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The Kurdish-Turkish Quandary: Foreign Intervention, Proxy Warfare
and Limited Resources

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Dedication Page

I dedicate this work to everyone who believes that learning is a continuous process that has no limits, and that we grow by knowledge and experience rather than age. I also dedicate this to everyone that lacks belief in the importance of their ideas and how much their ideas can evolve. It is not the beginning or the end that counts, but rather the process which we go through. And last but not least, I dedicate this work to the academics, scholars, and researchers that are true connectors who seek to shed light on the various underlying aspects of controversial issues rather than taking bias sides.

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The Kurdish-Turkish Quandary: Foreign Intervention, Proxy Warfare and Limited Resources

Ghida Itani

Abstract

While the manifestation of the PKK-Turkish rivalry in the trans-national Syrian conflict poses many questions, this thesis investigates an even more quizzical dimension of the Syrian proxy-warfare which is the PYD and YPG's (both offshoots of the PKK) relations with the U.S.A and Russia. This thesis is distinctive in its approach towards Kurds as a minority group integrated into the fractions of various parties and extensions. It provides answers for questions regarding how alliances, resources, and actions are taking place in Syria's proxy war. The evidence provided shows the compatibility of proxy warfare theory through the contribution of the various parties in the ongoing Syrian conflict. The exploration of this thesis also highlights possible options which might help the involved Kurdish groups to divert from proxy warfare to a certain extent. Thus, the results of this thesis will highlight prospects that have not been covered as yet regarding the Kurdish groups' involvement in the Syrian proxy warfare such as the conversion of the Kurdish question and the impact of the recent elected U.S. President Biden on a potential course-correction in the Kurds' trajectory.

keywords: Kurds, PKK, PYD, YPG, Turkey, Syria, U.S., Russia, Alliances, Resources, Proxy warfare, Conflict, Options

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List of Acronyms

<i>Acronym</i>	Meaning
<i>PKK</i>	Kurdistan Worker's Party
<i>PYD</i>	Democratic Union Party
<i>YPG</i>	People's Protection Units
<i>YPJ</i>	Women's Protection Units
<i>SDF/ QASAD</i>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<i>ISIS</i>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
<i>KRG</i>	Kurdistan Regional Government
<i>KNC</i>	Kurdish National Council
<i>PJAK</i>	Kurdistan Free Life Party
<i>PCDK</i>	Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party
<i>HPG</i>	People's Protection Forces

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Overview

With the end of World War I, and the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Middle Eastern national groups vying for self-determination resulted in the proliferation of new national entities (BBC News, 2019). Many Arab-speaking polities—once considered culturally-distinct pockets in the Ottoman empire—now enjoyed special political recognition under European mandate: either French or British. Many of these polities made the transformation to independent states by the end of World War II. British partition of historic Palestine in 1947 also introduced the state of Israel surrounded by Arab counterparts (now hosting Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan) by 1948 (Khalidi, 2006). Yet, the Kurds as a sizeable ethnic group in the Middle East with culturally specific characteristics received no state during this self-determination process that redrew state borders throughout the region. Aside from their self-autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq, the Kurds cohabit regions in Iran, Syria and Turkey with a plurality of ethnic groups (ISDP, 2016). Their status in these countries, short of cultural recognition, contribute to conflict aggravation.

Despite their ostracization from Middle Eastern politics, the Kurds enjoy enormous political plurality as a distinct communal group. Various Kurdish nationalist groups emerged to resist Turkish oppression, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK) which is a Marxist militant nationalist organization founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1974 (ISPI, 2016). Ocalan was responsible for triggering the use of violence by PKK against Turkey as of 1978. Upscaling the magnitude of the conflict reflects the Kurds' aspiration for an independent state. The PKK's goal of Kurdish statehood places them on a collision course with several regional states. PKK affiliates in Syria, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), engage in the regional conflict. The YPG and PYD are considered as affiliates of the PKK since they have originated from it to a certain extent and have various similar characteristics such as the ambition of achieving autonomous statehood. Yet, they differ from PKK in their political strategies and stances with other Kurdish groups, and other players involved within the Syrian warfare.

The protracted intrastate Kurdish-Turkish conflict has evolved into a transnational conflict which involves the U.S.A and Russia. Both major powers are in alliance with YPG and PYD and assist them by providing financial support and military aid. The assistance and support offered by U.S.A and Russia underlies many obstacles and speculations. At the same time, the contribution of PKK's affiliates within the Syrian proxy warfare has reflected on PKK and its stance. Ultimately, it has reflected on the Kurdish question for independence as a whole while having to deal with the growing oppositional stance against Turkey.

1.2 Aims

This thesis aims to explore the role of the PKK and its affiliates in conflict aggravation by analyzing their repertoire of contention, mobilization of resources and selection of regional and international alliances to support their cause. In doing so, it

grounds an understanding of the factors influencing these Kurdish groups' warfare. It seeks to uncover whether their participation in proxy warfare results from having limited resources, a conscious effort to shield against the conventional tactics of the Turkish army, or perhaps a tactic rooted in various battle-ground considerations designed to amplify their impact in Turkish decision-making circles.

Accordingly, this thesis demonstrates how the Kurdish groups' restricted abilities of allocating already limited resources renders U.S. and Russia's support indispensable. This predicament impacts the Kurdish groups' actions and influences their strategic options. Shifting away from reliance on foreign support will depend on the availability of viable alternatives to U.S and Russian military aid and financial support.

As such, this thesis explores the Kurdish groups' proxy warfare drivers. It will illuminate whether Kurdish groups consciously opt for proxy warfare as an effective strategy against the Turkish army or remain committed to this strategy by means of foreign incentives. In doing so, it uncovers how Kurdish participation in combating ISIS, the Turkish army, and compromising the Syrian state's hegemonic territorial control converges and/or diverges with the U.S.A and Russia's interests in Syria across different timeframes.

