



The Syrian Kurds' race towards autonomy: have they obtained the necessary amount of political and military leverage to claim a long-term *de jure* autonomous Kurdish region in Syria?¹

A corrida dos curdos sírios em direção à sua autonomia: eles já obtiveram uma quantidade necessária de influência política e militar para reivindicar uma região autônoma curda de longo prazo na Síria?

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Abstract: the aim of this article is to examine to what extent have the Syrian Kurds, during the Syrian War and the battle against the ISIS, achieved the necessary strategic leverage towards their goal of reaching an autonomous Kurdish *de jure* region in Syria. Thus, based on the history of the Kurdish-Syrian conflict and the international literature on the subject, the article inquires about the possibility of extensive and fair negotiations between the Kurds and the Syrian regime on the basis of a post-war agreement concerning the Syrian State. In order to do so, firstly it analyzes how the war in Syria and Western support for Syrian Kurdish actors have strengthened Kurdish political and military power in the region, as well as the underlying aspects of this support. The article then discusses why such support would not also imply the support for the claims of a *de jure* Kurdish region in Syria, and also assesses

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whether a *de facto* autonomy would be sustainable in the long term. Finally, the article presents its conclusive arguments about the state of the situation and possible measures to overcome the conflict.

Key words: Kurdish autonomy; Syrian Kurdistan; Syrian Democratic Forces; Popular Protection Units; Syrian war.

Resumo: *o presente artigo visa examinar a seguinte questão: até que ponto os curdos sírios, durante a Guerra Síria e o combate ao ISIS, obtiveram uma alavancagem estratégica em direção ao seu objetivo de alcançar uma região curda autônoma de jure na Síria? Assim, com base no histórico do conflito curdo-sírio e na literatura internacional a respeito do tema, o artigo perquire sobre a existência de uma possibilidade de negociações amplas e justas entre os curdos e o regime sírio sobre as bases de um Estado Sírio pós-guerra. Para isso, em primeiro lugar, analisar-se-á como a guerra na Síria e o apoio ocidental a atores curdos sírios reforçaram o poder político e militar curdo na região, e também os aspectos subjacentes deste apoio. Então, o artigo discute por que tal apoio não implicaria também no apoio, por parte destes atores ocidentais, às pretensões de autonomia curda de jure, avaliando também se uma autonomia de facto seria sustentável em longo prazo. Por fim, o artigo apresenta seus argumentos conclusivos sobre o estado da situação e possíveis medidas para superar o conflito.*

Palavras-chave: *autonomia curda; Curdistão Sírio; Forças Democráticas Sírias; Unidades de Proteção Popular; guerra síria.*



1. Introduction and historical background.

The so called ‘Kurdish issue’ is not only a well-known fact in International Politics, but one of today’s conflicts that has the most radiant effects in the Middle-East. Its inner conflict-logic has a great range of causes orbitating in historical, geographical and social aspects, and also including the involvement of a relevant number of States, political and military actors. Such long-term conflict, based on the Kurds’ quest for independence and autonomy towards the States where they are located — bearing in mind that they are the biggest nation without a State to call their own⁴— has produced harsh State repression.

Considering the question of the Syrian Kurds — which is the scope of this paper — the development of a conflict throughout the years between the Syrian Kurds and the Syrian regime (‘the regime’) initially showed that such Kurds would be left with no formal autonomy. However, the natural conflict evolution now presents the idea that a “Kurdistan in Syria”, although yet difficult to grasp how it would be its concretes terms, might be possible.

Today, the Syrian Kurdish’ political and military actors — which are mainly the Democratic Union Party (“PYD”) and its armed-wing People's Protection Units (“YPG”), now organized through the Syrian Democratic Forces (“SDF”), control between 25 and 30 percent of Syrian territory, including areas with rich oil and gas reserves.⁵ These areas of Kurdish control, found in northern Syria, were unitarily declared autonomous by the PYD in

⁴ ALTAN, Adem. **The Kurds: The world’s largest stateless nation**. 'France 24'. 2015. Accessed 23/11/2018. <<https://www.france24.com/en/20150730-who-are-kurds-turkey-syria-iraq-pkk-divided>>.

⁵ SAID, Rodi. **Syria's Kurds hope for 'new state and system' via Assad talks**. 'Aljazeera'. Juin 2018. Accessed 01/12/2011. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/syria-kurds-hope-state-system-assad-talks-180728170524768.html>>.



2013, then including the three cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazire, calling it *Rojava* — which, in Kurdish, means Western Kurdistan — which were, afterwards, proclaimed Federation of Northern Syria in 2016.⁶ In this line, one can say that, in terms of today, these Syrian Kurds actors have achieved a *de facto* autonomy in such region.

