

THE TRANSFORMATION STRUGGLE OF THE PYD: LOCALIZATION TENDENCY AS A METHOD OF GAINING LEGITIMACY?

ANALYSIS



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28 OCTOBER 2020

الشرق
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH



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Abstract: The Democratic Union Party (PYD) has emerged as one of the biggest beneficiaries in the Syrian war, triggered by the Arab Spring. Since its inception in 2003 until 2011, the party had not found the chance of being a significant actor in the Syrian political theatre. However, the Syrian war eruption and the rise of ISIS opened a new chapter for the PYD and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Specifically, the Kobane War in 2014 became a turning point for the PYD in its relationship with the USA. Given the PYD's intimate relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Washington has started forcing the organization to transform itself into a more local organization due to legitimacy concerns. Thus, over time the party started attempting to gain political and societal legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurdish population along with different segments of Syrian society and garner as much support as possible from different layers of the country. The PYD also aimed at appealing to international actors through the transformation. In the context of its efforts to gain legitimacy, the party has established administrative and military structures that include different ethnicities and religions. The PYD/YPG has tried to eliminate legitimacy problems through attempts to localize (or Syrianize) itself. Therefore, in the quest to attain societal and political legitimacy, it has taken pragmatic steps towards this goal. Nevertheless, the party's localization initiative remains inconclusive and currently faces various challenges.

Introduction

The outbreak of events triggered by the Arab Spring has upended Syria. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was established by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) supporters in Syria and later became the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)¹, has emerged as one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Syrian war. The party has come into prominence through its armed wing's (YPG) military victories, against the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), thanks to the enormous support it received from the US-led international coalition.

From the time of its establishment until the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the PYD had not been very active in Syria due to the Syrian regime's total control in the country. This, coupled with improved relations between Turkey and Syria following the Adana agreement, essentially sidelined the party. Nevertheless, after 2011, the wind reversed, and the PYD/YPG has come to the fore in the Syrian conflict after its leaders were encouraged to return to the political scene by the Syrian regime. For example, Salih Muslim, the PYD's ex co-chair, returned from the Kurdistan region of Iraq to Northern Syria after spending some time in exile. Over time, the organization has increased its clout, taking advantage of the Syrian regime's withdrawal from Northern Syria within the framework of an arrangement with the PYD. The instability environment deepened by the crisis in the country created a fertile ground for the organization to increase its footprint in the area. In particular, the external support brought by the function of combating ISIS and the group's crackdown on its Kurdish competitors has paved the way for it to establish military and administrative structures in Northern Syria. This has helped it to become the de facto administrator of the region ever since 2012. More importantly, with the Kobane war in 2014², the organization entered into an alliance relationship with the USA. Thanks to this partnership, it began to receive enormous financial and military support from Washington.

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The PYD created a narrative of resistance and victory through the Kobane war and marketed it very well. The legitimacy of the organization in Western countries has started to increase with this battle. Since this phase, the YPG has been tried to be legitimized in Western countries through the war against ISIS, discipline in the warfare, and its secularism. To this end, the PYD/YPG has been tried to be presented as a structure that has no bonds with the PKK, which was emerged from the Kurdish nationalism idea and continues its war against Turkey for almost four decades³. Over time, the relationship between the USA-PYD/YPG has evolved into a sort of partnership. The relationship got stronger, and Washington persisted in supporting the group in getting rid of ISIS despite Turkey's demands to fight against ISIS in Syria.

It should be kept in mind that one of the most important reasons that brought the United States and the YPG together was the failure of the US's train-equip program for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At a time when the FSA was eager to fight both the Assad regime and ISIS⁴, the YPG, which had no intention of fighting the regime, demonstrated its willingness to fight ISIS solely. The determination and stand of the YPG have made the organization a reliable ally for the USA. Eventually, the group began to be used as ground forces of the US-led international coalition. Yet while the YPG's military victories against ISIS were improving its popularity in Western countries, Turkey's security concerns relapsed over the years, which culminated in two military operations against the entity.