While this thesis recognizes the enormous costs associated with the struggle against Turkey, it attempts to explain their impact on the Kurdish quest for independence. It explores whether human casualties prevent or encourage diplomatic overtures between Kurds and Turkey. It also explores the impact of proxy warfare on international recognition, the possibility of having Kurdish territorial autonomous independence.

1.3 Research Questions

The Kurdish-Turkish conflict evolved beyond its initial medium and has emerged into other states. This emergence denotes the shift from an intrastate conflict into a transnational conflict which has later nurtured proxy war within Syria. Proxy warfare exists upon attaining certain underlying aspects that must be fulfilled. The various aspects explored within this case are the distinct roles of involved actors and parties while bearing various actions and costs.

In order to draw a better understanding of how proxy warfare takes place within the realm of Syria and the involvement of PKK's affiliates while having international support from U.S. and Russia, this thesis tackles the following research questions:

- How have the alliances, resources, and actions of the PKK's affiliates, PYD and YPG, contributed to their direct involvement in the Syrian proxy warfare while indirectly affecting PKK's stance against Turkey?
- To what extent are the Kurdish groups capable of contemplating alternative options to proxy warfare or are their options heavily influenced by their participation in proxy-warfare?
- How does the Syrian proxy warfare affect the Kurdish quest for autonomy as driven by the PKK and its affiliates?

1.4 Hypothesis

This thesis hypothesizes that a vague link exists within Kurdish groups between the PYD and the YPG with the PKK, but it is purposefully obscured or hidden because of proxy warfare dynamics. Such a relationship among Kurdish groups on the one hand

and the relationship between these Kurdish groups and the United States and Russia on the other hand, are heavily influenced by the mere nature of proxy dynamics.

This thesis proposes that due to the limited resources and the restricted options of these Kurdish groups, they find themselves in an internal and external dependency relationship. This dependency relationship often has the Kurdish groups of the PYD and the YPG dismissing their relationship with the PKK in order to receive the funding and support from the US primarily and Russia, since the PKK is designated by the U.S. and other foreign powers as a terrorist organization.

The dialectics of this dependency relationship capture the Kurdish groups in an eternal dilemma of receiving their security, autonomy, and resources on the one hand, and remaining proxy actors on the other. Therefore, this thesis argues that the separation from the leader actors who are the dominating actors can often be quite unrealizable even though the Kurds might be tempted to seek alternative options.

1.5 Literature Review

This literature review starts by identifying the key words and descriptions that are related to the Syrian proxy warfare. It identifies what a proxy environment is and what the proxy warfare is. Then, the focus shifts towards the direct explanation of the case of the Syrian proxy warfare as far as the leading players and the agent players while explaining what model this relationship is based on. It clarifies how their roles have taken place in accordance with their self-interests and its broader projection. Thus, this leads to discussing each party and actors' role within the Syrian proxy warfare with respect to other participants as well.

The literature review is divided to two parts: the theoretical literature and the empirical framework. The theoretical literature highlights the research questions and beliefs embodied within the targeted research study (Brewton, n.d.). It indicates how the theory of proxy warfare helps in elucidating the intertwined aspects of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and the Syrian plight. On the other hand, the empirical framework includes the already existing work of research related to the prospective research study (Begun, 2018). It projects the Kurdish-Turkish conflict along with the preceding literature focused on the Syrian conflict and the involved parties. The aim of this literature review is to show the importance of examining the YPG and PYD's role as affiliates of PKK contributing within the Syrian proxy war to dismantle alternative resource strategies and actions. Also, it aims to highlight the effect of their contribution to the Syrian proxy warfare on PKK's stance against Turkey and the Kurdish question for independence.

The statehood of Syria is challenged by the non-state actors involved within the Syrian conflict. These challenges are specifically addressed in the liberal-pluralist paradigm of statehood within the theory of international affairs (Geeraerts, 1995). The non-state actors in this case are the PYD and YPG as Kurdish groups within Syria along with other groups involved such as the SDF, Free Syrian Army, and ISIS. The PYD and YPG are extensions of the PKK which is a non-state actor that is indirectly affected. Similarly, Kristina Kausch tries to explain how state and non-state actors in the Middle East might get involved within states (Kamel, 2017). She gives the example of ISIS as a non-state actor contributing to the Syrian conflict. Yet, clarifying the contribution of

PYD and YPG as non-state actors in Syria by referring to the liberal-pluralist paradigm of challenging statehood needs further consideration.

Nonetheless, others might identify the case presented within this thesis as being related to defying state sovereignty or even state security. The liberal theory within international relations focuses on the state as being sovereign especially while dealing with conflicts (Thomson, 1995). The sovereignty of Syria has been challenged by non-state actors ever since the Syrian conflict started. Also, security issues might greatly evolve because of non-state armed actors which challenge the state (Owen IV, 2017). The security concerns that are caused by the PYD and YPG as non-state armed actors are linked to the areas they control in the Northeastern part of Syria and how that might affect other areas in Syria or its borders. However, the PYD and YPG would not have managed to maintain their control over these areas or might not have been capable of keeping up the fights they have been part of within Syria, without the assistance they received from the U.S. and Russia. Therefore, exploring the challenges facing the liberal paradigm of statehood by non-state actors is not enough to uncover the underlying attributions of having the PYD and YPG involved within the Syrian conflict.

