

## THE CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

*Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe*

Recent work on the contemporary Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria has identified a number of clear trends amidst the confusion of the civil war and the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish political entity.<sup>1</sup> One of the most pertinent questions to pursue is the relationship between the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK). It is clear that the future of the project in Rojava, of Kurdish politics in Turkey, and also of the states of Syria and Turkey will be significantly affected by the deep connections between these parties.

While the PYD is the current manifestation of an older strain of support for the PKK in Syria, until 2012 it was but one player of modest influence among many Kurdish parties in Syria. Since that summer, it has been extraordinarily successful in establishing itself as the dominant political and military force in most Kurdish areas of Syria, eclipsing the older Kurdish nationalist parties. It has set up an autonomous political administration according to a radical and experimental ideology. The PYD's position of power in Rojava, its intimate relationship to the PKK, its military success against Islamic State (IS), and its poor relationships with Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the Syrian Arab opposition mean that it is now a highly significant player in the Syrian civil war, in Kurdish geopolitics, and in Middle East geopolitics.

Kurdish politics are often analyzed within the borders of the four sovereign states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and hence the significance of trans-border relationships

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

and influences can be neglected. However, interaction across state borders is a typical characteristic of Kurdish politics in the Middle East and has taken several forms, such as cooperation and conflict between Kurdish organizations and cross-border militant and recruitment activities of Kurdish parties in other states. The support which the PKK received from the Syrian regime in the past and the PKK's mobilization and recruitment activities among Syrian Kurds frame the PYD-PKK relationship today. This is an essential context for understanding recent developments in Kurdish parts of Syria where the PYD-PKK movement aspires to represent one people who happen to be divided by an arbitrary modern border. Many Kurds in Turkey and Syria who do not necessarily support these parties also view their society, culture, and politics as fully entwined.

Deep cross-border sociopolitical connections have long existed between Kurds in Syria and Turkey. These connections and the PKK's decades-long organization in both countries tie the PYD to the PKK's transnational activities in the Middle East. On the other hand, in order to increase its legitimacy among Syrian Kurds and in the eyes of the international community, the PYD feels the need to show itself as a genuine Syrian Kurdish party that is independent from the PKK. These factors force the PYD to focus mainly on Syrian Kurdish politics and downplay its links to the PKK. Indeed, the PYD-PKK connection is exposing the PYD to the complexity of national, transnational, and international interactions, creating vulnerabilities as well as opportunities for the party.

Excellent analyses of the PYD exist within wider studies of the Kurdish national movement in Syria<sup>2</sup> and in policy reports,<sup>3</sup> but research focusing specifically on the PYD is slim. The relationship between the PYD and its mother party is clearly intimate, but the complicated and varied contexts in which the parties operate suggest that it is not monolithic. This chapter aims to make a contribution to understanding the PYD by examining its relationship to the PKK, including the question of the PYD's denial of subservience, and then considering the related question of the PYD as a "Syrian Kurdish" party. It will also analyze how the PKK views the PYD and the influence of the link and the Rojava phenomenon on the PKK.

### *Problematizing the PYD-PKK bond*

In the summer of 2012, the PYD took control of some towns in northern Syria which are predominantly Kurdish-inhabited. Over the following three years, the party expanded its territory and established a structure of autonomous government and associated institutions which it calls "Rojava" (west Kurdistan). For the reasons behind the rise of the PYD and analysis of the development of Rojava, see the following chapter in this volume, by Harriet Allsopp. The PYD is an offshoot of, and remains deeply connected to, the wider PKK movement. Examining the nature and extent of this connection is central to understanding the party's actions in Syria and

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

its goals for the western Kurdistan project. It also has deep significance for the many other actors with interests in Rojava: the other Syrian Kurdish parties; the Syrian regime; the Syrian opposition groups; Turkey; the KRG; and the international community.