The Quest for Societal and Political Legitimacy

The PYD/YPG's secularism has been another factor contributing to its positive reception in Western countries. As time passed, the YPG, which started acting like an anti-ISIS force, expanded its area of control over non-Kurdish areas. Given the PYD's intimate relationship (Even though the claim is rejected by the PYD/YPG leaders) with the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU, and the USA, Washington has started forcing the organization to transform itself.⁵ The PYD/YPG also tried to take

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advantage of its engagement with the USA so as to translate its military triumphs into formal/constitutional political gains. Moreover, the expansion of the lands taken from ISIS has deepened the USA's relationship with the YPG. The organization also aimed at deterring possible Turkish and regime interventions by consolidating its relationship with the USA and the transformation it would go through over time.

To this end, the PYD started attempting to gain political and societal legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurdish population along with different segments of the Syrian society and garner as much support as possible from different layers of the country. In the quest to attain societal and political legitimacy, it has aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Syrian society and evolving into a state-like actor. Furthermore, the PYD also wants to attract the international community for its political project. The party has long been trying to prove that it is not affiliated with the PKK in order to gain legitimacy in the international arena. Thus, day by day, it has sped up its efforts to prove that it is a local movement that emerged in war-ravaged Syria.

In its quest for legitimacy, it has endeavored to use an inclusive rhetoric throughout the war. In particular, when the PYD/YPG expanded its area of control towards Arab-populated regions in Eastern Syria, it felt the need to use an inclusive discourse founded on "being a local (Syrian) entity" and a "brotherhood of the peoples." The organization's main motive to do this is the following: The party foresees that it can obtain a legal framework of autonomy if it convinces the regime that it does not follow a secessionist agenda. Moreover, the party has always highlighted that they are the 3rd line^{6 7} in the Syrian War. It has neither sided with the regime nor supported the Sunni Arab opposition whose aim is overthrowing the regime. Additionally, the organization focused on seizing territories along with establishing and strengthening administrative structures to control the areas where Öcalan's "Democratic Confederalism" theory was put into practice.⁸

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In the context of its efforts to gain legitimacy, it has established administrative and military structures that include different ethnicities and religions. The formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), various parties moving within the orbit of the PYD, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria are the products of the organization's quest for obtaining societal and political legitimacy. The PYD/YPG tried to eliminate the problem of legitimacy by trying to localize (or Syrianize) itself. Therefore, it took pragmatic steps towards this goal. Although the localization project is not exempt from various problems and currently faces many severe challenges, especially in the Arab-dominated parts of Syria, the organization continues its efforts to gain legitimacy at domestic and international levels.

The “Third Line” Strategy

As emphasized above, the PYD/YPG demarked itself from the Syrian opposition, and the YPG occasionally had conflicts with elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At the same time, the group had clashes with the Al Nusra Front in different areas, such as in Tal Abyad and Rimelan. However, after 2015, other than fighting Turkey-backed opposition, the organization focused solely on the fight against ISIS. Moreover, as the organization expanded its clout over Eastern Syria and took control of the natural resources-rich areas, which produces 70 percent⁹ of the total energy resources in the country, it started focusing on governance. Additionally, Bashar al-Assad did not perceive the PYD as an existential threat to its regime and wanted to focus on Damascus's security following the attack on the National Security headquarters, which claimed the lives of a number of high-ranking security figures, including Defense Minister Dawoud Rajiha and his deputy, Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat.¹⁰ The regime's withdrawal from Northern Syria in 2012 has benefited both parties. The common enemy anxiety, the presence of moderate and jihadist factions, coupled with Turkey's threats, led both sides to avoid clashing with each other.