The use of the proxy warfare theory within this thesis is vital for clarifying the diverse entangled aspects and complex attributions. It helps in identifying the role of the PKK and its affiliates, and the U.S. and Russia, as players involved within this complex quarrel. Upon addressing each party's role, the breakdown of proxy warfare theory shows how leader parties and agent actors' interests overlap. It reveals the importance of PKK's affiliates having options and strategies to re-establish matters related to resources, alliances, and actions taken within this framework. Nonetheless, the proxy

warfare theory assists in understanding the whole ongoing complex situation and further upcoming prospects.

Daniel L. Byman states that “proxy war occurs when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing a party to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself” (Byman, 2018). The major powers entangled in the Syrian proxy warfare are U.S. and Russia. The parties which are supported and directed are the PKK and other Kurdish groups that serve U.S. and Russia’s interests of proxy war utility.

In order to understand the basics of proxy warfare theory, we must first understand the basis of having Syria as a proxy habitat. As Amos C. Fox proposes, “a proxy environment is defined as an environment characterized by two or more actors working towards a common objective.” (Fox A. C., 2019). In other words, Syria is a place that has differing players on its grounds while being keen on attaining interests that may overlap. The existence of a proxy environment within Syria paves the way towards the formation of the Syrian proxy warfare. Thus, the case of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict’s spill over Syria as a proxy environment proclaims the existence of relative relationships with players that are involved and interested in Syria such as the U.S.A and Russia. Correspondingly, the theory of proxy warfare aims to differentiate between parties that are leaders such as U.S. and Russia, and other parties that serve as agents within a proxy environment (Fox A. C., 2019). The leader parties work for their own interests while using their extremities of power to lure other actors into being their agents. Even though Amos C. Fox mentions that proxy wars are present, yet he clarifies

that the U.S. army itself has no clear identification and announcement of using it as a strategy of war.

The U.S.A and Russia have managed to gain PKK and other Kurdish groups' alliance by offering them financial support and military aid. The Kurdish groups' limited allocation of resources forces them to seek U.S. and Russia's assistance. Since the leading parties initially show no clear evidence of their proposed self-biased intentions, it appears later in forms of proxy wars such as in the case of Syria. Ultimately, the costs are carried by agent actors rather than the leading parties.

Although several authors have agreed to the concept of having a leading actor and an agent actor within the theory of proxy warfare, yet the approaches of explanation have varied. The Syrian conflict is viewed from the aspect of having regional and global powers such as U.S. and Russia contributing to proxy warfare by offering financial support and armament support. Oguz and Celik's focus is on the involvement of foreign global powers and how they were using an agent actor such as Daesh to face their military opponents indirectly (Oguz & Celik, 2018). They differentiate between the initial phase of Syrian conflict that was a classic proxy war and how its nature has become a more complex military-entangled conflict.

Proxy warfare theory has been also discussed from a state-centric approach that has dealt with the various dilemmas of the principal-agent theory (Wirtz, 2020). Wirtz' book review of Tyrone Groh's book, *In Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, highlights how proxy warfare might serve states' interests and what are the four types of proxy wars. These four types include the following: “in it to win it”; (2) seeking a “holding action” to maintain the status quo; (3) “meddling” to cheaply alter the status quo; or (4)

attempting to “feed the chaos””. Hence, proxy warfare theory in this case is conceptualized with a direct focus on states’ wants from a realist perspective.

The proxy warfare theory does not only hold qualitative-based explanations, it may also carry explanations which depend on economic background. Proxy wars can be based on competition between states and the capability of maintaining sustainability (Konyukhovskiy & Grigoriadis, 2018). This explanation is focused on the principle-agent theory, but it is greatly dependent on the calculations of the possible costs such as win or defeat while considering the possible dilemmas. The approach measures the victory or loss of states based on economic measures. Hence, this helps in measuring the intensity of the proxy conflict while considering the states’ benefits with regard to their agents.

However, this thesis’ approach towards proxy warfare theory is different from the previous discussed analysis since it adds to both the theoretical and the empirical framework. It realizes the existence of a dominant actor and an agent actor, while focusing on examining the underlying relationship between them. The exploration of the relative relationship between both actors is dependent on alliances, resources, actions, and costs. Therefore, this thesis draws a clear path regarding how the dominant and agent actors get entangled in a proxy relationship. This approach opens the door towards seeking alternative strategies and outcomes.

Various strands of literature convey the instigation of the conflict between PKK and Turkey. RAND corporation offers a study on the framework and type of this conflict (RAND corporation, 2017). Nimet Berikier-Atiyas mentions in his article that the Kurdish-Turkish conflict’s initiation into a violent armed conflict by PKK falls under the call for cultural, political, and territory rights combined (Berikier-Atiyas, 1997). He

claims that 1984 was a turning point that has led to the ongoing violent struggle between PKK and Turkey. Rebekah Bragg declares in her paper that the longed goal to be achieved by PKK is the establishment of Kurdistan as an independent recognized state (Bragg, 2013). She discusses Kurdish national autonomy and self-determination options. She also mentions that the struggle between PKK and Turkey has had lots of costs and damages such as having up to 40,000 death cases and home losses.

As mentioned by the Institute for Security and Peace development, the acts of violence tended to rise several times during the ongoing conflict between the Kurds and Turkey, yet they have managed to reach a ceasefire agreement in the year 2013 (ISDP, 2016). This report tends to highlight how the warfare strategies have differed after the cease fire agreement had collapsed and the casualties that took place afterwards. Several strands of literature try to understand what happened during the outbreak of the 2015 ceasefire and what went wrong in the proclaimed peace process. Diverse opinions in the literature agree that the PKK's peace process with Turkey has been lacking the proper application of peace methods and monitoring (Vasquez, 2019). Others argue that inner Turkish affairs such as the 2015 elections has led to the relapse and re-occurrence of violence between PKK and Turkey (Aydin-Duzgit & Keyman, 2017). Thus, they are linking the internal and external outcomes within and outside of Turkey together in order to try and understand the ongoing struggle with PKK.