A number of scholars, analysts, and activists see the PYD as purely the manifestation of the PKK in Syria.<sup>4</sup> The numerous other Kurdish parties in Syria and their supporters, including the KRG in Iraq, also see no distinction between the two. For the Turkish authorities, the certainty that the parties are identical is a matter of deep political faith which drives Turkey's hostility to the PYD and Rojava and controls its policies toward the north of Syria.

And yet the PYD demurs. The party is very open, indeed proud, of its ties to the PKK, but it defines the relationship as an ideological alliance which is not institutionalized. For example, Salih Muslim, co-president of the PYD, confirms that the party follows the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan but describes the two parties as "brother organizations, which respect each other" and states that the PYD is independent in its practical policies and decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Another PYD official goes further: "PYD is completely distinct from the PKK. PKK lets the PYD choose what to do; if needed it will help, but not otherwise. PYD has its own leadership; it is a Syrian Kurdish party. The only commonality is the shared leftist ideology."<sup>6</sup> As for the PKK, its leaders often declare that the PYD is not directly controlled by the PKK, but rather emphasize that it is part of the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK)<sup>7</sup>, the umbrella organization for Kurdish parties in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq that follow Öcalan's ideology. To explore the curious question of the PYD-PKK relationship, it is first necessary to problematize the idea of the bond between the parties and to examine their history, institutional structures, ideology, resources, human capital, fighters, and funding.

Kurdish political parties in Syria date back to 1957 and were largely modeled on the Kurdish parties in Kurdistan-Iraq, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup> The PKK was founded in Turkey in 1978, and between 1980 and 1998 the Syrian regime allowed it to use Syrian and Lebanese territories as a base from which to conduct its armed campaign against the Turkish state. While in Syria, the PKK mobilized Syrian Kurds and some joined the movement as fighters. Syrian Kurds remain important members of the PKK to the present, including senior figures such as Bahoz Erdal, PKK military commander until 2004 and currently one of three men on the PKK's executive committee.

Following Syria's expulsion of the PKK in 1998 and the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK decided to widen its activities and supported the establishment of sister parties in the other four parts of greater Kurdistan. This cross-border expansion is part of the development of the PKK from a single leftist political party into a larger party-complex comprising several parties and organizations.<sup>9</sup> The differing narratives of the PYD story begin in 2003 when the party was founded in Syria: being set up

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

either by the PKK to maintain its support base in Syria<sup>10</sup> or by Kurds in Syria who happened to agree with PKK ideology as the best solution to their problems.<sup>11</sup>

The PYD operated largely separately from the numerous other Kurdish parties in Syria, marked out by its closeness to the PKK. Similarly to the other parties, it suffered from the attention of the Syrian authorities, often more severely, and a number of party members were jailed and died in detention. But the party had better discipline and clearer goals than its competitors, as well as the useful support of the experienced PKK, so that in 2012 when civil war engulfed Syria and the Assad regime's authority was weakened, it was ready to act.

For PKK supporters in Syria, the establishment of the PYD gave structure to their activities and the party derived legitimacy from the history of the PKK's struggle. The PYD's membership of the PKK party-complex is transparent: the party is a member of the KCK, in effect the executive body for all groups within the party-complex. The PYD states that every party in the KCK system has equal rights, although it should also be noted that the leadership of the KCK and the PKK is identical. The PYD has established political and social structures which mirror those of the PKK. The PYD set up the Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk a Rojava, TEV-DEM) in Syria, which includes numerous civil society organizations, e.g. the PKK runs the Democratic Society Congress (Kongreya Civaka Demokratîk, KCD) in Turkey. Similarly, the PYD established women's, youth, educational, and language organizations, such as the Star Union (for women), Youth Union, and Families of the Martyrs Foundation, which are modeled on the various elements of the PKK-complex in Turkey, as well as professional associations and local and village councils.