Efforts to Cover Up the Relationship With the PKK

The Kurdistan People's Congress (KONGRA-GEL), which is accepted as the legislative body of the KCK, previously was expressed as the highest legislative body of Kurdistan in the charter of the PYD. While establishing the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) in Syria, the organization copied the KONGRA-GEL example. Likewise, the cantons announced in 2014 (Jazira, Afrin, Kobane) also saw the TEV-DEM structure as a precedent in establishing their local governance.¹¹ Taking these points into account, it is clearly seen that the PYD was established as the political entity of the KCK in Syria and is associated with the PKK. Although the PYD claims that it is not affiliated with the PKK, it is a member of the KCK, which has the same leadership and charter as the PKK.¹²

Additionally, many senior executives of the organization are people who have been to the Qandil Mountains before. The most prominent of these figures are Mazloun Kobane, Ilham Ahmed, Polat Can, Xebat Derik, Rojin Ramo, and Aldar Khalil.¹³ At the beginning of the crisis in Syria, many people from the Qandil mountains and Turkey had been sent to Syria. The mentioned names began pursuing the organization's objectives by directing the decision-making mechanisms within the PYD/YPG.

The PYD's previous charters show its ties with the PKK and the KCK. However, as the organization gained power in Syria, it changed its charter due to domestic and international legitimacy concerns. In 2012, the PYD held its 5th Congress in a period when it increased its effectiveness in Northern Syria and removed all mentions of the "PKK" from its program. In 2015, in its 6th Congress, the organization also removed the part which specified the KONGRA-GEL as the official legislative body of the Kurdish people.¹⁴ With these changes, the bond between the PKK and the PYD was attempted to be eradicated. The PYD tried to prove that it was a local opposition movement due to the reasons mentioned above. In the meantime, per the military and administrative structures, it has established over time, the group has increased its localization efforts.

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DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF THE LOCALIZATION PROJECT

The PYD and its military wing had to go through a transformation period due to the realities stemming from rapidly changing dynamics in the Syrian War. Following the Kobane War, the organization accelerated its localization project with the USA's increasing pressure. Primarily, the project has political, administrative, and political dimensions.

Administrative Dimension

The PYD and some other movements that have allied with it established a “constituent assembly” in November 2013. Movements whose politics align with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were not included in the mentioned assembly announced in Qamishli. Chechen, Chaldean, Syriac, Kurdish, and Arab representatives took part in this assembly consisting of 82 members. This move was the preliminary step of the declaration of the autonomous areas. In December 2013, a legislative assembly was established. The legislative assembly announced the “social contract” supporting the “Democratic Nation” theory, which transcends ethnicities and religions¹⁵ in January 2014, in Amuda.¹⁶ Subsequently, the establishment of the three cantons (Jazira, Afrin, Kobane) was announced. With this administrative structure, a decentralized administration system has been created to act as a roadmap for Syria's future. Additionally, the YPG was accepted as the defense force of the announced areas. Moreover, Kurdish, Syriac, and Arabic were accepted as official languages on the social contract. Qamishli, which is located in Jazira canton, was chosen as the administration's capital, and it was stated that it would be jointly governed by the Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis.¹⁷ Additionally, the delivery of basic services and security to the public should also be evaluated in the context of winning hearts and minds and gaining societal legitimacy.

Following the expansion of the YPG/SDF's footprint over different parts of the country, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, which is the continuation of the cantons, was announced in 2016.¹⁸ In 2018, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) announced the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria following the SDF's seizure of areas in Eastern Syria.¹⁹ These changes show that the Autonomous Administration has been flexible enough to adapt to the new realities on the ground. More importantly, with these changes, the PYD has tried to demonstrate that it is both an inclusive and a Syrian organization.

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Having said that, even though the PYD presents itself to Western countries as a pluralist, decentralized and democratic structure that rejects the classical nation-state model, it has actually established a monopoly on the administrative structures established in Northern Syria.²⁰ In other words, while the aim, in theory, was to establish decentralized institutions, in reality, the PYD dominated the mentioned institutions by its practices.

Military Dimension

The YPG was founded in the wake of the events that took place in Qamishli in 2004.²¹ However, it was not activated up until 2011. Following the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Northern Syria, it has become a very serious force.²² The official establishment date of the YPG is July 2012.²³ Eventually, Turkey started seeing it as a hostile force, and as Turkey's rhetoric against the YPG become harsher over time, the USA started to consider transforming the YPG by merging it with different religious and ethnic groups in an effort to appease Turkey's security concerns and legitimize its military and financial help to the organization due to the organization's bonds with the PKK.

