town in Deir Ez Zor where the remnants of ISIS surrounded, and he died in an ISIS ambush²³ in March 2019.

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3. Supporting the Kurdish Cause

Some of the foreign fighters who volunteered with the YPG have expressed their support for the Kurdish cause as one of the main motivations for joining their fight. The Kurds are one of the largest groups of people worldwide without a nation-state. The PKK's long insurgency against the Turkish state was and still is perceived by

many as a struggle for autonomy or even independence, and so is that of Barzani in Iraq despite the federal arrangement with the central government in Baghdad. For these fighters, joining the Kurdish fight for emancipation is a duty and a cause worth dying for.



Picture 4: Konstandinos Erik Scurfield

This is the case of the former Royal Marine Konstandinos Erik Scurfield; the first British YPG fighter reported killed in action. In a message to his mother, he expressed his solidarity with the Kurds saying that “Kurds are dying, and their government is doing nothing.”²⁴ For this kind of fighter, ideology is not a decisive factor for choosing the faction they volunteer with. They could very well join the Peshmerga forces or the YPG, as long as they feel useful and welcomed. In comparison with the Peshmerga, the YPG is not choosy about which foreigners it takes. Very often fighters who first volunteer with the Peshmerga end up leaving and joining the YPG. This was specifically the case for John Robert Gallagher; a 32-year-old former Canadian soldier killed in action in November 2015.²⁵

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4. Seeking Action

Some individuals who joined YPG were far less motivated by the plight of Kurds or the ideology of the group. They were primarily thrill-seekers. This is the case of Giano, a German-Iraqi Kurd who had been working for his family restaurant before arriving in Syria. In an interview accorded to Karim Franceschi²⁶, Giano describes himself as a “vacation guerilla” who had previously fought in Palestine, Russia, Africa, and Belarus before volunteering with the YPG. According to Franceschi, Giano is the kind of person who would do anything for adrenaline. For instance, during battles, Giano would fire at random just for the fun of it.



Picture 5: Patrick Maxwell (Right)

Others are motivated by darker thoughts and motivations. For them, it is the pure thrill of killing someone that brought them to Syria. This motivation was particularly expressed by Patrick Maxwell, a YPG operative from Austin, Texas. In an interview according to the New York Times, Maxwell stated the frustration of his inability to re-enlist in the U.S. Marines. He added that there was

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still a warrior in him, and if joining the YPG allowed him to fight and to walk away with killing as many of the bad guys as he could, then “that would be a good thing.”²⁷ What is more, some of these people are considered mentally unstable or ‘psychopaths’ even by their ‘comrades.’²⁸

5. Self-Realisation

Whether seeking fame, redemption²⁹, status or identity, many fighters join to achieve personal ideals and objectives. For this kind of recruits, all other considerations are secondary as long as they are allowed to fulfill their fantasies. This is the case of Evgeny Semenov, who articulates his indifference towards whom he is fighting for. He said it could have been the Peshmerga or the Assad Regime, adding he does not have faith in people as a matter of principle and he just defends what he cares about.³⁰

6. Protecting Christianity

The vast majority of Kurds are Muslim Sunnis, but they have coexisted in relative peace with Assyrian, Armenian and Orthodox Christians for a long time. When ISIS attacked northern Iraq and Syria, Christians communities were systematically targeted and persecuted. The Peshmerga adopted early on an inclusive discourse claiming a responsibility and duty to defend people of all faiths and has even recruited Christians into their ranks to fight ISIS.³¹ Nonetheless, the YPG approach to dealing with local Christians proved to be more effective. The group did not only welcome them as volunteers but also allowed them to create their armed groups,

trained and equipped them and included them in diverse governance structures. This strategy did not only attract more Christians to join their ranks, but also attracted devoted Christian foreign fighters³² who had vowed to protect their own. This was the case of Hanna Johannes Cosar, a former Swiss soldier who commanded a Christian militia fighting the Islamic State in Syria.