The PYD follows the ideology of the PKK and Öcalan apparently to the letter, inheriting the Marxist-Leninist influence on the early movement and, after 2000, the new idea of democratic autonomy which transcends the (defunct) nation-state and advocates decentralized organisation of political, social, and economic affairs by networks of local councils. It is argued that the nation-state must be rejected as a failure in favor of locally-organized self-government, and the benefits of this should be available to all peoples, not just Kurds. While neither party officially seeks independence or a united greater Kurdistan, the endgame of democratic autonomy involves the removal of existing national borders. The border between Turkey and Syria (in Kurdish terminology between northern Kurdistan and western Kurdistan) is therefore irrelevant to the purist's view of this theory. The ideology also builds on the older Kurdish nationalist view of Kurds in Turkey and Syria as one people, to confirm that the PYD and PKK are working toward the same ultimate goal.

PKK ideas about women's participation are also evident, so the PYD officially ensures co-representation of women in all positions in its organizations, and 40 per cent representation in the military. The PYD draws on the same well as the PKK for the symbolism and narrative of the movement, idealizing the charismatic leadership

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

of Öcalan and the cult of martyrdom. The military structure of the PYD also emulates that of the PKK. Technically, the PKK is a political party and military activities are conducted by the People's Defence Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG). Similarly in Syria, defense is conducted by the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). The PYD claims that the YPG is not only answerable to it but also that it serves all the people of Rojava through its broader elected bodies which involve other parties and organizations. The PYD's control of territory has also enabled it to establish a civilian police force (*Asayîş*) which the PKK has not been able to do in Turkey.

The YPG has assumed domestic control of Rojava and has proved effective in fighting jihadist groups, including IS in 2014 and 2015. Part of the reason is that the PKK has supported the development of its military capability through supply of personnel and training from its veteran forces. It is also probable that the YPG receives arms from the PKK. The PKK's ability to assist was aided by ceasefires between it and Turkey and between PJAK and Iran. Syrian Kurds have noted an increasing presence in the YPG of fighters and commanders who are from Turkey and Iran.<sup>12</sup> The PYD is very open that ex-PKK fighters are serving with the YPG, but stresses that they have become YPG fighters who are answerable to the YPG command.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Bilhan Tuncel states, "even many revolutionist, democratic, humanist internationalists all around the world join the YPG against radical religious groups who massacre people and brutally execute captives. The PKK's logistic and military support for YPG is a matter of duty and responsibility to the people of Syria, Kurdish or non-Kurdish."<sup>14</sup>

Harassment by the Syrian authorities forced PYD leaders into exile, and several, including Salih Muslim, were based with the PKK in Qandil in Kurdistan-Iraq until the change of circumstances brought about by the Syrian war allowed them to return to Syria to mobilize activities from 2011. The strongly authoritarian nature of the PKK is also evident in the PYD.<sup>15</sup> There is an inherent tension between the PYD's official positions on the practice of multi-party politics and tolerance and its actions on the ground. Similar to the PKK, the PYD is showing strong authoritarian tendencies, and its commitment to Kurdish unity and democracy is questionable. While the party insists that it is committed to pluralism, it has effectively imposed one-party rule in Rojava. For example, a PYD law announced in 2014 forbids the existence of political parties which do not recognize its administration.<sup>16</sup> As many of the other Kurdish parties do not recognize this, these are placed in a similar position of illegality to that under Ba'ath rule. There are numerous accusations of PYD harassment of political opponents, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest, restrictions on political activities, and the use of violence to quash domestic unrest.<sup>17</sup>

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

### *The PYD as a Syrian Kurdish party*

The history of the parties, the extent of their operational links and support, their identical ideology and the development of the PYD party-complex as a near mirror-image of the PKK's all demonstrate the intimate connections between the parties and, further, suggest that the PYD is heavily influenced, if not controlled, by the PKK. The PYD's own insistence that it is an autonomous actor therefore requires explanation. There are two clear major reasons for this: the need for legitimacy and popularity among the Kurdish population of Syria; and the need for international support. Both are intimately connected to the question of whether the PYD is genuinely a Syrian Kurdish party dedicated to the interests of Kurds in Syria, or whether its overarching *raison d'être* is to support the goals of the PKK.