Gianna Vasquez states that Antonio Guterres, the current UN Secretary General, has highlighted the need of decreasing the intensification of the violent ongoing conflict in Syria which involves both the Kurds and Turkey (Vasquez, 2019). The main malfunctioning trigger drawing back these parties' progression towards peaceful means is their involvement in Syria's warfare (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Thus, the

conflict between PKK and Turkey is a transnational conflict that has managed to spill over the Syrian conflict by the involvement of other Kurdish groups such as the YPG and PYD. Max Hoffman mentions in his article U.S. and Russia's intervention and support of Kurdish groups such as YPG and PYG. Yet, PKK is listed as a terrorist group by the Turkey and the U.S. (Hoffman, 2019). Therefore, this draws significant inquiry especially with regards to the issue of not having the PYD and YPG get identified as being terrorist groups although they are extensions of the PKK.

The support carried out by U.S. and Russia includes offering Kurdish groups in Syria financial support and military aid. The Kurdish groups have fought ISIS while having relatively complex relations with Turkish groups (South Front, 2017). The New York Times mentions that while Kurdish groups' fight with ISIS in Syria indicates U.S. abandoning them, yet they have gained Russian support (Hubbard, Savage, Schmitt, & Kingsley, 2019). The costs and damages of these Kurdish groups' contribution to the Syrian proxy warfare are high and include many fatalities and house damages. The ultimate damage which has occurred is PKK's acceleration of violent struggle with Turkey while also diverting from its main goal of having Kurdistan's independence and recognition granted.

Accordingly, the previous literature has managed to draw a preliminary guide to display how the conflict between PKK and Turkey took place and how it may have spread onto Syria. Yet, the gap in this literature pertains to the lack of understanding the utility of Kurdish groups such as the PKK's affiliates, PYD and YPG, in Syria's proxy warfare to U.S.A and Russia. The research paper's proposed literature unravels the actual contentions underlying the involvement of the PKK's affiliates in the Syrian proxy warfare and its reflection on PKK's stance. It explores alternatives for resources

and strategies which may lead to their divergence from this predicament. It also paves the way towards clarifying how the acceleration of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict takes place. Therefore, this literature contends surrogate circumstances in which PKK and Kurdish groups such as PYD and YPG may have less costs and more gains ahead.

Various fields of study use the concept of proxy in their research attempts. The instrumentalization of the theory of proxy and its purpose of use may vary from one field to another. For example, the concept of proxy is being used in corporate business studies in which it acts as a relative concept to measure the size of a firm in relation to financial policy (Hashmi, Gulzar, Ghafoor, & Naz, 2020). In this case, the concept of proxy conveys the relationship of firm size with different variables, which helps in carrying out calculations that can track and compute financial policies. Another example of the use of the proxy concept is in linguistic studies (Stade, 2020). The proxy concept is being used in linguistics to highlight the relationship between the mind and the early language capabilities. Also, the field of artificial intelligence and data adopts the concept of proxy (Prince & Schwarcz, 2020). The Iowa Law Review discusses the risks of proxy discrimination by artificial intelligence and uses it to show the importance of paying attention to the danger it may cause.

Similarly, the exploration of relations between contexts and variables by the concept of proxy is being used in the research field of politics and international relations. The concept of proxy is being linked to warfare and security studies in which Vladimir Rauta uses it in his research article to help in understanding the relationships within the warfare and its growth throughout three generations (Rauta, 2020). However, this thesis chooses to focus on the concept of proxy theory in a distinct stance that tackles the relationship between leading parties and agent parties within warfare. This thesis

analyzes the works of a leading scholar, Amos C. Fox, who discusses this leader-agent relationship within the proxy warfare theory. The approach in this thesis is distinct for focusing on the parties, actions, resources, and strategies carried out by PKK's subgroups within the Syrian proxy warfare. Therefore, it adds a deeper insight and further explanation to the proxy warfare field of research which still displays several gaps.

In that sense, Rondeaux and Sterman try to draw a link between the reality of proxy warfare and the reality of being in a multipolar world (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). They shed light on the fact that the use of proxy warfare as a definition tends to be relative according to the side or power that is using it. However, multipolarity can greatly explain the fact that several foreign powers get involved while having hegemony over certain actors. The elaboration on the role of foreign actors as powers within a multipolar world is needed in order to have a better understanding of the whole picture which is going on currently within proxy warfare.

After the identification of what a proxy environment is, it is important to identify what proxy warfare is and how it takes place. Proxy warfare is described as, "A warfare between the proxies, but conducted in such a way that the major competition is between their supporters" (Oguz & Celik, 2018). The proxy warfare definition indicates the direct involvement of minor actors in a struggle while bearing the costs instead of major powers that are indirectly involved. The Syrian proxy warfare is interpreted by Mumford as an "anarchic proxy warfare". Mumford implies through this description that it upholds the engagement of a wide matrix conveying sponsor-surrogate relationship while each having separate ambitions (Oguz & Celik, 2018). The sponsor in this case is the leading party which assists the agent party while the surrogate is the party which acts as an agent

that carries out the work on behalf of the leading party. Therefore, the link between the sponsor and the surrogate in the case of the Syrian proxy warfare is the distinct benefit of each side that may help them in fulfilling their interests. The interests of these distinct parties may overlap but usually they are more centric towards each party's self-driven motives.