Picture 6: Hanna Johannes Cosar

In an interview accorded to Haaretz, he said, “as Christians, we are not only fighting against the Islamic State, we are fighting against a state that hates us.”³³ Upon his return home, Cosar was fined 500 Francs for violating Swiss neutrality.³⁴ Another striking example is the American Keith Broomfield. Kevin was a member of the Twin City Baptist Church in Massachusetts.³⁵ According to the pastor of the church, Broomfield, was a dedicated Christian³⁶ and he wanted to serve the Lord. Moreover, the pastor expresses that Broomfield kept his Bible open while walking around in Syria in an interview accorded to the Christian Post.³⁷ That being said, some fighters who joined in the YPG due to their faith in Christianity left the group later on due to the organization’s leftist stance. An important example is a British YPG volunteer named Alan Duncan. Duncan left the YPG because of the leftist stand of the organization.³⁸

Recruitment

The YPG uses different recruitment methods but relies heavily on the PKK vast network of militants in Europe and the Middle East to attract recruits. Additionally, it has its media outlets, such as Ronahi TV³⁹, Stêrk TV⁴⁰, and many websites to convey its messages. In Europe, especially in Germany⁴¹ and in the UK⁴², the organisation enjoys the support of PKK militants to organise meetings, rallies, funerals and protests. These events are regular theater for growing their constituency and recruiting new members. The group also benefits from the solidarity of other leftist organisation such as the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party in Turkey (MLKP). Such organisations have assisted the YPG in recruitment and logistics too. Furthermore, the YPG is also very effective on the social media. It has entire dedicated Facebook pages such as “The Lions of Rojava⁴³”, “YPG International⁴⁴” or “Save Kobani⁴⁵” to address Westerners and to convince the most enthusiastic to join its ranks. The organisation also uploads interviews⁴⁶ of foreign fighters in which they describe their lives and the teachings of Öcalan and encourages their comrades to join them.

Following first contact, it is relatively easy for volunteers to get to the front lines. There are two main routes that are usually used to reach their final destination in Syria. Some will take the same route as ISIS fighters, heading to Turkey where they make contact

The Turkish authorities regularly clamp down hard on these smuggling routes, so alternatively volunteers usually fly to Erbil or Sulaimaniyah, where it is easy to join up with Kurdish Syrian fighters



with the YPG and then illegally cross the border into Syria: this is the route described by Karim Franceschi's infamous book translated into Turkish under the name of *"Kobanê'de Bir İtalyan Savaşçı Heval Marcello (An Italian Fighter in Kobanê: Comrade Marcello)"*.⁴⁷

The Turkish authorities regularly clamp down hard on these smuggling routes, so alternatively volunteers usually fly to Erbil or Sulaimaniyah, where it is easy to join up with Kurdish Syrian fighters. This route was described by Robert Amos in an interview given to The Tower in January 2017.⁴⁸



Picture 7: Robert Amos (Right)

The Engagement Phase

This phase includes how volunteers are absorbed into the conflict zone, their training, operational roles, and affiliation within the fighting apparatus. Another important question concerns their impact on the war. Upon arrivals, volunteers are usually admitted into camps for military and ideological training. After a few

weeks, they are assigned to different units⁴⁹ within the YPG or join other associated armed groups. During this phase, foreigners are encouraged to assimilate into the local culture. For instance, they are given new noms de guerre⁵⁰ such as Bahoz, Sipan, Amed Givara, Marcello, Demhat or Bagok.

Additionally, they get more familiar with Kurdish militants' terminology and often employ terms such as "şervan" (fighter), "heval" (comrade) or "şehîd" (martyr). As their stay continues, they eventually undergo an ideological shift too. Foreign fighters embrace Öcalan as the revolutionary representative of socialism in the contemporary era. Indeed, for many, Rojava becomes the ground zero from where the new socialist revolution will spread. According to the fighters, the "Rojava Revolution" does not just belong to the peoples of Rojava; rather, it is an achievement for the entirety of humanity.⁵¹

Foreign fighters with fighting experience are usually instrumental in training recruits for guerrilla fighting such as urban warfare and bomb manufacturing. They are also crucial in the recruitment of the next waves of foreign fighters, serving as contacts for attracting recruits seeking purpose and comradeship. From past experiences, such recruiters have been able to gain large numbers of recruits.

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Another vital role is their participation in creating media products⁵², from running production units, releasing statements and videos, translating these into English and other languages, and even appearing in videos appealing to Western audiences including governments.

Nonetheless, foreign volunteers are not always an asset: their protection is costly, and the tolerance of locals towards their mistakes is usually lower than those of the other fighters. Furthermore, Western volunteers are also a prized ISIS target either for kidnapping or to prove the YPG affiliation with international powers. Despite this, some are still keen to fight on the frontline. The following is a detailed account of the most prominent foreign fighters' organisations engaged in northeastern Syria.