But these developments didn't happen without well-know causes. Their roots encompasses the creation and the ascension of these Kurdish actors, the external influence of others, the 2011 Syrian uprisings, the creation of a coalition to fight ISIS in 2014,⁷ until today's current discussion regarding a possible Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. For a better understanding of these facts, it is important to trace its causes way back to the Kurdistan Workers' Party ("PKK")⁸ and its relation with the government of Turkey and Syria.

During deteriorated relations between the Syrian regime and Turkey over territorial questions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, — which includes Ankara's decision to build the Atatürk Dam on the Euphrates River in 1983, today under the control of SDF forces⁹ — the Syrian regime decided to initially shelter PKK as a "*potential card in a power play*"¹⁰ in Syrian territory, but only until Turkey's thread of military attack in 1998 and the 1999 Adana

⁶ SCHOTT, Anne Sofie. **The Kurds of Syria**. Royal Danish Defence College. June 2017.

⁷ ALJAZEERA. **Syria's civil war explained from the beginning**. April 2018. Accessed 02/12/2018. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>>.

⁸ Political and armed group acting in Turkey with the the initial aim of achieving a Kurdish independence. Considered as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU: HILTERMANN, Joost. **The Kurds Once Again Face American Abandonment YPG**. 'The Atlantic'. August 2018. Accessed 02/11/2018.

⁹ HALL, Richard. **Syria's Kurds prepare for a future without the US**. "The National". August 2018. Available in: <<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/syria-s-kurds-prepare-for-a-future-without-the-us-1.757187>>. Accessed 20/10/2018.

¹⁰ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. **Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle**. Report n° 136. January 2013. Available in: <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle>>. Accessed 19/10/2018. p. 12.



agreement between the two States.¹¹ This caused Syria to persecute PKK's actors, which caused the PKK to establish its headquarters in the Qandil mountain in northern Iraq.¹² Afterwards, PKK established the PYD as a political wing in Syria in 2003, benefiting from the support of the previous years.¹³ However, after the 2011 Syrian uprisings and Turkey's change of approach to become opposition regarding the regime, Syria chose to:

co-opt the PYD both to contain antiregime protests and, importantly, strengthen his leverage vis-à-vis Turkey by dangling the threat of an empowered PKK. For the PYD, this shifting landscape offered an opportunity to establish a strong presence in Syria [...] The PYD also has established a militia, the People's Defence Corps (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). It pre-existed the uprising; since then, however, it has functioned as a surrogate for the army, controlling the boundaries of majority-Kurd populated areas, as well as the areas bordering Iraqi Kurdistan and, most importantly, a large part of the border with Turkey.¹⁴

At that point, Salih Muslim, leader of PYD, who was seeking refuge with the PKK in Iraq, reportedly returned to Syria's Kurdish areas in April 2011.¹⁵ From this moment, the PYD-YPG would enhance their *de facto* power over the *Rojava* region, specially after the withdrawal of Syrian armed forces from the northern part of Syria in 2012, in order to

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. **Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy**. Report n° 108. December 2009. Available in: <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/reshuffling-cards-i-syria-s-evolving-strategy>>. Accessed 19/10/2018. p. 5-8.

¹³ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. **Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle**. *Op. Cit.* p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.



concentrate its troops in the south and center of its territory against the opposition,¹⁶ which caused the YPG to take control.

After important victories such as in Kobane in 2014-2015, and taking into consideration the general great support from the US-led international Western coalition against ISIS, the PYD-YPG, as the most important ally of such coalition in Syria, began to attain a relevant amount of military power and administrative control in the Syrian Kurdish northern conquered territories. Then, the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) were created in 2015, establishing its basis with the tacit tolerance of the Syrian regime, since the latter was concentrating its efforts against the rebels:

As the ideology of democratic confederalism does not promote nationalism or a specific ethnic agenda, but rather the opposite, it has been important for the PYD to show both the inhabitants of Rojava as well as external allies that non-Kurdish groups are part of the revolution to gain legitimacy. This has resulted in the creation of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM [...]) and, subsequently, in the formation of a multi-ethnic military force called the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) – an opportune move for the international coalition, which sponsored the creation of the SDF and thus tried to distance itself from the Kurdish cause in the struggle against the Islamic State.¹⁷

Such facts gave rise to a series of tensions that will be further analyzed in this paper, such as Syrian Kurdish internal political disputes — including accusations of the PYD as being on the Syrian regime's side — and between Turkey and SDF, considered by the Turkish government as wing of the PKK, and therefore threatening its territory, taking into consideration the proximity to its boundaries.