Namely, the organization was forced to have a new shape and adopt a more inclusive discourse that would not only appeal to the local Syrian actors but also the international powers. Therefore, in 2015 the YPG merged with various groups from different ethnicities of the region, and the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established as an umbrella entity consisting of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, and other ethnicities.

After the creation of the SDF, the United States sped up its military aid to the organization. Moreover, Mazloum Kobane, the commander in chief of the SDF, has continually been highlighting that the SDF is a Syrian national force, and the entity wants to gain constitutional recognition.²⁴ Kobane also states that they see the SDF as

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the nucleus²⁵ of the future Syrian army, and they want to be a part of it by protecting their autonomy within the military. At the time of crises, when Turkey intervened in Syria, for example, the SDF called on the Syrian regime to protect its borders by claiming to be against foreign interference and in favor of the integrity of the country.²⁶ Addedly, Kobane has consistently articulated the inevitability of an agreement with the Syrian regime.²⁷

That said, the PYD/YPG has intensified its efforts to compromise with Damascus, specifically after US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw US forces²⁸ from Northern Syria. Redur Khalil, one of the SDF's top executives and former spokesperson of the YPG, stated that an agreement between the autonomous administration and the Damascus regime is inevitable in the short term.²⁹ What is more, in 2018, the United States issued an arrest warrant for 3 PKK leaders (Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık, and Duran Kalkan) and specified rewards³⁰ for those who would provide information on them. This was likely a bid to pressure the PYD/YPG to distance itself from the PKK.

Local military councils are also worth mentioning in the military aspect of the localization project. In 2019, in a time when Turkey increased its threats to intervene in Northern Syria, the SDF established local military councils in Tal Abyad, Kobane, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Qamishli³¹ to appease Turkey's security concerns to a certain extent. Through this move, the SDF tried to claim that it had devolved power to the local forces, and the regions mentioned would be protected³² by locals who are not affiliated with the YPG.³³ However, this decentralization move was questionable from the very beginning and has not born fruit in terms of preventing Turkey from intervening in Northern Syria.

Political Dimension

The creation of the SDF was not the last bid for the PYD/YPG's claim of being a part of the wider Syrian mosaic. In 2015, the Syrian Democratic Council, which is a coalition of political parties, and serves as the political wing of the SDF, was established. However, it is known that the PYD's ideology dominates this entity, which is led by Riyad Dirar and Amina Omer.

The PYD has also tried to gain legitimacy by opening political offices in many countries under the name of "Rojava Representation."³⁴ The organization has engaged politically with European countries as well as Russia and the United States in order to gain international recognition. It has opened political offices in Benelux³⁵, Oslo³⁶, Stockholm, Berlin, Paris³⁷, Prague, and Moscow, and to a certain extent, achieved its political goal. The former co-chair of the PYD, Salih Muslim, visited various European countries³⁸ frequently and tried to convey the political agenda of his party to the European politicians. In the meanwhile, the PYD Co-Chair Asya Abdullah and YPJ Commander Nesrin Abdullah also met with European officials. For example, Asya Abdullah and Nesrin Abdullah were hosted by the French President François Hollande at the Élysée Palace in February 2015.³⁹

Nesrin Abdullah, along with Salih Muslim, also went to Italy at the Italian government's official invitation and spoke at the Italian parliament.⁴⁰ Zuhat Kobane, the PYD's Europe representative, says that even though the political offices do not mean official recognition, there is a de facto recognition. She also articulates that "the political offices will carry the diplomatic relations which the PYD has developed so far to a new stage. The aim is not to seek help, but to guarantee and legitimize the status."⁴¹

Apart from political offices, the PYD contacts European delegations through the Syrian Democratic Council and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. For example, delegations from countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany⁴² have