Foreign Armed Groups

Some of the transnational volunteers directly join the YPG, but most of them end up organising themselves into their groups. The groups carry some minor differences in terms of organisation, history and composition. Some of the groups were newly founded in Syria while others have organisational ties with militant groups at home. Some are ethnically diverse, and these are usually the preferred destination of Westerners, while others are mostly Kurds or Turks. Nonetheless, regardless of their names, ideologies or ethnicity, they all follow the orders of the YPG.

The International Freedom Battalion⁵³ (IFB) is the main umbrella organisation for transitional militants fighting alongside the YPG. The organisation was established in June 2015 and is composed of Turkish groups such as “Devrimci Komünarlar Partisi⁵⁴”, “Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi” and “Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri⁵⁵”, as well as European militias like “Reconstrucción Comunista⁵⁶” (Spanish), “Επαναστατικός Σύνδεσμος Διεθνιστικής Αλληλεγγύης (The Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity)” (Greek), “Brigade Henri Krasucki” (French), and the “Bob Crow Brigade” (British/Irish), in addition to political transitional groups such as the “International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces” and “The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army”. The name of the organisation is inspired by the Communist brigade named “The International Battalion”, which fought Franco⁵⁷ during the Spanish Civil War. The organisation mainly participated in the Manbij offensive in 2016, the Raqqa battle in 2017, and also in Afrin in 2018. The IFB can be divided into two parts; the first includes the Western groups and the second includes the Turkish leftist groups.

A. Western Groups



The Bob Crow Brigade

The Bob Crow Brigade “BCB” is a British/Irish group established some time during 2015. It carries the name of the former secretary-general of the British Association of Rail, Maritime and Transport Unions (RMT), Bob Crow, who lost his life in 2014. The naming of the group after him is due to Crow’s admiration for the International Battalion which fought in Spain nearly eighty years ago. The group raised the media attention in October 2016 after sending a letter to Owen Smith, a British Labour Party politician, criticising him for his proposal to negotiate with ISIS. The letter was signed by a famous quote from Crow saying, “If you fight you will not always win, but if you do not fight you will always lose.” The group adopts a Communist⁵⁸ and anti-capitalist⁵⁹ ideology, and most of its members have no prior fighting experience. There is no clear evidence of their participation on the battlefield, but they regularly catch the press attention by pronouncing an opinion on domestic affairs either in the UK or Ireland. For instance, the group showed solidarity with the RMT strikes during 2016; they also expressed their support for annulment of the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland.

The Henri Krasucki Brigade

Similar to the “BCB”, the Henri Krasucki Brigade (BHK) was established during 2015 and was also named after a French unionist and communist politician called Henri Krasucki. The group is mostly composed of French individuals with no fighting experience. Also similar to the “BCB”, the group become known to the French

public after sending a message of solidarity to the militant group “Zone à Défendre” (ZAD)⁶⁰, protesting the local authorities’ decision to build an airport in the Pays de la Loire province. The group also manifested its support to the CGT union and the Air France workers on strike following the company decision to cut 2,900 jobs. The group contribution on the battlefield is also unknown, besides posting pictures⁶¹ of what appears to be their headquarters in Manbij following the SDF victory over ISIS, there is no clear evidence for their participation in the fighting. However, the “BHK” have launched several campaigns to send medical equipment and medicines to Syria. During one particular campaign hosted on the Leftist French website “Secours Rouge”, a veiled lady posted a 14 minutes video in which she stated the raison d’être of the group. She notably said that their objective is “to build a cooperative and participatory community among the region’s communities and to liberate women from ISIS repression.” In the same video, she also denounced what she describes as “the siege imposed by Turkey and Masoud Barzani” on Rojava.⁶²

Antifascist International Tabur

The original ANTIFA movement was first established in 1932 in Germany to lead the Communist struggle against Hitler. Following the end of the Second World War, the group mainly maintained a presence in Eastern Germany⁶³ under the watchful eye of the USSR. The militant group was and still is often associated with anarchists, democratic Communists, liberals and patriotic nationalists.⁶⁴



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Nowadays, ANTIFA is a network of small militant and activist group across Europe and the U.S. Even though its numbers are small, its members are active on social media and the internet. The group recently came under media attention following its participation in demonstrations in Virginia protesting the rise of the far-right white supremacists on 8 August 2017. The ANTIFA activists acted violently and were accused of attacking the white supremacists.⁶⁵ On April 2, 2017, the ANTIFA announced the formation of “The International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces” (IRPGF) in Syria. According to the IRPGF, their goals are to defend the social revolution in Rojava⁶⁶ and to spread anarchism. Similar to other Western groups, there are no definite proofs of their participation on the battlefield. The IRPGF is mostly seen through media stunts and messages of support and solidarity to anarchist militant groups across the world.