¹⁶ SCHOTT, Anne Sofie. **The Kurds of Syria**. *Op. Cit.* p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 17.



In this sense, these developments have led to the current situation being that the SDF, having been systematically backed by the US, NATO and generally the West in terms of financing and weaponry, attain today almost total control over northern Syria. In fact, the civil war and specially the fight against ISIS boosted the power of such Syrian Kurdish actors, which began to dream about the idea of a post-war solution including Kurdish formal autonomy.

However, after the regime's military and territorial retrieval, what can be seen today is that these Western "so-called allies" may not follow the same line of support when the issue concerns Kurdish autonomy. Syrian Kurds are feeling US abandonment regarding this question,¹⁸ and are tending to pursue a direct negotiation with Damascus,¹⁹ with ongoing talks.²⁰

Therefore, in light of these facts, this paper aims to examine *to what extent have the Syrian Kurds obtained strategic leverage towards their objective of achieving a de jure autonomous Kurdish region in Syria*. Firstly, it will analyze how the war in Syria and the Western support for the PYD-YPG and SDF enhanced Kurdish political and military power in the region, and also the underlying aspects of such support (Topic - 2.). Then, this paper discusses if and, if it is the case, why such a support would not also entail the backing, by such Western actors, of the Kurdish *de jure* autonomy pretensions, also assessing if a *de facto* autonomy would be sustainable (Topic - 3.). Finally, it presents its conclusive arguments

¹⁸ See, for instance, the US statement that it would withdraw its personnel from Syria: BROWNE, Ryan; STARR, Barbara. **Trump says US will withdraw from Syria 'very soon'**. 'CNN Politics'. Accessed 27/10/2018. <<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/29/politics/trump-withdraw-syria-pentagon/index.html>>.

¹⁹ HILTERMANN, Joost. **The Kurds Once Again Face American Abandonment YPG**. *Op. Cit.*

²⁰ COURT, Mireille; DEN HOND, Chris. **Rojava survives for now**. 'Le Monde Diplomatique'. December 2018. Accessed 01/12/2018. <<https://mondediplo.com/2018/12/03rojava>>.



about the state of the situation and possible measures to overcome of the conflict (Conclusion - 4.).

2. On one hand, the initial collapse of the Syrian regime and the use of the YPG and SDF as proxies for Western powers against ISIS boosted Kurdish territorial and geopolitical power in the region.

To better understand the role of the Syrian Kurds in the war in Syria, it is of foremost importance to rely on the fact that, since the 2011 uprisings, the Kurds harmoniously coexist with the regime in a tense relation of indirect animosity and tacit (or perhaps express) acceptance. For instance, since the beginning of the uprisings, the regime “*exploited the disunity of the opposition*” by establishing decrees that would meet some of the Kurdish claims, such as the granting of citizenship and the non-alienation of Kurdish territory areas.²¹

As the uprisings came to the shape of a organized rebellion, the regime then started to tacitly tolerate Kurdish control over the northern Syrian territory. In 2012, President Bashar al-Assad’s withdraw from north, leaving a vacuum filled and maintained by the PYD-YPG. Commentators usually agree on the idea of a tacit agreement²² between the regime, who would not attack *Rojava*, and the Syrian Kurdish actors, who would *de facto* control the area and would not fight the regime — and, also, suppress rebellions. Some sources even say this agreement was express, and not tacit.²³

²¹ SCHOTT, Anne Sofie. **The Kurds of Syria**. *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

²² *Ibid*, p. 17.

²³ ALJAZEERA. The Damascus Documents. March 2012. Accessed 03/12/2018.

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/2012319182523316314.html>>.



Therefore, the Syrian Kurdish actors managed to publicly control a piece territory without being attacked by the central government. This, however, were not the only factors leading to its military and political boost.

2.1. The SDF has obtained systematic support from the West and NATO in the fight against ISIS, even taking into consideration Turkey’s view of the YPG as a terrorist group.

Perhaps the main factor related to YPG and SDF military and territorial expansion relates directly to the fight against ISIS. An almost unconditional Western support supplied a great amount of weapons to Kurdish actors — mainly to the KDP in Iraq and also YPG. The YPG has received U.S. military largesse by armaments and training, enabling it to deal with the Islamic State within and even without Kurdish territories in Syria.²⁴ However, the fact is that such Kurdish actors, for several times, fought Western battles, and not the ones directly related to the Kurdish cause, with *“thousands of Kurdish lives lost and massive investments diverted from the development of Kurdish areas to recapturing areas of great concern to the United States”*.²⁵

The YPG and SDF were, in fact, used as proxies against ISIS, but also as a way to limit Al-Assad’s influence and, to a lesser extent, Iran pretensions on the region. Furthermore, Western support also comes — to a lesser extent — in terms of its sympathy for the Kurdish respect and promotion of democratic principles and human rights, inside the scope of the

²⁴ HILTERMANN, Joost; FANTAPPIE, Maria. **Twilight of the Kurds**. “Foreign Policy”. January 2018. Available in: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/16/twilight-of-the-kurds-iraq-syria-kurdistan/>>. Accessed 07/10/2018.