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visited Northern Syria and met with figures from the Autonomous Administration on different occasions. Even some politicians from the European Parliament⁴³ participated in the aforementioned delegations. Likewise, the Syrian Democratic Council and the Autonomous Administration have organized many events/workshops in different European capitals, including Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, to introduce their political project.⁴⁴ The visit of the SDC's President of the Executive Committee Ilham Ahmed is noteworthy in this respect. Ahmed had visited Washington⁴⁵ and met with senators⁴⁶ to request for help against Turkey's military operations. Lately, she also visited Moscow, met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov⁴⁷, and reached a memorandum of understanding with the Popular Will Party.⁴⁸ The memorandum is of importance as it describes the Autonomous Administration as an "objective necessity and a societal need related to conditions of the country"⁴⁹ and indirectly brings the PYD to the constitution committee meetings, given the fact that Popular Will Party representatives participate in the negotiations. The intra-Kurdish dialogue in Syria is also another move in the search for political legitimacy. The Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK) tries to reconcile with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) to increase its legitimacy at societal and international levels. Both sides have lately agreed to establish a Supreme Kurdish reference⁵⁰ for the unity talks. For the time being, this is merely a memorandum of understanding as both sides have not yet succeeded in reaching a comprehensive deal that covers security, military, and administration.

Having said that, the organization also uses foreign ISIS-affiliated prisoners in its search for political legitimacy. The SDF has captured and imprisoned thousands of ISIS members. A big chunk of the prisoners consists of foreign militants, women, and children. The reluctance of Western countries to repatriate these people has allowed the organization to use them as a form of blackmail. The SDF states that it cannot protect the prisons where ISIS members are held in case of a military operation against it. In addition, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has managed to establish contact with foreign officials of many countries by using the mentioned foreigners very effectively. In this way, the organization tried to strengthen its hand in gaining political recognition.

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Many countries, such as Nigeria⁵¹, Russia⁵², the United Kingdom, Germany⁵³, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and France, have contacted the Foreign Relations Office of the Autonomous Administration to repatriate children. Nevertheless, in general, Western countries have been very reluctant to repatriate their citizens other than children. Yet, there are a few exceptions. For example, Norway repatriated a number of ISIS-affiliated women.⁵⁴ Kazakhstan, on the other hand, took responsibility and repatriated ISIS militants alongside women and children.⁵⁵ It is also known that there are some Turkish citizens detained by the SDF. However, since Ankara designates the SDF as a terrorist entity and does not recognize the Autonomous Administration, Turkish citizens cannot be repatriated. The PYD-controlled Autonomous Administration only hands over ISIS members through direct negotiations with countries and does not accept a third country as a mediator.⁵⁶ This move is a shrewd way of strengthening its hand in the quest for political legitimacy in the international arena. Previously, the establishment of an international tribunal for ISIS-affiliated prisoners was also voiced by different international actors. The Autonomous Administration also valued these voices with regards to legitimacy concerns.⁵⁷ The international tribunal establishment would have provided the SDF and the Autonomous Administration to have direct or indirect contact with foreign countries, which could have further contributed to their legitimacy in international actors' eyes

CRACK IN THE PYD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PKK

A short while ago, the Autonomous Administration has brokered an oil deal⁵⁸ with Delta Crescent Energy LLC, which is a little-known American firm. It can be said that the agreement is crucial for the SDF, even though it is not a very comprehensive one. The SDF and Mazloum Kobane have long been aspiring to assure the continuation of the US military presence in Northeast Syria for their very survival. The agreement ensures the continuation of a military presence. It also helps the SDF to diversify its relationship with the USA.⁵⁹ The main focus of their relationship has been security thus far. Most importantly, the Autonomous Administration assumes that diversification of the relationship can culminate in official recognition in the future.