The historical focus of the PKK movement has been its struggle against the Turkish state. Kurds from other states were actively encouraged to join the organization, but to support it in the fight in Turkey, not to solve Kurdish problems in other states. In Syria, because of its alliance with the Ba'athist regime, the PKK not only failed to mobilize against the state's discrimination against Kurds, but even denied the existence of a specifically Syrian Kurdish people or problem. Öcalan notably endorsed the Syrian regime's denial of Syrian Kurdish aspirations and agreed that they were descendants of refugees from Turkey, undermining the legitimacy of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria.<sup>18</sup> The PKK viewed the Kurds in Syria primarily as a useful source of recruits for its fight in Turkey.

The Kurdish parties in Syria of the 1957 genealogy, although severely restricted and riven by factionalism, were broadly representative of the Kurdish political-cultural national movement and have only been eclipsed by the PYD since 2012. There is a strong tradition of hostility to the PKK and the PYD among Syrian Kurds who saw the movement diverting efforts from their own concerns in Syria and who broadly supported the 1957 parties. Further, until the Syrian war, the Kurdish movement in Syria had been non-violent, in stark contrast to the PKK. Therefore the PYD has always had a problem of legitimacy among the people it claims to represent, many of whom believe that the PYD and PKK prioritize their interests in Turkey above the interests of Syrian Kurds. The PYD has frequently given the impression that it believes the Turkish state is a greater threat than the Syrian state to Kurds in Syria. The strong authoritarian streak displayed by the PYD, which is so similar to that of the PKK, and the current accommodation with the regime, which continues the trend from the 1980s and 1990s, further undermine its legitimacy and expose the party to criticism of behaving like, or being, the PKK.

The PYD has therefore attempted to portray itself as a pluralist and democratic party, willing to cooperate with its rival Kurdish parties and involve them in the administration of Rojava, in the hope of improving its legitimacy among the large number of Kurds who are not natural supporters. The PYD agreed to a political deal

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

with the many parties in the Kurdish National Council (KNC) by which representation throughout the structures of western Kurdistan and command of the YPG is shared equally between the two sides. In practice the PYD pays lip service to the deal, but officially it remains committed to power-sharing. As part of this, it is incumbent upon the party to downplay its ties to the PKK and to present itself as a movement dedicated specifically to serving the Kurds in Syria.

Connected to the PYD's need to present itself domestically as a Syrian Kurdish party willing to work with others is its need for international support. The PYD operates in a very tough neighborhood with only one sound ally (the PKK) and many enemies. It is well aware of the considerable potential it has for winning friends internationally, given the advantages it holds over other actors in Syria: being secular, comparatively democratic, popular, and disciplined. Most crucially of all, the YPG has become the most effective military force in Syria fighting against IS. Western powers prefer the KNC, KRG-linked parties to the PYD, hence strengthening its motive to promote power-sharing. And among the major reasons for international reluctance to back the PYD are its link to the PKK, considered a terrorist organization by the US and EU, and fears of upsetting Turkey. The PYD has also tried to persuade Turkey that it is distinct from the PKK, wary of the threat of Turkish invasion of northern Syria with the aim of attacking Rojava. Turkey was never likely to change its view, and the threat materialized in August 2016 when Turkish forces established a pocket of control inside Syrian territory, largely to stop the expansion of Kurdish-held territory, and increased its military engagement with the YPG. Since the fighting between IS and the YPG escalated in 2014, US support of the YPG has become crucial to the survival of Rojava and indeed the Kurdish population in Syria, who face catastrophic consequences should IS defeat the YPG.

There is a further possible explanation for the PYD's insistence that it is not merely a proxy for the PKK: that the different contexts in which the parties operate mean that the relationship is more subtle and flexible than often assumed and that the PYD's claim is not wholly inaccurate. This links to the increasing "Syrian Kurdish" nature of the PYD as its expansion and development of its own administrative and military functions within Syria have made it inherently more focused on Rojava. The PYD identifies closely with the PKK's struggle in northern Kurdistan, but the exceptional circumstances in western Kurdistan have given the party a more distinctive purpose and identity than it had prior to 2011. This is evident in Salih Muslim's description of the PYD as "Syrian patriots",<sup>19</sup> and the party stresses firmly that it does not seek separatism or the fragmentation of Syria.