Nonetheless, major powers may carry out proxy warfare by using Kurdish nationalism as a master plan (Bozsogi, 2019). Kurdish nationalism is a trigger for Kurdish groups to serve as agent parties to major powers that may use such incentive to lure them into the matrix of proxy warfare. The relationship between them conveys the inclination to provide strategic benefits for assistance or shielding. The sponsors in this case are U.S.A. and Russia while the agents are the Kurdish groups such as PKK's affiliates in Syria, known as PYD and YPG. This relationship is initiated by the existence of initial benefits that generate further broader benefits for each involved side.

The interests of PKK's subgroups include covering up for their limited allocation of resources while trying to keep up their fight against opposing parties in Syria such as Turkish troops. On the other hand, the interests of U.S.A include stopping the expansion of opposing major powers' influence in Syria such as Russia. Similarly, Russia seeks to limit U.S.A.'s influence in Syria. Therefore, both sponsor parties tend to use PKK's subgroups to serve their rival interests while having PKK's affiliates bear the costs on their behalf.

Amos Fox argues that the proxy warfare may inhale the transactional model which fits perfectly in the case of the Syrian proxy warfare. The transactional model is defined by Fox, "This model sees the mutually beneficial exchange of services between the principal and the proxy at the center of this relationship" (Fox A. , 2020). it is

important to note that the PKK's affiliates' involvement as agents in the Syrian proxy warfare, is encouraged by the financial support and military assistance provided by U.S.A and Russia as sponsors. Therefore, the help being offered by U.S.A and Russia to the PKK's subgroups is proof that the transactional model is being used since financial support and military assistance require transaction attempts from the sponsor parties to the agent parties.

According to Simon Jackson, providing armaments consistently indicates a possibility of having combatants being involved in warfare. He states that the attempt to recognize the providers of the armaments and their incentive is harder than finding it with minorities such as the Kurds that are usually being used as combatants for proxy warfare (Jackson, n.d.). Therefore, aiding of armament or weaponry and support of any kind comes with a cost that is usually borne by the proxy. Thus, the question lays in how important it is for them to receive this kind of aid and support which is linked to their limited allocation of resources.

Consequently, the underlying benefits must not be taken slightly as the Syrian proxy warfare matrix upholds drastic shifts and engagements that need to be processed in order to understand the various underlying conceptions. Therefore, the main parties and participants involved in the Syrian proxy warfare must be indicated specially to understand how the Kurdish-Turkish conflict has evolved into this Syrian proxy warfare and the various attributions linked to the sponsor-agent proxy warfare theory. Ultimately, this helps in understanding how the sponsor-agent relationship within the Syrian proxy warfare affects attributions such as resources, actions, and costs.

This thesis' approach towards proxy warfare theory has a distinct analytical approach from previous approaches such as that of Byman which mentions that major

powers assist parties that they can use to do their work for them (Byman, 2018). This thesis adds to what Byman mentions by analyzing the relationship between parties based on their role and actions in which it realizes the existence of leading actors and agent actors within the proxy warfare. Also, it focuses on studying the underlying relationship between them as dominant and dominated actors, respectively. Amos C. Fox mentions the relationship between leading actors and agent actors in proxy warfare, yet he does not delve into the issues of alliances, resources, actions, and costs which are being covered within this thesis. Therefore, this thesis tends to build on existing works that tackle the issue of proxy warfare while filling the gaps of underlying issues that need unraveling such as clarifying the different parts and situations of the relations within the proxy warfare.

Although the literature draws a preliminary guide regarding the causes of the PKK-Turkish conflict and its spillover into Syria, it exhibits a gap regarding the utility of Kurdish groups such as PKK's affiliates in Syria's proxy warfare with regards to U.S.A and Russia. This thesis' contributions unravel the contentions underlying the involvement of the PKK's subgroups in the Syrian proxy warfare. It opens the door to finding possible alternatives for resources and strategies which lead to their divergence from this predicament. It also paves the way towards clarifying how the acceleration of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict takes place. Therefore, here we present the options which PKK and its Kurdish affiliates may have as far as having less costs and more gains ahead.

1.6 Methodology

This thesis adopts the qualitative research methodology for the topic under scrutiny. The qualitative methodology allows for a wide segment of expert opinion on the issue of proxy-warfare (Bryman, 2016). It includes analyzing primary and secondary sources in a theoretical framework. The primary sources are semi-structured interviews with experts in the field. The secondary sources are a variety of scholarly articles, news reports, journals, and books in the field.

Eight semi-structured interviews with scholars, journalists, and experts in Kurdish affairs and proxy-warfare were conducted by this author. It was important to conduct these interviews to fill the gaps within this research study by displaying the latest views and analysis. The focus of the questions which have been tackled during these interviews was on finding answers regarding the various support options and alternatives available for YPG and PYD as PKK's affiliates. Also, the concentration was on the feasibility of portraying YPG and PYD's involvement as being part of a Syrian proxy warfare while examining how that may reflect on PKK's stance against Turkey. Eventually, future prospects have been discussed within these interviews.

The snowball sampling technique has been used as part of seeking potential interviewees. Snowball sampling means that potential interviewee experts have been referred to the author by previous experts which have been interviewed (Dudovskiy, n.d.). Nonetheless, the interviewees have recommended other scholars and experts as part of snowball sampling which has helped in having a variety of experts interviewed. Each interview has been digitally recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed by the thesis author. All the transcription quotations that have been deployed throughout the thesis are

originally derived from the interviews. These quotations have been included after analyzing each transcription and filtering information in accordance with the arguments proposed within the thesis.

Seven of the eight interviews have been conducted in English. However, one of the eight interviews has been conducted in Arabic and has been transcribed in Arabic and then translated into English. The interviews conducted were of an average of one hour and two minutes, and their transcription was of an average of 32 pages double-spaced. The type of transcription which has been used to transcribe the interviews is verbatim transcription. This kind of transcription requires typing all the words and expressions mentioned during the interviews (Streefkerk, 2021). It is usually used for legal studies or even legal-related jobs, but it has been implemented by the author to make the transcriptions more accurate and precise.