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Following the announcement of the deal, a crack is observed in the PKK-PYD/SDF relationship. The recent crack was crystallized in Cemil Bayık's remarks against the agreement. Cemil Bayık, the co-chair of the executive committee of the KCK, has stated that the PKK cadres follow the news from the media, and they are not aware of the details of the agreement. He also added that they are against such initiatives since Syria is a "sovereign and internationally recognized country, and nobody can own the oil as it belongs to the whole Syrian society."⁶⁰ Moreover, he asserted that the SDF should thank Abdullah Öcalan for the intra-Kurdish unity talks, tacitly criticizing Mazloun Kobane as he previously praised the leadership of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for its endorsement to the negotiations.⁶¹ On top of these, different sources claim that some non-Syrian PKK figures, including Sabri Ok, one of the PKK's top figures, were expelled from Northern Syria as a result of the USA's pressure.⁶²

BARRIERS TO THE LOCALIZATION PROJECT

There are various challenges to the localization project initiated by the PYD/YPG. It is tough to predict where the still incomplete localization initiative will head due to the constantly changing dynamics in the Syrian war. The biggest obstacle to the organization's localization initiative is the tension between the SDF and locals of the Arab-populated areas such as Raqqa⁶³ and Deir Ez-Zor. Despite the PYD/YPG's efforts to present itself as an inclusive organization, the reality on the ground seems different.⁶⁴ The PYD allegedly only brings those who are obeying the party's rules into leadership positions⁶⁵ among different administrative entities. This situation creates tension⁶⁶ in the Arab-populated areas in which the SDF is seen as an occupying force.

Although the organization desires to gain the support of the local people based on obedience, the nature of representation⁶⁷ for differing actors in administrative entities leads to discontent in the SDF-controlled areas. Arabs are deprived of genuine representation in the PYD-led structures. Moreover, the suspicious assassinations against tribal leaders in the area⁶⁸, coupled with the grim reality, such as destroyed livelihoods, infrastructure, and other problems related to the delivery of social services, has culminated in waves

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of protest⁶⁹ against the SDF in Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa. The SDF has responded harshly to the protests.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, Mazloum Kobane has been trying to obtain the approval of Arabs in recent months. Thus, he has met with tribal leaders⁷¹ of different Arab tribes to get their consent and polish the SDF's image. In short, the Arab-majority areas continue to remain as the weak spot for the SDF and PYD-led Autonomous Administration.

Additionally, the situation on the ground is not favorable for the Kurdish side. The Syrian regime has been pretty reluctant to grant any sort of legal autonomy to the SDF and the PYD-led Autonomous Administration to date. In the past, the SDC and Damascus, with Russia's mediation, held many rounds of talks⁷² with regards to the SDF-controlled areas in Damascus and the Kheimim airbase. The PYD has consistently shown its approval for the talks and endorsed this initiative.⁷³ The party has said that the two sides can reconcile if the regime leaves the Baath mentality.

Nevertheless, negotiations between the sides have not yielded any positive results for the PYD and SDF, and the situation does not seem to be reversing any time soon. The regime thinks that it has the upper hand in the negotiations and still uses Turkey's threats against the PYD in order to avoid from making any significant concessions. What is more, Ilham Ahmed now blames the regime for the failure of the talks. She recently claimed that "the Syrian government, instead of solving the Syrian crisis, has been destabilizing the security and stability of the region and creating discord between the Kurds and the Arabs."⁷⁴

Moreover, not everyone within the PYD/SDF is in favor of the localization project as it necessitates power-sharing. The discontent with power-sharing is illustrated in senior PYD figure Aldar Khalil's statements, whose rhetoric is similar to that of the PKK cadres in Qandil. In one of his speeches regarding the unity talks with the KNC, he stated that they would never accept an agreement, which will mean the destruction of their administration.⁷⁵ He also asserted they could not offer administration positions to KNC

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leaders as they were not elected, and then he rejected the idea of Roj Peshmerga's⁷⁶ deployment in Syria.⁷⁷ The discontent within the PYD is likely to grow in the upcoming period as the influential name Aldar Khalil and some other figures insist on following⁷⁸ the PKK leaders in Qandil. That said, the KNC clearly wants the PYD to distance itself from PKK cadres. In an interview with Rudaw⁷⁹, Neşet Zaza, a senior figure of Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (KDP-S), which is an essential party within KNC, touches upon the PYD's relationship with the PKK and asserts that they will never accept their territories to be ruled by non-Syrian PKK cadres as their existence has become a reason for Turkey to intervene in Kurdish-populated areas in Syria.