²⁵ *Ibid.*



Middle East. Democracy, protection of minority groups and internally displaced persons, and even women's rights²⁶ are principles that are promoted by the Kurds and welcomed by the West, taking into consideration that Kurds can influentiate their neighbors.

It must be considered, however, that such support is not unanimous. In this sense, there is an evident tension between, on one hand, NATO's and the US support for the SDF²⁷ and, on the other hand, Turkey's view of YPG as a branch of the "terrorist" PKK. At this point, some aspects must be taking into consideration. Firstly, Turkey, seen by PKK as terrorist, do not appreciate having an active and powerful paramilitary Syrian PKK's wing in the border of its territory. Also, to acknowledge a Kurdish region in another close territory could cause an avalanche effect regarding the issue of Kurdish autonomy inside Turkey. Thirdly, any military support for the YPG could entail a trade of arms and the consequent indirect support for the PKK. Therefore, what can be seen is that Turkey has been trying to strangle northern Syria economically²⁸ and even military,²⁹ and that such general Western support, although coming in great extent, still haven't found its full potential.

²⁶ See, for instance, Abdullah Ocalan's Democratic Confederalism, on which this Kurdish leader advocates, among other things, for women's rights. OCALAN, Abdullah. **Democratic Confederalism**. Transmedia Publishing Ltd, International Initiative Edition. 2011. p. 38.

²⁷ Such support, however, has not always been the case. Even the US initially was reluctant in helping the YPG. However, one can say that it realised that "*it did not matter whether these Kurdish fighters carried labels such as 'terrorists' [...] they were the only party stopping IS.*": THORNTON, Rod. **Problems with the Kurds as proxies against Islamic State: insights from the siege of Kobane**. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 26:6, 865-885. 2015.

²⁸ HILTERMANN, Joost; FANTAPPIE, Maria. **Twilight of the Kurds**. *Op. Cit.*

²⁹ See, for instance, the capture of the city of Afrin by the Turks in March 2018: CHULOV Martin; SHAHEEN, Kareem. **Nothing is ours anymore': Kurds forced out of Afrin after Turkish assault**. 'The Guardian'. June 2018. Accessed 03/12/2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/too-many-strange-faces-kurds-fear-forced-demographic-shift-in-afrin>>.



2.2. Therefore, the SDF has generally obtained great territorial and strategic gains in northern Syria.

Although the existence of some tension regarding Turkey and the PKK, the YPG and the SDF managed to maintain and conquer a great range of territorial gains in Syria. Since the beginning of the Syrian war, YPG and, later, the SDF, with the help of the international coalition, had critical victories in cities such Raqqa,³⁰ Kobane³¹ and Manjib,³² and have gain control of much of the territory east of the Euphrates from ISIS.³³ These territories are known to be rich in oil and gas, including oil fields of Al-Omar³⁴ and Tanak.³⁵

It is important to highlight, however, the existence of some setbacks regarding territorial control of the SDF. For instance, the city of Afrin, taken by the YPG in 2012, was bombed and captured by the Turkish military, with the idea that “*the people of Afrin didn't*

³⁰ ENSOR, Josie. **US-backed Syrian Kurds meet with regime for first time in hope of protecting territory.** 'The Telegraph'. October 2017. Accessed 18/10/2018. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/27/us-backed-syrian-kurds-meet-regime-first-time-hope-preserve/>>.

³¹ LETSCH, Constanze; HAWRAMY, Fazel. **Kurdish forces take control of Syrian town of Kobani.** January 2015. Accessed in 01/12/2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/26/kurdish-forces-take-control-kobani-syria>>.

³² BBC NEWS. **Syrie : les habitants de Manjib célèbrent la libération.** August 2016. Accessed 27/11/2018. <<https://www.bbc.com/afrique/monde-37071200>>. However, note that, by an agreement between the US and Turkey, the administration of the village is with the Manbij Military Council: FRANCE 24. **Kurdish forces to withdraw from Syria's Manbij under US-Turkey deal.** June 2016. Accessed 19/11/2018. <<https://www.france24.com/en/20180606-manbij-militia-kurdish-ypg-syria-turkey-usa-assad>>.