It is clear that the PYD and PKK have considerably different operating contexts which produce different opportunities and constraints, in particular as the PYD is a party of government, something the PKK has never experienced. This has created a set of challenges for the PYD which are very different to those ever faced by the PKK. Further, the prospect of the PKK implementing democratic autonomy in any part of

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

Turkey is remote, and especially so since the resumption of violence between it and the Turkish state in 2015. While the PKK has returned to low-level guerrilla warfare and the prospects of political progress in Turkey recede, the PYD is attempting to implement democratic autonomy and run local government services and an army in a chaotic war zone in which there is an existential threat to the Kurdish population.

The internal dynamics of the PKK-PYD-YPG structures are fluid rather than monolithic, and there are factions within each. Some actors see local factors as paramount, especially those who have joined the PYD through expedience, while others take a broader and more ideological view. It is also worth noting that the PYD's commitment to limited and asymmetric plurality contrasts with the PKK, and also that the PYD did not employ violence between 2003 and 2012. It established its militia prior to 2011, but did not conduct military operations until the opportunity, or the necessity, of the civil war arose in 2012. The PYD argues that it poses no threat to Turkey, not least because Rojava would be unlikely to survive should Turkey choose to snuff it out. This raises the important question of whether, should developments force a choice, the PYD would put the interests of the PKK and the struggle in Turkey ahead of Syrian Kurdish interests, as happened in the 1990s. It is conceivable that the PYD-PKK bond, despite its great strength, could be tested by external pressures and internal tensions.

The developments in Syrian Kurdistan since 2012 indicate that the PYD has become a genuinely "Syrian Kurdish" political movement. The increased branding of the PYD as a separate party dedicated to serving the people of Rojava and the extraordinary conditions of war and political opportunity suggest a gentle and nuanced shift toward more autonomy from the PKK. The relationship remains ambiguous, quite probably deliberately so, and also because of the different strands of opinion within both parties. This ambiguity is also in keeping with the opacity of the PYD's political plans.

### *The trans-border PKK complex and the KCK*

The PKK should be considered as a major actor with a trans-Kurdish implantation, and therefore as a structural pillar of the Kurdish political sphere well beyond Turkey.<sup>20</sup> The PKK and the PYD are part of the KCK, which presents itself as a non-state, non-military democratic, political, and social organization. The KCK was established in 2005 in line with the principles and organizational structures proposed in Öcalan's confederal model.<sup>21</sup> There are two further parties under the KCK umbrella: the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), established in 2004 in Iran; and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan, PCDK), established in 2002 in Iraq. These four KCK parties, PKK, PYD, PJAK, and PCDK, conduct their affairs autonomously, but they need to do this in line with the principles adopted in the KCK charter. The

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

fact that the leadership of the KCK is identical to the PKK's leadership implies that the PKK leadership has the ability to exert its power over other parties. Although the PKK remains a party with a focus on Turkey, through the KCK it acts like the center of a cross-border mechanism, as Bozarslan describes.

Despite the PKK dominance in the KCK, the relative autonomy of KCK parties from the PKK can be observed in practice. The organizational models and actions of each party vary from country to country, even from city to city within the same country. Parties in the KCK conduct their affairs based on the requirements of the country-specific and regional context, rather than being directed by the KCK in a top-down manner. Tuncel emphasizes that the KCK and Qandil do not take part in the PYD's or other parties' decision-making processes.<sup>22</sup> However, each party is expected to follow Öcalan's confederal system model in structuring their representative, administrative, and political systems; and there are certain models they follow in their military organization. Therefore, KCK leaders' claim that the PYD manages its affairs autonomously from the PKK might not be too far from reality.<sup>23</sup>