Conclusion

As manifested above, the localization project of the PYD/YPG has been facing various problems. However, it is highly likely for the PYD and its military and political extensions to continue their localization efforts in their quest for gaining societal and political legitimacy. Thus, they will continue capitalizing on their inclusionary rhetoric to appeal to domestic and international actors for their survival.

The lack of genuine Arab representation in PYD-led administrative structures has created dissatisfaction. Considering this situation, the PYD might try to curb the discontent through new elections that can change the percentage of Arabs in administrative structures in Qamishli and Hasaka⁸⁰, where the Kurds and Arabs co-exist. Additionally, Ilham Ahmed's recent statement with regards to the removal of all the Syrians⁸¹ (excluding the ones who have serious accusations⁸²) from the infamous Al-Hol camp, where around 70.000 ISIS-affiliated people reside, should be read within the context of finding common ground with the Arab tribes in Eastern Syria. The tribes have long been demanding the inmates' release from the notorious camp, which serves as an indoctrination center.

Ilham Ahmed's recent statement with regards to the removal of all the Syrians from the infamous Al-Hol camp, where around 70.000 ISIS-affiliated people reside, should be read within the context of finding common ground with the Arab tribes in Eastern Syria

Likewise, the PYD will continue its efforts to mend ties with the Assad regime. However, it does not have the upper hand in negotiations. Thus, the de facto situation on the ground is likely to continue unless a significant dynamic emerges on the battlefield. The regime is likely to continue Turkey's intervention threats to escape from making any serious concessions.

In the same vein, Turkey's position regarding the PYD is not expected to change in the foreseeable future, given that the country does not believe in a PYD-PKK breakup. The SDF's recent deal with Delta Crescent Energy LLC ensures the continuation of the US military presence, diversifies the USA's relationship with the group, and cements the relationship between the two sides. This situation worries Ankara as it does not want to face a scenario similar to the situation of the Kurdistan Regional Government following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. What is more, the administrative and military changes that the PYD/YPG has made thus far have been considered cosmetic changes by Ankara. In addition to these, Turkey has shown its dissatisfaction with the intra-Kurdish talks as the PYD aims at being included in political processes by reconciling with the KNC. Turkey adamantly opposes⁸³ the unity talks and PYD's participation in political processes that would shape Syria's future.

Moreover, a possible PYD-KNC agreement necessitates the KNC's split from the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition, which is not welcomed in Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has made Turkey's stance towards the talks clear by saying, "We will neither allow a terror corridor, nor the legitimization of terrorists on our borders."⁸⁴ He also articulated that "irrespective of the names, whoever sides with the PKK/YPG is not different than the PKK, and they are a legitimate target."⁸⁵ Taking these points into account, Turkey's stance towards the PYD and its military and administrative structures is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

In summation, the success of the PYD's unfinished localization project will depend on the new dynamics that will emerge on the Syrian battlefield, whether the organization will really break its ties with the PKK, and new alliances to be formed between the states taking part in the war. The years to come will be of critical importance to see the outcome of this localization initiative.

Endnotes

- 1- After the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999, the PKK was forced to go through a restructuring process. The organization was obliged to give its weight to the political movement for a while during this period. The PKK, at its 7th congress, decided to initiate the so-called “democratic transformation” process by declaring that it underwent a political and ideological change in line with the directives provided by its leader Abdullah Öcalan. Moreover, the post 9/11 period compelled the PKK to seek a new political structure, which culminated in the creation of the Kurdistan Communities Union. At the time, the PKK decided on a confederal model, establishing seemingly local branches in 3 other countries (i.e., in Syria, Iraq, and Iran), and becoming a part of the KCK. The KCK can be viewed as an umbrella entity (or a binding contract) that consists of the PKK and its affiliates in Syria (PYD), Iraq (PÇDK), and Iran (PJAK). The main motive behind the establishment of the KCK and the creation of local parties are as follows: The newly created parties would act per the local needs and dynamics. However, the strategic decisions were to be made by the PKK cadres in the Qandil mountains.
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