It was essential to have a sample of eight interviews to encompass diverse opinions taken from a variety of specialists that vary in background and affiliations in order to avoid interviewee bias and to incorporate an approximate amount of opinion variety. These interviews have been conducted online through online platforms which is Skype. The questions asked throughout these interviews have been assigned in a semi-structured way in order to keep the flow of the ideas addressed directed towards the designated medium of study while also offering space for the interviewed scholars to add their personal expertise and views.

To understand the underlying alternating alliances, resources, and actions of the YPG and PYD as PKK's affiliates while examining the reflection on its stance, it has been vital to explore an approximate number of more than 90 various scholarly articles, newspapers, academic research, interviews, and books which convey the interrelated

issues that are covered within this thesis. Accordingly, a variety of scholarly articles from Carnegie, ISDP and RAND corporation, have been included. Other scholarly publications focusing on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, the various contributing players, and alliances within the Syrian proxy warfare, have been explored.

Secondary sources have also consisted of the latest news from the BBC News, Middle East Monitor, Ahval News, TRT World, and Daily Sabah, inter alia. Also, interviews conducted by the Washington Kurdish Institute have been analyzed and have been cited to back up the proposed arguments. Therefore, the abundance and diversity of these references has helped the author embody non-bias interpretations and analysis onto the work presented within this thesis.

1.7 Thesis Breakdown

The thesis is sub-divided to five main chapters. Each chapter includes a distinct section that focuses on certain aspects related to the research study examined.

Chapter two explores the main actors and participants within the realm of the Syrian proxy warfare. The main actors are both the agent and the sponsor actors. The agent actors are PKK's affiliates, PYD and YPG. The analysis shows how these actors originated from the PKK. It also reveals the sponsor actors, U.S.A. and Russia, whose roles as allies of Kurdish groups are thoroughly examined. It discusses in some detail the nature of the alliances and the resulting assistance, which includes financial support and military aid. Nevertheless, the roles of other participating players are mentioned in order to make the reader more familiar with the whole atmosphere of the Syrian proxy warfare. These additional participating players include Turkey and other Kurdish groups such as the KRG.

Chapter three explores how the limited allocation of PKK, PYD, and YPG's resources advocates the integration of PKK's subgroups within the Syrian proxy warfare because of the need for assistance. It clarifies the availability and limitations of resources as far as having PYD and YPG simulating PKK's module in a more viable way and their tactics. However, the relationships of PKK and its extensions with other Kurdish groups are being explored in this chapter. It seeks to identify the feasibility of having better relations with other Kurdish groups and its impact as an option to make up for the limited allocation of resources.

Chapter four aims to uncover the actions, combat, and battlefield strategies carried out by the PYD and YPG within the Syrian proxy warfare. In so doing, this chapter aims to highlight how the U.S.A and Russia influence PKK's subgroups directly through influencing their military options, while also having an influence on the PKK indirectly. Thus, it starts by discussing the inputs regarding PYD and YPG's strategies as far as maintaining the autonomy of the administration in the Northeastern part of Syria. Ultimately, it ends by discussing a potential course correction of the dependency relationship framed within the theory of proxy warfare.

Chapter five draws a conclusion that sheds light on the possibilities of PKK's ambitions for independence while dealing with the restricted viability of its affiliates' convergence from the Syrian proxy warfare. Also, it opens further discussions regarding PKK and its affiliates' relationship with Turkey and the related viable scenarios especially after the election of the new U.S. President Joe Biden.

Chapter Two

Players and Alliances

This chapter identifies the main actors and participants and specifies their role in the Syrian proxy warfare. It discusses the leader-agent actors in more detail than previously mentioned. It also highlights the alliance between PKK's affiliates and the U.S. and Russia by situating this relationship in the transactional module theory which explains the assistance and support offered from leading players to the agent actors. It analyzes the roles and contributions of other participating players to reveal the multiple factors contributing to the Syrian proxy-warfare. These additional contributors include participating players such as Turkey and Kurdish groups such as the KRG.

This chapter argues that the PYD and YPG's role within the Syrian proxy warfare has been induced by their alliance with U.S. and Russia. This alliance is focused on offering the U.S. and Russia as leading players, military aid and financial support to the PYD and YPG, as agent actors. The PKK's role shall be highlighted to clarify how PYD and YPG are extensions of it and how this shall affect its stance later on. However, shedding light on additional players such as Turkey and other Kurdish groups such as the KRG, is essential to recognize the further challenging outcomes facing the alliance between leading and agent players in accordance with their contribution within the Syrian proxy warfare.

2.1 Main players and Participant players

This section discusses the main players contributing to the Syrian proxy warfare, and the other participating players. The main actors under study are PKK, PYD and YPG, and U.S.A and Russia, which integrate them within the Syrian proxy warfare quandary. However, the participant players are players who affect the Syrian proxy warfare, such as Turkey and Iran.

This section aims to highlight the role of each player involved within the Syrian proxy warfare. To differentiate between each actor involved, they shall be categorized according to two main categories. The First category includes the main players. The main players are both the agent actors and the sponsor actors within the proxy warfare. The second category includes the additional players. These additional players act as supplementary players to draw a better understanding for the reader on how the Syrian proxy warfare takes place.

The argument of this section is that PYD and YPG, as affiliates of PKK, fall into the category of agent actors according to their role in the Syrian proxy warfare, On the other hand, The U.S.A and Russia, fall into the category of sponsor actors with regards to their role in the Syrian proxy warfare. The alliance and relationship between them is mainly economic, based on the transactional module mentioned earlier by Amos C. Fox. Nonetheless, other players such as Turkey and other Kurdish groups challenge the ongoing circumstances and outcomes of the Syrian proxy warfare. Thus, all of this will be further highlighted in the second section of this chapter.