The different local political contexts facing each KCK party have led to significant variations between them. The case of PJAK is the most pertinent and valuable comparison to the PYD. While the Syrian authorities tolerated the existence of the PYD, Iran would allow no such presence by PJAK, which has operated from its base across the border in Kurdistan-Iraq while its leadership sits in Europe. The PYD was able to operate as a cultural-political nationalist party, similar to the other Kurdish parties in Syria, within the limited space permitted by the Ba'athist regime, and it did not take up arms until as a reaction deep into the chaos of the Syrian war. By contrast, PJAK was founded as an armed guerrilla movement and has conducted a sporadic campaign against Iran, but this has failed in the face of stiff Iranian response. Technically the fighting is conducted by the military organization the Force of Eastern Kurdistan (Hezi Rojhelati Kurdistan, HRK). Similar to the PYD's relationship to Kurdish society in Syria, PJAK has not been universally welcomed by Kurds in Iran who oppose its violent methods and its links to the PKK rather than the older Kurdish parties in Iran, and blame it for triggering increased repression by the Iranian state. PJAK would try to impose hegemony as the PKK has, but similarly to the PYD would have to find some compromise with the other Iranian Kurdish parties—the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and Komala—just as the PYD has done with the KNC parties. Following the PKK/PYD, PJAK has also dropped its emphasis on the traditional Kurdish nationalist agenda in favor of the ideology of democratic autonomy for all people in the region.

The PCDK, established in southern Kurdistan (Iraq) in 2002, has achieved the least traction of the PKK franchises, because Kurdistan-Iraq has already achieved autonomy and its well-established political movements are deeply opposed to the PKK. The KRG authorities have closed the party's headquarters and banned it from standing in parliamentary elections.<sup>24</sup> Orhan makes the point that while the PKK

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

launches its attacks from Iraqi Kurdistan, it has a greater social base and more recruits from Syrian Kurdistan.<sup>25</sup>

### *PKK strategy in Rojava*

The idea of a Kurdish fraternity underlies the PKK's support for the PYD. The PKK perceives Kurds as divided into four unnatural groups which have been suppressed and badly treated by regional regimes and their international allies. Therefore, supporting other Kurdish groups in Iran, Syria, and Iraq is a key goal for the PKK. The PKK insists that this fraternal support does not amount to control over the PYD.<sup>26</sup> The creation of PKK-affiliated parties in the other three parts of Kurdistan in the early 2000s reflects its increased interest in the Kurdish struggles in other states, rather than exploiting these purely for the benefit of the movement in Turkey. Alan Şemo states, "PKK and Qandil have always stated publicly that they respect the will and the decision of Rojava political parties and people. They are ready to help if required but do not impose any policy or decision on Syrian Kurds."<sup>27</sup> This rhetoric is in line with the KCK's overarching goal to implement Öcalan's democratic confederalism, a non-state structure governed by local administrations in a bottom-up model.

The PYD is also significant for the PKK for another reason. As a de facto party of government, the PYD is now putting PKK ideas into practice for the first time, and ahead of the mother party in Turkey. Therefore, PKK leaders strongly support the PYD and the Rojava experiment. In June 2015, Murat Karayılan, one of the four KCK leaders, commented on Turkey's plans to intervene in Syrian Kurdish territories and declared that "If they [Turkey] intervene in Rojava, we will do the same in Turkey, and the whole of Turkey will turn into a battlefield."<sup>28</sup> The PKK leadership, through the party's website, has often called for support for Rojava and said that the revolution in Rojava should be expanded to other parts of Kurdistan.<sup>29</sup>

PKK and KCK leaders strongly reject the claims of PYD authoritarianism in Rojava and emphasize the democratic character of the PYD rule. Cemil Bayık, one of the three members of the PKK's executive committee, stated that the PYD is not the sole ruler and that other Kurdish groups, and non-Kurds such as Assyrians and Arabs, are also part of the administration in the Rojava cantons.<sup>30</sup> Other Syrian Kurdish parties point to the undemocratic and oppressive policies and increasing dominance of the PYD in Kurdish politics in Syria.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, PKK and KCK leaders have huge interest in the success of the PYD and the Rojava experiment, because this will mean that the PKK's ideology and its model of governance are feasible and successful and, at least in theory, could be later rolled out across all four parts of Kurdistan, and indeed Turkey and the Middle East.