³³ ALJAZEERA. **Syria: SDF reclaim territory hours after government capture.** April 2018. Accessed 28/11/2018. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-sdf-reclaim-territory-hours-government-capture-180429184747155.html>>.

³⁴ DW. **US-backed SDF captures Syria's largest oil field from 'Islamic State'.** October 2017. Accessed 30/11/2018. <<https://www.dw.com/en/us-backed-sdf-captures-syrias-largest-oil-field-from-islamic-state/a-41066879>>.

³⁵ PARASKOVA, Tsvetana. **Syria's Second-Biggest Oil Field Is Operational Again.** 'Oil Price'. August 2018. Accessed 30/11/2018. <<https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Syrias-Second-Biggest-Oil-Field-Is-Operational-Again.html>>.



choose to live under the PKK”, allegedly imposing a kurdish-arab demographic shift by Turkey.³⁶ Also, Turkey has been currently allegedly shelling SDF positions.³⁷ Such actions serve to demonstrate how the Turkish government may react regarding YPG’s control and conquering of territories and cities close to Turkey’s borders, and also to show that the US relatively inactive behaviour, which only interfered to prevent Turkey to further conquering Manbij.^{38 39}

In general terms, nonetheless, by not attacking the Syrian regime and serving as proxy for the international coalition against ISIS, the SDF managed to obtain great international support and a consequent territorial control over great part of northern Syria, achieving today, after the rebellion’s setbacks and the following regime’s rebirth, a *de facto* control over such portion of the Syrian territory. However, such situation doesn’t seem to be sustainable. ISIS has today negligible territory — even though it is somewhat active as insurgent force⁴⁰ — and the Syrian regime regains territory and power day by day, having in fact almost won the civil war:

³⁶ SHAHEEN, Kareem. **Nothing is ours anymore': Kurds forced out of Afrin after Turkish assault.** *Op. Cit.*

³⁷ REUTERS. **U.S. forces patrol border between north Syria and Turkey: SDF. November 2018.** Accessed 02/12/2018. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-forces-patrol-border-between-north-syria-and-turkey-sdf-idUSKCN1N71S4>>.

³⁸ AL JAZEERA NEWS. **Syria's Kurds hope for 'new state and system' via Assad talks.** July 2018. Available in: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/syria-kurds-hope-state-system-assad-talks-180728170524768.html>>. Accessed on 12/10/2018.

³⁹ Note that, however, there is evidence of Turkish-backed armed groups shelling positions of the Manbij Military Council: VAN WILGENBURG, Wladimir. **Turkish-backed groups shell Manbij despite US-Turkish joint patrols: Monitor.** 'Kurdistan 24'. November 2018. Accessed 01/12/2018. <<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2c562d7e-5571-4a06-b826-8bb2c5b00fdd>>.

⁴⁰ THE NEW YORK TIMES. **Dozens Dead in Eastern Syria After Clashes with Islamic State.** October 2018. Accessed 29/10/2018. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/world/middleeast/syria-islamic-state.html>>



With the support of Tehran, Hezbollah, and in particular, Moscow, Assad's rotten regime has stayed entrenched [...] First, Assad won his war to stay in power. Granted, he rules a challenging, fragile, and fragmented Syria; one where violence will not cease in the coming years [...] Surely the regime in Damascus will seek to regain control over all of Syria, but doing so will be a difficult and costly effort [...] The roles of Russia, Iran, and Turkey—and their increasing collaboration—stand out. Both Moscow and Tehran's use of force in Syria is heinous.⁴¹

For this reason, on a situation of almost post-war, the Syrian Kurds must ask themselves what they want to do, to have, and to achieve. This will be perhaps the most critical and tense period of the conflict. Not because of military combats, but because of the necessary tactics and strategies that must be implemented and negotiated.

For the Kurds, their *de facto* control over their territory does not seem to be sustainable in a long term. In other words, in little time, the Syrian government, after having defeated its rebellious enemies, could come to take back northern Syria, and it would definitely have support from important international actors such as Iran and Turkey. For this reason, it is of utmost importance for the Syrian Kurds to, taking into consideration their current territorial, political and military power, negotiate on a good-faith basis with Damascus, but also seeking international support. However, such a support seems to be below expected, for the reasons that will be laid down in the next topic.

⁴¹ KARLIN, Mara. **After 7 years of war, Assad has won in Syria. What's next for Washington?.** 'Brookings'. February 2018. Accessed 13/10/2018. <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/after-7-years-of-war-assad-has-won-in-syria-whats-next-for-washington/>>



3. On the other hand, such support from the West did not necessarily entail a backing of the Syrian Kurds will of autonomy.