2.1.1 Main Players

The main parties that this thesis focuses on are the key participants within the Syrian proxy warfare and they consist of two distinct categories. These two categories are differentiated according to their stance with relevance to the Syrian proxy warfare. The first category consists of the agent parties or actors which act as surrogates. It includes the PKK and its subgroups which are the PYD and the YPG. The second category consists of the principal actors which behave as sponsors with their own agendas. It includes the U.S.A and Russia. The relationship between the surrogates and the principal actors is mainly based on self-interests and benefits.

The PKK is known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party. It has been established in 1984 as a form of a resistance militant Marxist movement that has been launched by Abdullah Ocalan against the Turkish government's oppression (University of Uppsala Conflict Data Program). The proclaimed oppression has been ongoing for several years before the establishment of PKK in 1978 as a political and further militant advocacy for Kurdish rights within Turkey (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). The conflict between PKK and Turkey remains active until this day even though it has encountered a limited period of somewhat peaceful negotiations between Ocalan and Ankara from April 2013 (Glavin, 2015). However, these peace truce negotiations have failed in 2015 in which the truce had been disregarded and violence was reinstated (University of Uppsala Conflict Data Program). Thus, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government is still present till this day even though various attempts of peace negotiations have occurred.

The outcomes of the incessant social protracted intra-struggle between the PKK and Turkey does not only include the production of a large number of casualties, but it also entails the production of an even larger transnational conflict that is processed internationally. Therefore, the transnational conflict attribution under study within this thesis is the spillover of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict between PKK and Turkey unto the Syrian battle grounds in which PKK affiliates and other actors have become involved in the Syrian proxy warfare.

The expansion of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict transnationally towards Syria is no surprise since PKK and Turkey both have goals at risk. As mentioned by the CRU policy brief, Syria is perceived by PKK as a chance to form a worldwide acknowledged Kurdish structure in Syria that has a somewhat legal attribution that would denounce its standing in Turkey (Veen, Yuksel, & Tekines, 2020). This means that form of entity is manifested by PYD, known as the Democratic Union Party, which is one of PKK's affiliates in Syria. The YPG, known as being part of the People's Protection Units, resembles PYD's military wing. Thus, the PYD and YPG are both being acknowledged as subgroups of the PKK.

Nonetheless, the PKK is not willing to demilitarize and demobilize and that is a clear cause for the failure of peaceful negotiations between them and Turkey. The PKK manages to continue its militarization and mobilization actions in areas such as Jabal Qandil near the Turkish borders, while indirectly being affected by its subgroups that are directly involved within Syria. The PKK extensions under study within this thesis are PYD and YPG. Therefore, their role within proxy warfare is highlighted while indicating their relative relationship as extensions of PKK that serve as agent actors for the leading players. Thus, the direct affiliation of PKK's subgroups within the Syrian

proxy warfare affects the PKK's stance indirectly especially regarding the acceleration of its oppositional stances against Syria.

The PYD was formed by the PKK in 2003 (Cagaptay & Tabler, 2015). Ever since the PYD's establishment as a Syrian group, its direction and beliefs have been directly associated to that of the PKK as a parent group. Dr. Alan Semo, the Representative of the PYD in the United Kingdom, mentions that many previous PKK fighters have joined PYD upon their request while the PYD has given them the option of going back to their homes, families, and lands (Semo, 2020). This means that the PYD to a certain extent includes former PKK fighters within its party. Therefore, this fact is constantly highlighted by major powers such as Turkey as a sort of proof that they may comply or accomplish PKK's similar needs and wants.

As noted by Stark and Ahram, "PYD launched a self-proclaimed autonomous region of Rojava, later renamed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)" (Stark & Ahram, 2019). This autonomous goal was the initial trigger for PYD to undergo its involvement within the Syrian proxy warfare. Thus, PYD behaves as an agent actor in the Syrian proxy-warfare for the sponsor actors, that is the U.S.A and Russia. The reason behind the initiation of such a relationship is the existence of shared common rivalries. These rivalries include the somewhat complex paradoxical relationships with other parties such as ISIS, Turkey, and others. Therefore, the involvement of PYD in Syrian proxy warfare as an agent actor can be demonstrated clearly by highlighting the ongoing battles against the enemies it shares with the United States as a principal actor.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Justice Department, 2020). They

originate from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and consist of two groupings. The first group is called "Yekîneyên Parastina Gel" which is abbreviated by YPG and means People's Protection Units. The second group is called "Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê" which is abbreviated by YPJ and means Women's Protection Units (Justice Department, 2020). The role of these two groupings is to act as protecting units for the Kurdish people in Syria especially while trying to maintain and resist oppositional forces such as ISIS and Turkish affiliations within the Syrian proxy warfare.

Nonetheless, the YPG is considered as a military patron group for SDF, which is known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (Stark & Ahram, 2019). The role of the Kurdish People's Protection Units as a whole is to assist the SDF in their military actions in Syria. For example, the Energy Industry Review mentions how the YPG manages to claim the land within the north-eastern part of Syria and how it controlled the SDF battles against ISIS (Evgenios, 2020). The relationship between the YPG and the SDF has pushed for the YPG gaining U.S.A.'s sponsorship because of its close ties with the SDF. Therefore, the YPG plays the role of the agent facing battles in favor for the U.S.A. which plays the role of the principal actor that sponsors the agent actors within the Syrian proxy warfare.