B. Turkish Leftist Groups

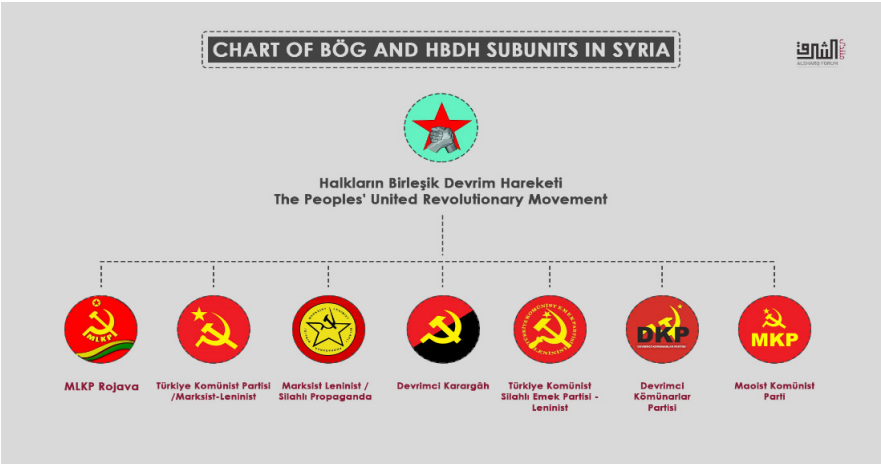
The second part of the International Freedom Battalion consists of Turkish Leftist movements and parties. There are messages of support from many leftist groups to the YPG and some members of these groups have been listed on the PKK and PYD “martyrs lists”. The first reported case of a death was that of MLKP member Suphi Nejat Ağırnaslı in Kobani in October 4, 2014, which suggests a rather early engagement with the YPG. Unlike Westerner-dominated militant groups, the Turkish militias contribution on

the battlefield is felt, and the names of their members regularly appear on the PYD killed-in-action lists. This observation confirms the better assimilation of “near” foreign fighters within the local insurgent group. Furthermore, the number of their volunteers is also higher than that of the Westerners. This observation in its turn confirms the impact of ethnicity on the engagement of individuals on transnational insurgencies, since the majority of these groups’ members are ethnic Kurds.

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In general, Turkish (Kurdish and Turkish ethnicity) leftists who are participating in the fight in Syria alongside with the YPG, are divided into two groups, the first is the Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement and the second is the United Freedom Forces.

The Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH)



Halkların Birleşik Devrim Hareketi (HBDH)/The Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement is a union of Communist Marxist-Leninists and Maoists. The union consists mostly of Kurds and Turkish Alawites. Its founding was announced on March 12, 2016 in Qandil Mountains, the headquarters of the PKK. During their founding declaration, Duran Kalkan, a member of the PKK Executive Committee, said that "the union will defeat the fascists and nationalists". In the same statement, Kalkan also described the "Turkish state as a nationalist and imperialist evil state that necessitate a union of the opposition to defeat." Indeed, the group tries to appeal to a broader audience beyond the traditional Kurdish communities. In several statements, the HBDH has called upon the Alawites, democrats, seculars, workers, the poor and all the opposition forces to unite in their struggle⁶⁷ against the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his allies. The group mostly operates in Syria, where it claims that the Rojava revolution is under the attack of Turkey, but it has also carried out assaults on military targets within Turkey. For instance, the HBDH claimed responsibility for an attack on Turkish soldiers in the city of Trabzon in 2017, killing four and wounding 11 others.⁶⁸

Marxist–Leninist Communist Party (MLKP)

Marxist-Leninist Komünist Partisi (MLKP)/Marxist–Leninist Communist Party was established on September 10, 1994 as a union of many Turkish and Kurdish Marxist groups. The party is banned from Turkey for committing acts of "terrorism" against civilians and officials. The organisation is particularly active among the Turkish

The MLKP generally entertain good relations with European leftist organizations: for instance, the Spanish Communist Reconstruction (Reconstrucción Comunista, abbreviated as RC) regularly sends volunteers to fight in the ranks of the organisation

diaspora in European countries, especially Germany, where it periodically organises annual party meetings.⁶⁹ The MLKP was also among the first foreign groups to participate in the Syrian conflict. Its members were engaged in the war alongside the YPG as soon as 2013 in Ras Al-Ain⁷⁰ and were later spotted in during the Battle of Kobani⁷¹ in 2014, the Battle of Tal-Abyad in 2015, and the Raqqa campaign in 2018. In February 2015, the MLKP issued a statement calling upon its supporters and all revolutionary youths around the world to join the Battle of Rojava in the YPG ranks.⁷² The group does not only engage in the Kurds living in Turkey, but have also welcomed foreigners among its ranks, such as the German national Ivana Hoffman, who was reported to have been killed⁷³ in Tel Tamir on March 7, 2015. The MLKP generally entertain good relations with European leftist organizations: for instance, the Spanish Communist Reconstruction (Reconstrucción Comunista, abbreviated as RC) regularly sends volunteers to fight in the ranks of the organisation.

The Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist (TKP/ML)

Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist (TKP/ML)/The Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist was established on April 24, 1972 in Turkey by a group of young Marxists under the leadership of İbrahim Kaypakkaya after splitting from the Enlightenment Movement (PDA).⁷⁴ In 2014, their armed wing Türkiye İşçi Köylü Kurtuluş Ordusu (TİKKO) sent volunteers to support the

YPG during the Battle of Kobani against ISIS.⁷⁵ The TİKKO contingent in Syria was led by Nubar Ozanyan⁷⁶ (A.K.A. Orhan Bakırcıyan) until his death on August 14th, 2017 while fighting ISIS in Raqqa. The TKP/ML was a member of the HBDH union but decided to withdraw later over fundamental disagreements⁷⁷ on the nature of military operations inside Turkey.

The People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (THKP-C)

Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi (THKP-C)/The People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey was formed in 1970 by Mahir Çayan with the aim of "fighting the capitalist system and the fascist regime." Since its establishment the group has carried out hundreds of bloody attacks against Turkish and foreign civilians, officials and politicians. The THKP-C lost most of its active members in the clashes with the Turkish army during the 1980s, and some of their old members moved to parliamentary politics⁷⁸ and left the organisation afterwards. The party emerged back in Syria with the participation of Marxist–Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLSPB) in the conflict. A battalion was created by Devrimci Karargâh, and MLSPB joined the IFB in support of the YPG.

The Turkish and Kurdish Communist movement is a complex phenomenon and has suffered from a lot of fraternal infights and defections in addition to their bloody conflict with the Turkish state and the Nationalist Movement Party. The majority of groups that emerged during the 1960s and '70s have slowly

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disappeared over the last three decades, but the “Rojava Revolution” presented them with an opportunity to re-engage their traditional constituencies in a new struggle away from Turkish state authority.

The Communist Labor Party of Turkey/Leninist (TKEP/L)

The beginning of the Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi/Leninist (TKEP/L)/The Communist Labor Party of Turkey/Leninist in northern Syria goes back to the second half of 2014 with the beginning of the ISIS attacks on the city of Kobani/Ain al-Arab in December 2014.

The first official center belonging to the TKEP/L was established on December 22, 2016 in the city of Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê⁷⁹ in the memory of Yaşar Bulut, the leader of the military wing of the party. He was killed in 1993⁸⁰ in Turkey. The party has another center in Kobani/Ain Al Arab, from which the party issued what can be considered its first statement from within Syria on October 12, 2015.⁸¹

During the clashes between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the district of Nusaybin, TKEP/L sent threatening messages to some of the city’s people who had collaborated with the Turkish army as they entered the city. During the reading of this statement the walls around the fighters were decorated with the pictures and flags of TKEP/L, but the statement was released in the name of “YPS -Civil Protection Units” (PKK’s urban

youth wing). Originally the YPS was called YDG-H and they were incorporated into the Civil Protection Units (YPS) in January 2016. Militants who used to be in the YDG-H but who are now in the YPS tend to be in their teens and early twenties and have generational differences with the veteran PKK commanders.⁸²

TKEP/L continues to release regular statements from its headquarters in the city of Ras al-Ain⁸³/Serê Kaniyê⁸⁴ concerning memorial events for Turkish and Kurdish leftist organizations.