3.1. The alliance between Syrian Kurds actors and Western Powers has never achieved the level of a long-term military and diplomatic support.

Although the alliance between the YPG and the international coalition fighting ISIS consisted of a substantive military support, it never became a long-term strategic engagement. First of all, it was because the YPG (and later the SDF) consisted, in fact, only as proxies for the Western powers, who did not want to bring its own soldiers to the conflict and incur in human costs:

Proxy warfare has been defined as the ‘indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties to influence its strategic outcome’. It is a type of warfare that involves a sponsor (normally a state) employing a proxy (either a sub-state actor or a state smaller than the sponsor) to, basically, do much of its fighting for it. It has been described as ‘warfare on the cheap’. The basic premise is that if the strategic interests of both sponsor and proxy align then they may as well act in concert.⁴²

The problem is that, as proxies, having been used to contain ISIS, after ISIS fall, these Western powers would have a normal tendency to halt support for the Syrian Kurdish actors. Also, it is important to take into account the fact that the Kurds are not considered ideal proxies, since they represent an heterogeneous amount of actors with different political views, in the sense that that is no guarantee that, by providing arms to the YPG, these arms would not come to the PKK or to other group considered as undesirable.

⁴² THORNTON, Rod. **Problems with the Kurds as proxies against Islamic State: insights from the siege of Kobane.** *Op. cit.*



Furthermore, the greater the territorial gains made by the Kurds in northern Syria beyond the Kurdish cantons, the greater the apprehension among US allies, specially Turkey.⁴³ For instance, Erdogan has expressed the view that pushing across northern Syria “could lead to the creation of a structure that threatens our borders”.⁴⁴

In this notion, the “alliance” between the West and PYD-YPG and SDF were, in fact, a coordination based on a utilization as proxies, with all its consequences. One could say that it consists more of a short-term tactical alliance than an actual long-term military and political support.

However, it is impossible to deny that the Syrian Kurds got encouraged with their *de facto* situation, and nevertheless dreamed about autonomy. However, they have been suffering a setback. Since the fight against ISIS begin to come to an end, the West seems to have simply withdraw all kind of support, without backing any kind of Kurdish claims for autonomy towards the regime.⁴⁵ In fact, the US had long opposed changes to the Middle East’s borders, fearing “*setting off an unstoppable domino effect*”,⁴⁶ and seems to still do. Such a behaviour, however, did not arise without Kurdish complaints.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ GULF TIMES. **Thousands flee as Kurds near IS-held Syria town.** June 2015. Accessed 04/10/2018. <<https://www.gulf-times.com/story/443305/Thousands-flee-as-Kurds-near-IS-held-Syria-town>>.

⁴⁵ HILTERMANN, Joost; FANTAPPIE, Maria. **Twilight of the Kurds.** *Op. cit.*

⁴⁶ THORNTON, Rod. **Problems with the Kurds as proxies against Islamic State: insights from the siege of Kobane.** *Op. cit.*

⁴⁷ See, for instance, the testimony of Ilham Ahmed, a senior Kurdish official in the SDF’s political wing, stating that the Kurds felt “*let down*” concerning US recent behaviours regarding SDF backing. FRANCIS, Ellen. **Wary of U.S. ally, Syrian Kurds look to Damascus for talks.** “Reuters”. July 2018. Available in: <<[>>](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/wary-of-u-s-ally-syrian-kurds-look-to-damascus-for-talks-idUSKBN1KF2NN/). Accessed on 12/10/2018.



3.2. Western powers still oppose the idea of a Kurdish independence and do not tend to support an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria without Assad's acquiescence, although their *de facto* support made such autonomy a reality.

Even after the changing of the aim of the PKK and PYD-YPG, from the creation of a independent Kurdistan to the gaining of autonomy in the Kurdish cantons of all States they are located — with the political and economic cooperation of these regions regions, following the idea of “democratic confederalism” brought by PKK ideological leader, Abdullah Ocalan⁴⁸ — the idea still seem not to be supported by the main Western powers.

One thing seems to be, because it was necessary to contain ISIS, give some territorial control to the Syrian Kurds as a side effect of a proxy support. Another completely thing seems to be, from this point, support, from a *de facto* territorial control, a *de jure* autonomous region inside Syria. At this point, other problems come into perspective.