At an ideological level, the Rojava experiment implemented by the PYD has huge implications for Kurdish politics in Turkey. Rojava is a major concern for HDP politicians and Kurdish civil society organizations in Turkey and influences their

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

discourse. Developments in Rojava have emboldened the PKK and Kurdish politicians in Turkey. The talks between the government and Öcalan in Turkey and the surrounding public discussion often referred to the Rojava experiment as an example of Öcalan's democratic federalism. In this process, the governing Justice and Development Party, although it constantly criticized the developments in Rojava and referred to Rojava only in the context of its criticism of the PKK and its activities, has tolerated discussions on decentralization in the public domain.

In addition to the ideological dimension, the PYD and Rojava are important strategically for the PKK and for its ability to maintain cross-border links in Syria. The PKK seeks to promote the PYD within Syria, because a strong PYD in Syria offers tactical and strategic advantages to the PKK. Until the emergence of autonomous Kurdish rule in Syria, the PKK's cross-border activities in Syria were substantially restricted, leaving Qandil in northern Iraq and the Iraqi-Turkish border as its main base of activity and sanctuary. Moreover, the success of the Rojava experiment and its possible recognition by outsiders and regional states would lead to the emergence of a PKK-friendly Kurdish political entity with a legitimate rule to govern for the first time in the Middle East. The creation and entrenchment of such a region means that the PKK can be present, maintain its organization, and continue to operate across Turkish-Syrian borders. This reality makes developments in Rojava hugely important for the PKK and its political aims, not only in Turkey but also in the wider region.

The battle for Kobanî is an excellent example of the importance of the PYD to the PKK and also to the Kurdish political parties in Turkey. During the fight between IS and the YPG, the PKK provided direct support to the town's defenders. Karayılan described the fight in Kobanî as one of the milestones in Kurdish history.<sup>32</sup> The successful defense of Kobanî has had huge implications for Kurdish communities in Turkey, especially among PKK sympathizers, as well as outside Turkey. Several Turkish Kurds wanted to cross the border to help YPG forces, and they protested when Turkey obstructed access from and to Kobanî. Turkey justified its actions by arguing that the PYD is purely the PKK, which it considers to be a terrorist organization as bad as IS.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Syrian Kurdish autonomy and the PKK flags flying on the other side of the border created great anxiety for Turkey, which also made the prevention of cross-border links between PYD and PKK a key policy aim.

Despite Turkey's attempts at prevention, many Turkish citizens who were sympathetic to the Kurdish cause but were not involved in PKK's military operations joined the fight in Syria on the side of YPG forces against Islamist militants.<sup>34</sup> Funerals for Turkish citizens who lost their lives in the conflict, especially in Kobanî, have become a regular scene in many towns in eastern and south-eastern Turkey.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, outside the region, several members of diaspora Kurdish communities joined YPG forces to fight, and huge campaigns to raise money and support to help YPG forces and the people in Kobanî were organized among Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe.

## THE KURDISH QUESTION REVISITED

Kurdish political parties in Turkey openly support Rojava and PYD control in the region.<sup>36</sup> Members of the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), which made a major breakthrough in the Turkish parliament election in June 2015, lobbied for international support for the PYD and the defense of Kobanî. They criticized the Turkish government for blocking support to the YPG at the borders and for not supporting Rojava.<sup>37</sup> They have also made several declarations to argue for the legitimacy of Kurdish autonomous rule in Rojava.<sup>38</sup>

It is unsurprising that the PKK has provided unflinching and substantial support to its sister party in Syria. What is more notable is that the PKK's official position on its relationship to the PYD also consistently stresses the latter's autonomy. The pressures identified, which influence the PYD's insistence of its separateness, do not affect the PKK. Therefore the mother party's hold over its wider party complex is either sufficiently sophisticated to encourage such a public perception, or there is some truth in the claim. If, as argued in this chapter, the relationship is more nuanced than often assumed, and the PYD is indeed becoming more "Syrian Kurdish", this suggests that some very interesting and important dynamics could emerge.