The Revolutionary Communal Party (DKP)

Devrimci Komünarlar Partisi (DKP)/ The Revolutionary Communal Party was formed on February 4, 2016, through the union of Türkiye Devrim Partisi/Turkish Revolution Party and “Kurtuluş Hareketi.”⁸⁵

In its first statement, the party called on Kurds, Alawites, secularists and supporters of the CHP to acquire unlicensed weapons to prepare themselves for self-defence before it became too late, and while this armament was occurring, the party advertised the expertise and capabilities of its members in the field of armaments and training, leading to the arrests of six DKP supporters were arrested in Izmir city on June 1, 2017, on charges of belonging to the party and the “United Freedom Forces (BÖG).⁸⁶”

The Leader of the DKP, Ulaş Bayraktaroğlu, was killed during the SDF/YPG campaign in the ISIS capital of Raqqa in northern Syria

on April 10, 2017.⁸⁷ Many neighborhoods in Istanbul witnessed marches by leftists glorifying and praising him after his death. It is worth mentioning that Bayraktaroğlu was arrested in the course of the Gezi Park protest in Istanbul after he led protests there and attacked police with molotov cocktails, before being released after several months of detention, Bayraktaroğlu was also a member of the central leadership committee of the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP)⁸⁸, and was the general commander of BÖG.

Other groups which took part in the formation of HBDH but did not take roles in the Syrian war were:

- Maoist Komünist Partisi (MKP)/Maoist Communist Party
- Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK)/Kurdistan Workers' Party
- Marksist Leninist Silahlı Propaganda Birliği-Devrim Cephesi (MLSPB-DC)/Marxist–Leninist Armed Propaganda Corps–Revolutionary Front
- Devrimci Karargâh (Revolutionary Headquarters)
- Sosyal İsyan/ Social Insurrection (SI)
- Türkiye İhtilalci Komünistler Birliği (TİKB)/The Union of Revolutionary Communists in Turkey

Some other groups joined the battle in an individual capacity and are rebuilding their networks in Syria. For many among them, Rojava is now their new home, and the PYD/YPG led project is a leftist paradise they cannot claim in Turkey. Nonetheless, they are

still active in their original communities and regularly comment on domestic affairs. In some instances they call upon their supporters to vote for the HDP or even the CHP, while in other instances they encourage or even participate in armed attacks on the Turkish authorities.

The United Freedom Forces (BÖG)



Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri (BÖG)/The United Freedom Forces was established in December 2014⁸⁹ in Kobani as an organisation of foreign leftist fighters of both revolutionary socialist and anarchist ideologies. The Spanish Civil War and partisan discourse have been frequently used⁹⁰ by the group in the Syrian War. Moreover, BÖG is considered to be the largest group within the International Freedom Battalion. It is also viewed as one of the most active armed groups in northern Syria. Four of its leaders were killed⁹¹ in action as a testament to their contribution on the battlefield.

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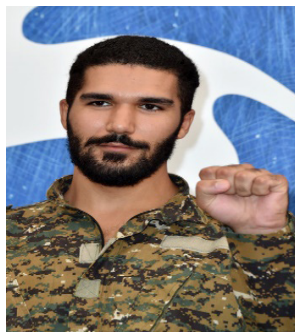
Bedreddin Akdeniz (A.K.A. Suphi Şoreş) was killed on May 25, 2015 during clashes with ISIS in Tel Khanzir. His successor Azeri Mahir Arpaçay (A.K.A. Tamer Arda) was killed⁹² a week after during the YPG campaign in Tal Abyad. Its third leader Aziz Güler was also killed⁹³ the same year in a mine explosion. The group's fourth leader Ulaş Bayraktaroğlu was an active militant in Turkey before leaving for Syria: his death⁹⁴ was celebrated among many Turkish leftist organisations. He was killed on April 10, 2017 during the Raqqa campaign.

Organizations which participated in the declaration of the United Freedom Forces (BÖG), but either have been mentioned among HBDH or were not active in Syria:

- Devrimci Komünarlar Partisi (DKP)/The Revolutionary Communal Party: The principal founder of the BÖG, has been mentioned within the "HBDH".
- Proleter Devrimci Kurtuluş Örgütü (PDKÖ)/Proletarian Revolutionary Liberation Organisation
- Social Insurrection Front⁹⁵
- Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi (THKP-C)/ People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey has been mentioned before within the HBDH
- Türkiye Devrim Partisi (Turkey Revolutionary Party)⁹⁶

The Post-War Phase

This phase follows the end of the foreign fighter's direct contribution on the battlefield and for some this new phase of militancy starts even before the end of the war. In this section, the paper examines what happens to volunteers after they leave and how their former role shapes their future. Upon their return, many find it difficult to go back to a regular job. They usually seek the company of similar people with similar beliefs and with whom their former fighter life is valued, accepted and celebrated. For many, their engagement for the cause does not stop but the nature of their contribution changes. They take on a symbolic role as an activist for the YPG and their Democratic Confederalism project in Syria, regularly speaking to local and national media⁹⁷ and freely conveying PKK messages at events and rallies. Moreover, some go on to form a support network⁹⁸ to finance and recruit for the YPG and their affiliates.