First, there is an evident distinction between the political aims of the Syrian Kurdish political and military actors, such as PYD-YPG, and the will of Syrian Kurds as a whole. These groups, even though publicly defending democratic principles,⁴⁹ are considered to tolerate zero opposition, and part of the Syrian Kurdish people object to their exercise of power, collusion with PKK and the making of war profiteers from oil revenues.⁵⁰

Also, internal Kurdish disputes difficult any kind of arrangement. For instance, Iraq Kurdish parties, such as the Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), are hostile to YPG. KDP even gathered rival Kurdish factions under the Kurdish National Council

⁴⁸ OCALAN, Abdullah. **Democratic Confederalism**. *Op cit*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ THE KURDISH PROJECT. **Democracy in Kurdistan**. <<<https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-democracy/>>>. Accessed on 15/10/2018.

⁵⁰ HILTERMANN, Joost; FANTAPPIE, Maria. **Twilight of the Kurds**. *Op. cit*.



(KNC), in order to be rival with YPG. In fact, the KNC accuses the YPG of being an instrument of the Syrian regime.⁵¹

In light of this, the Syrian Kurds, in order to claim their autonomy, would perhaps have to demonstrate that they can achieve a certain level of internal agreement and also that they can construct and maintain long-term political, legal, and social functioning institutions, such as continuing setting up civil and political councils.

However, faced with no US — and, generally, the West — backing for a autonomous northern Syria, the Kurds are beginning to prepare a future — and future negotiations with Damascus — without the US. There are already existing negotiation meetings and also signs of approximation, such as in the project of jointly run the dam on the Euphrates River and to let Syrian government officials collect the bodies of Syrian soldiers in Raqqa.⁵² The strategy for the Kurds, which consider themselves stronger and at a high position to negotiate now, seems to be *“agreeing to a deal while the US still has forces in Syria [...] the longer the civil councils and decentralised system they created operate, the harder it will be to remove them”*.⁵³ Riad Darar, co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (‘SDC’) — the political wing of the SDF — expressed the view that the Kurds do not have coordination with the US in these negotiations and that, to achieve autonomy, the SDF would be even willing to return the non-Kurdish lands:

⁵¹ SCHOTT, Anne Sofie. *The Kurds of Syria*. *Op. Cit.* p. 17.

⁵² HALL, Richard. *Syria's Kurds prepare for a future without the US*. *Op. Cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*



We run these areas [under SDC control] [...] secure, peaceful and stable. The main objective of these talks is to work together towards a new, democratic, decentralised Syria with a new system and a new form. [...] One day, we want to return them to a Syrian state and not to the Syrian regime.[...] only [...] once we are done with setting up a new state, a new system that we will build all together through negotiations. [...] We do not have political coordination with the US; our decision to move ahead with these talks is independent.

However, the question remain as to whether the Syrian regime will enter into negotiations and abide from recovering Syrian territory from the Kurds and establishing again a centralised State. Bashar al-Assad has been inflexible and has repeatedly announced his intention to reclaim “*every inch of Syrian territory*”.⁵⁴ Are the regime just buying time for it to recover from the war? These aspects need to be considered by the Syrian Kurdish actors when negotiating with the regime.

Also, one main point regarding such possible accord is Turkey's role, which opposes the maintenance YPG on its boundaries. Turkey, as an important geopolitical and military actor in the region — see the conquering of Afrin, v.g., — have an important place in these negotiations. It can certainly, using its influence, prevent any kind of agreement regarding Syrian Kurdish autonomy with the Syrian regime, so it would be advisable for the Syrian Kurdish actors to also invite Turkey for negotiation and, more than this, propose a deal that do not threat Erdogan's government. Also, other regime's important allies must be considered in this calculation, specially Russia — which in fact do not antagonize the Kurds, having even sometimes proposed a federal solution to Syria and pushed to include the PYD in peace talks⁵⁵ — and Iran and Hezbollah.

⁵⁴ HILTERMANN, Joost. **The Kurds Once Again Face American Abandonment YPG.** *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁵ SCHOTT, Anne Sofie. **The Kurds of Syria.** *Op. Cit.*



For this reason, in order to prevent further conflict inside Syria, all actions must be previously measured. There is no simple resolution for this equation. In this notion, this paper will now present some conclusive arguments and possible solutions.

4. Conclusion.

The current situation of SDF's territorial and military power is stable and the best in years. This might be perhaps the most well-founded occasion for the Syrian Kurdish actors to dream about autonomy. They possess a great range of Syrian northern territory, rich in oil, and are governing it in a relatively satisfactory way, at least in terms of stability. ISIS, even though still resisting as a insurgent force and doing attacks, is being wiped out. The regime today is regaining power and territory but probably would not consider as advisable to begin another conflict with the Kurds if such situation could be resolved in a good way for both sides.