There is no doubt about the depth and centrality of the PKK influence on the PYD and the Rojava experiment and also their shared ideology. However, the movements operate in different contexts and hence now in different ways. Most significantly, the PYD is effectively a party of government, experimenting with a revolutionary ideology, as well as providing critical military defense to a Kurdish population under a severe and immediate threat. Such conditions could create diverging needs and policies, presenting the PKK with a tension between its Turkey-centric goals and operational needs, and the success of its Syrian offshoot. In the 1990s, the PKK made a clear choice in favor of the former; it is conceivable it would do so again.

### *Conclusion*

Analysis of the relationship between the PYD and PKK is crucial to understanding Kurdish politics in Turkey and Syria and indeed in the wider Middle East; the analysis in this chapter has thus identified evidence to support some of the major themes of this book. Cross-border links play such a critical role now on both movements that the inadequacies of state-centric research are confirmed. The sense that the early twentieth century is proving to be a "Kurdish moment" is firmly supported by the case in Rojava with the unprecedented and transformational establishment of autonomous Kurdish rule. But this experiment remains highly vulnerable and fragile. The PYD is aware of this and is careful not to overreach, while seeking improved international support and legitimacy.

Another consistent theme across the Kurdish movements is the levels of authoritarianism within the various political parties. The PYD also fits this trend as its PKK-infused character and determined opportunism on the ground, as well as its

## CURIOUS QUESTION OF THE PYD-PKK RELATIONSHIP

self-righteous belief in its ideology, have contributed to the strong strain of authoritarianism within the movement and its practices. Party hegemony is defined as the national interest, as demonstrated by the PYD's rigid certainty that its ideology and practice are correct. PYD hegemony is becoming increasingly visible in the general acceptance of the Rojava cantons idea, even by those deeply opposed to the PYD. Rojava is also proof that, whatever their shortcomings, Öcalan's ideas can be applied.

A further broader theme is that significant parts of Kurdish interests are now more than ever aligned with international interests. Despite international reservations about the PYD and the Rojava experiment, the party offers a vastly more palatable alternative to the violent jihadi groups, and the US military support of the Kurds at Kobanî marked a significant intervention. The nature of the PYD's relationship to the PKK has put the US in the delicate position of providing support to the PYD while continuing to back Turkey against the PKK. Interestingly, the PKK appears to be revealing signs of interest in working with the US, for instance by suggesting that the US play a role in restarting talks between the PKK and the Turkish government.<sup>39</sup> If true, this is a huge change for the PKK, an organization that always saw its ideological views as irreconcilable with those of the US, and perceived the US as an enemy in its struggle. The PKK's links to the PYD, with its increasing links to the US, can be considered as a factor in a possible closer US-PKK relationship.

The opportunity to establish and develop its own administration in Rojava has created the conditions for the PYD to become more "Syrian Kurdish." Yet at the same time, due to the desperate necessity of the existential conflict with IS, it is heavily reliant on PKK support. In order to increase its domestic and international recognition, and to make Rojava viable, the PYD has to work, or at least claim to work, with the other Kurdish parties. When the war ends, assuming the Kurdish population remains in Syria in large numbers, the PYD will probably need to make concessions to other Kurdish parties to present a united Kurdish front in negotiations with other actors. This requirement could be largely removed if it succeeds in entrenching its power base in Rojava and the Kurdish National Council parties are weakened even further. But successful leadership of the Kurdish population of Syria and negotiations for its future will require the PYD to commit to Syria, ahead of the PKK's struggle in Turkey. The PYD will also be required to make compromises to find a settlement with the majority of Syria which is not Kurdish; but to what extent they will agree to do so, and whether the PKK will allow this, is questionable.