Picture 8: Karim Franceschi

Karim Franceschi⁹⁹ is an interesting example of a YPG fighter returnee. The Italian YPG fighter spent three months in Kobani during 2014 fighting against ISIS and returned to Italy before his visa to Turkey

In his books, Franceschi did not attempt to hide his military engagement in the conflict, emphasizing that he sees himself as a revolutionary and says his sole motivation is a socialist revolution in Syria

expired. Once back, he wrote two books¹⁰⁰ describing his experiences, telling the stories of other glorified YPG martyrs and encouraging his comrades to join the “cause”. In his books, Franceschi did not attempt to hide his military engagement in the conflict, emphasizing that he sees himself as a revolutionary and says his sole motivation is a socialist revolution in Syria. Additionally, he likens ISIS fighters to Nazis. What is more, he claims that the Kurdish fighters resemble the Italian partisans who resisted against Nazi Germany in the Second World War. After spending a short while in his own country, Karim returned to Syria once again and took part in the creation of Antifascist Internationalist Tabur.¹⁰¹



Picture 9: Jordan Matson

Another case is the American former YPG fighter, Jordan Matson. The fighter set up “The Lions of Rojava” Facebook page, which is well known for recruiting Westerners to the ranks of the organization.¹⁰² He currently resides in Sweden. This is also the case of Macer Gifford, who is a British YPG volunteer who returned home after spending some time in Syria during 2015.



Picture 10: Macer Gifford

Upon his return, Gifford created the “Friends of Rojava Foundation.”¹⁰³ His association raises funds to support humanitarian activities within YPG-held areas and regularly organizes meetings to convey YPG rhetoric. Both Jordan Matson and Macer Gifford have engaged in media activities and appeared on TV channels including the prominent BBC.^{104 105}

Nonetheless, while some foreign fighters return home and reintegrate into their respective societies, many others do not. Their decision to stay or to leave is usually impacted by the type of role they played during their engagement phases as well as its legal consequences back at home. Fighters who assumed support roles like the vast majority of Western volunteers, usually return home to continue the same effort. However, fighters who actively fought on the battlefield and were in commanding positions, like the Turkish volunteers, often choose to stay or to go to other PKK camps. The

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latter decision to stay is mainly due to the legal persecution they risk upon their return for fighting with an organization designated as a terrorist organization by many countries.

With the surge of foreign fighters into Syria, some countries have adopted new legislation to prosecute them upon their return. Countries such as Belgium, Austria, Australia and the United Kingdom have enacted laws to strip dual citizens of their citizenship. Others have adopted the penal code to imprison returnees on charges of participating in terrorist activities. Nonetheless, these laws are often subject to the definition of terrorism adopted by the authorities and has mostly been enforced against individuals who joined the ranks of ISIS. The YPG in this context is not widely recognised as a “terrorist organization” despite its organic relationship with the PKK which is on the other hand identified as such. The YPG’s partnership with the International Coalition against ISIS further complicates this legal imbroglio. Regardless, a few cases of criminal charges being pressed against YPG foreign volunteers have been reported.





Picture 11: Jamie Janson

Jamie Janson, one of the British recruits of the YPG, was arrested upon his return to the United Kingdom. Counter-Terrorism Command held him under section 5 of the Terrorism Act.¹⁰⁶ However, he was released after a short while. Likewise, Jitse Akse, a Dutch fighter for the YPG, was arrested by the Dutch police after fighting with the YPG for more than nine months.¹⁰⁷ Later he appeared in court under murder charges.¹⁰⁸ Akse, who had previously been a soldier, publicly said that he killed ISIS fighters and did not show any sign of remorse, saying “When you see what they have done ... by killing a member of [ISIS] I have probably saved dozens of lives” to a local newspaper from his northern Dutch village.¹⁰⁹ After a while, public prosecutors dismissed the case against him, and he no longer faces the risk of being jailed for what he has done in Syria.¹¹⁰ Italy initiated another striking initiative.¹¹¹ The Italian police conducted searches targeting three Italians and seized the passport of Pierluigi Caria who allegedly previously fought against ISIS in Syria in the International Freedom Battalion, which is linked to the YPG.¹¹² Caria is charged with acts committed with the purpose of terrorism and violent acts against the state.¹¹³

Conclusion

The phenomenon of a leftist transnational insurgency is without any doubt, smaller in volume and impact than the proliferation of jihadi militants in the Levant. Nevertheless, the unconditional international support the YPG received in its fight against ISIS, has undeniably bolstered the PKK threat against Turkey.