However, Kurds only possess *de facto* control over northern Syria. Such control is not internationally legally recognized, nor it is by the Syrian State. The fact is that, at any point, the regime could start a campaign to take back its territories, and it certainly has military power to do so, specially with international support from major actors such as Russia, Turkey and Iran. The West, seeing that ISIS is being defeated, seems to be progressively pulling out from Syria, without backing the Kurds claims.

Thus, the question that raises is whether the Kurds have, throughout the years, obtained the necessary political and military leverage to support such will of autonomy.

It is important to constat some factors that could diminish such a leverage: (i) the Syrian Kurds actors did not conclude, throughout the war in Syria, comprehensible *long-term*



alliances with major international actors, which would entail political support in domains outside the fight against ISIS; (ii) no relevant major international actor directly supports Kurdish autonomy; (iii) YPG is still considered unwelcomed by Turkey; and (iv) the US has expressed the view that it may withdraw from Syria, and that it doesn't necessarily support the Kurdish claims.

In this sense, even though these Syrian Kurdish actors are not claiming independence, contrary to Massoud Barzani in Iraq, the US — and, generally the West — support for the Kurdish autonomy cause still do not seem to be strategic for them.

On one hand, committing to support an autonomous *Rojava* could enhance Western influence inside a hypothetical Syrian federal State, and in the Middle-East generally. Also, it could serve as a spot for halting terrorist migration from Iraq and for maintaining its stability closely. On the other hand — and these seem to be the critical factors — the direct support for an autonomous *Rojava* might be too much of a political commitment, taking into considerations the long-term consequences of such support, such as maintaining a permanent state of alliance and protection, which the actors may not be ready nor willing to do so. Also, to support an autonomous *Rojava* would be also to support a specific political actor (PYD-YPG and SDF), and not the Kurdish people as a whole. Finally, it would also diminish their influence with regional allies such as Turkey.

In light of this, the Kurds, in the probable event that they do not find US direct support for Kurdish autonomy in a possible future post-war agreement regarding the structure of the future Syrian State, these Syrian Kurdish actors would have to continue dealing directly with Damascus. Even though they seem to have enough leverage to conduct negotiations, it seems that their best strategy would be not to ward off the US, but in fact to use its possible indirect



support of the Kurdish autonomy cause. In other words, to make use of the cards of the game that are in the backstage.

For that, it is of the utmost importance to urge the US — who does not want the Syrian regime to clash against SDF, prolonging the conflict — to maintain its troops in *Rojava*, providing the Kurds with the “*time, space, and security to reach an arrangement with Damascus until a final agreement is achieved*”⁵⁶ — gaining military leverage, and not necessarily affecting US relations with Turkey. Also, seeking a Russian support or, at least, neutrality to the issue of Kurdish autonomy, could also play a major role in such negotiations.

Finally, the Kurds should make it clear that any arrangement regarding the post-war in Syria without their participation would not provide Syria with long-term stability. This of course includes the matter concerning current tension with Turkey, in the sense that the US must act to create a level of cooperation and understanding between Turkey and the Kurds, in order for that, after US withdrawal, no clashes happen. Furthermore, the Astana peace talks, which excluded the SDF and only invited the KNC,⁵⁷ are reported not to have agreed on the composition of a UN-backed constitutional committee.⁵⁸

A good deal for the Kurds could be achieving an area “*of self administration in exchange for Damascus getting access to resources such as water, wheat, and oil*”,⁵⁹ with

⁵⁶ HILTERMANN, Joost. **The Kurds Once Again Face American Abandonment** YPG. *Op. Cit*

⁵⁷ GORAN, Baxtiyar Goran. **WATCH: Kurds find home in Astana**. 'Kurdistan 24'. January 2017. Accessed 01/12/2018. <<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/868fd6ce-5121-458c-b299-446624200c60/WATCH--Kurds-find-home-in-Astana->>.

⁵⁸ ALJAZEERA. **Astana talks: UN envoy to Syria rues 'missed opportunity'**. November 2018. Accessed 03/12/2018. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/astana-talks-envoy-syria-rues-missed-opportunity-181129140620716.html>>.

⁵⁹ HALL, Richard. **Syria's Kurds prepare for a future without the US**. *Op. Cit.*



economic and territorial integration. Such a idea is not impossible. The Syrian Kurds possess the majority of Syrian oil fields and the regime will not give it up, since it needs a financial basis for the reconstruction of its cities. Also, if the Kurds are handed with *de jure* autonomy, they would not have to use the oil field as a financial and political leverage to keep supporting such a right. In this notion, the Kurds would have to assess what are their true critical goals.

In the meantime, the Kurds must maintain the development of their administrative institutions in *Rojava* in order to show that they can govern themselves. A post-war agreement on this basis is definitely possible and seems to be the best solution for a long-term peaceful Syria.

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