As a consequence, Ankara has unilaterally pursued its security concerns and has even grown closer to Moscow in its search for an international ally in this struggle. In addition to the diplomatic tensions that arose between Turkey and the West over the mismanagement of this delicate issue, there are also no guarantees that YPG returnees will not engage in bloody attacks in the future. A defining characteristic of foreign fighters is their ability to build networks and to transfer their know-how and ideas to their own respective constituencies. In this particular context, the “Rojava Revolution” has not only established a perfect environment for these dynamics to emerge; it has also offered a success story to be replicated elsewhere.

This paper attempted to analyse the phenomenon of YPG foreign fighters through describing their journey in three phases. Studying the first phase before the physical engagement on the battlefield

A defining characteristic of foreign fighters is their ability to build networks and to transfer their know-how and ideas to their own respective constituencies. In this particular context, the “Rojava Revolution” has not only established a perfect environment for these dynamics to emerge; it has also offered a success story to be replicated elsewhere

allows us to better understand the main motivations that drove these individuals to join the YPG ranks, while it also allowed us to identify their recruitment tactics and journeys to the battlefield. Delving into the second phase has revealed the different roles assumed by the fighters and the correlation between their profiles, past experiences and ethnicity and the responsibilities they eventually undertake. Finally, by looking closer at their third and last phase of the engagement, we were able to better identify their different trajectories once the battle is over.

The recent cases where criminal charges have been pressed against YPG ideological-driven foreign fighters upon their return suggest a growing concern among Western countries. Nonetheless, the threat of a transnational insurgency should not be restrained within this specific profile alone. Individuals who joined the ranks of the YPG and other affiliates for the thrill of participating in the fight or to kill the bad guys are equally dangerous if not more. Indeed, given the right circumstances, this type of volunteer could re-engage in new conflicts abroad or even seek similar thrills at home. A first recommendation is to proceed with detailed profiling of individuals implicated in these types of activities and to command the appropriate response upon their return. These could range from psychological assessment to imprisonment or social re-education.

The international response to ISIS extremism has allowed the PKK to seize ample space to spread its propaganda and its version of the "truth" to a wider audience. This disproportionate media access has directly enabled the PKK to expand their network of influence, recruitment and fundraising

A second important recommendation is to raise the level of co-operation with Turkish authorities. An impressive number of YPG volunteers hold Turkish citizenship and maintain a close relationship with PKK networks in Turkey and neighboring countries. Since the disruption of the peace process in 2015 following the Battle of Kobani and the proliferation of arms among YPG and PKK militants, 991 Turkish forces and 7,071 PKK militants were killed, and at least 378 civilians lost their lives. The lack of data sharing has allowed the radicals within the PKK to re-activate a violent insurgency in Turkey and most importantly has undone years of negotiations with huge potential for achieving sustainable peace in the region.

Finally, the international response to ISIS extremism has allowed the PKK to seize ample space to spread its propaganda and its version of the “truth” to a wider audience. This disproportionate media access has directly enabled the PKK to expand their network of influence, recruitment and fundraising. Additionally, this broadcasting of the organization’s damaging rhetoric has indirectly encouraged anti-Turkey sentiments among their audiences. In contrast, Western governments have undertaken effective measures to counter the destructive ISIS propaganda machine, by banning their sympathisers from the public domain and targeting their digital media outlets. If these tactics have proven to be too difficult to apply to the PKK over a lack of consensus over defining “terrorism”, then other solutions could be put in place, such as granting equal space to the counter-narrative or just reminding the public of the PKK’s bloody past in Europe.



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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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The Phenomenon of YPG Transnational Fighters in Syria

Even though foreign fighters are an age-old phenomenon, they have once again come to the fore with the outbreak of the war in Syria. The battlefield has attracted thousands of foreign volunteers who have joined militant groups and further increased the level of violence perpetrated against civilians. The rise of ISIS has led the international community to mainly focus on Sunni radicalism, ignoring the Shia or Leftist transnational insurgency. This paper attempts at analysing the phenomenon and current dynamics of YPG foreign fighters in Syria. In doing so, the paper has described the journey of these foreigners in three phases. A mobilisation phase during which a volunteer is motivated to travel to Syria, an engagement phase that describes his or her role and responsibilities vis-à-vis the YPG, and the third phase upon their return home, and the new roles they embrace afterwards.