The U.S. has chosen to assist and ally with the PYD and YPG for a strategic reason. Dr. Alan Semo, the UK Representative of the PYD, and Dr. Azad Deewanee, who specializes in peace studies and conflict resolution, both indicate separately that these Kurdish groups were the perfect candidates because of their military capabilities (Semo, 2020) et al. (Deewanee, 2021). Nonetheless, there is a common target between the U.S. with PYD and YPG, which is fighting and getting rid of ISIS. Ultimately, the

alliance between U.S. and Kurdish groups during Trump's administration has had several drawbacks which put this alliance under question.

On the other hand, the reason behind Russia choosing to support the PYD and YPG, is to be able to lure them into want and needs that comply with that of the Assad regime. For example, Sirwan Kajjo, a journalist and Kurdish analyst, speaks of Russia's role in convincing these Kurdish groups by offering them support and aid in a clear attempt to drive them away from ties with the U.S.A (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). Therefore, this highlights the incentives behind such alliances which include underlying benefits of Russia in trying to rebalance the situation in favor of it. Consequently, what makes the Syrian proxy warfare a more complex issue, is the fact that Russia tends to offer assistance for the PYD too. As mentioned by the Russian TASS news agency, Russia supports the PYD claiming that it is a permitted player which is part of Syrian organizations that are made up of citizens of Syria and not Turkey (Taskomur, 2017). Yet, this is being considered as a puzzle game since PYD is being backed up by the U.S.A while trying to maintain autonomy over territories in northern Syria. Thus, the PYD is an agent actor for Russia because it can assist it in gaining autonomy and recognition which is its initial goal.

2.1.2 Participant Players

Other participants involved in the Syrian proxy warfare vary from the main parties and actors in that they may influence its initiation and ongoing outcomes while not being the key actors. It is important to shed light on the stance of other participants to have a better understanding of the complex issues underlying the Syrian proxy warfare. The other participants who are discussed, are Turkey, Syria, Iran, and other Kurdish groups. Therefore, these participants' role is explained while clarifying their relationship with the PKK's subgroups as agent actors and the U.S.A and Russia as leading players.

The PKK and PYD are regarded by Turkey as undifferentiated (Veen, Yuksel, & Tekines, 2020). As the struggle carries out between Kurdish groups and Turkish troops, the latter tries to diminish and restrict the former's plan of action. This Turkish limitation focuses on the restriction of further "Kurdish Awakening" over provincial realms. On the other hand, PYD seeks accomplishing sovereignty within Syria borders while maneuvering a somewhat self-governed district. Accordingly, in terms of proxy warfare theory, PYD as a PKK subgroup plays the role of an agent. Thus, this surrogate role unfolds by indicating PYD's involvement within Syrian battles for the initial sake of its struggle against Turkish troops and proposed autonomy while serving other underlying interests of the sponsor actors.

Nonetheless, Turkey links the PYD and YPG directly to the PKK and highlights these links with the U.S. and Russia. Such a move helps Turkey confirm the risks to its borders and territorial integrity posed by these Kurdish groups. On the other hand, Dr. Azad Deewanee mentions that we have seen Turkey aiding Syrian oppositional groups

like Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army and other jihadist groups (Deewanee, 2021). This indicates that these supported groups by Turkey can be considered as proxies of Turkey upon their reception of support and aid while undergoing wars against other anti-Turkish groups in Syria. Thus, Turkey might not only affect the Syrian proxy warfare as an external actor, but also as a leader player to agent actors in a somewhat different case and scenario than that of the PKK's affiliates with regards to the U.S. and Russia.

As mentioned earlier, Syria acts as a proxy environment which hosts two or more parties sharing a somewhat common objective. It is difficult to distinguish between the engaged actors in the Syrian civil war since they are supported by many external actors and this has turned the disastrous situation into an even more destructive proxy war (Wirtz, 2020). Nonetheless, it is vital to understand that aside from the sponsor actors and agent actors involved in the Syrian proxy warfare, the host proxy environment has its own dilemma.

As far as PKK, which is the PYD and the YPG's group of origin, its position with Syria is a different story. Nonetheless, before the Adana agreement had been launched on 20 October 1998, Hafez Al Assad and the PKK were very well acquainted. Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's leader, was receiving patronage from Al Assad in Syria before he left and got caught by the Turkish government (Oweis, 2020). The strike of the conflict in Syria might have endured the disregard of the Syrian government and Turkish government as being allies, yet it has open doors for the relations between the Syrian government and the PKK. Thus, the relations between Syria and the PKK are greatly

affected by the ongoing outputs which assume its stance is the same as its relative ally bloc.

The position of Iran within the realm of the Syrian proxy warfare is greatly connected to Russia's relative position. Both Iran and Russia are allies of the Assad regime and they share common strategic interests. Nonetheless, Iran which has been backing up Al Assad regime since 2011, considers any action made for achieving stabilization as a source of gain (Najmuddine, 2019). Thus, Iran's support to Kurdish groups in Syria such as the PYD and YPG is questionable. Therefore, Iran might have the same stance as that of Russia and Syria towards the PKK's affiliates, yet its interests might be somewhat deviant.

Thus, Iran has been concerned about the ongoing activities of Kurdish groups such as the YPG and PYD, and it has been trying to play the role of the mediator between them and Turkey (Najmuddine, 2019). This shows that Iran that the outputs of the Syrian proxy warfare may trigger the Iranian Kurds. Iran's internal interests force it to maintain its relations with PKK's affiliates while trying to seek assumed stable grounds within the Syrian proxy warfare. So, the underlying incentives of Iran as an external actor of the Syrian proxy warfare would greatly affect its stance as an ally of the Syrian regime and Russia.

With regards to other Kurdish groups and entities outside of Syria, it is vital to highlight the role of the KRG in Iraq. Although there is no direct influence for the KRG in the Syrian proxy warfare, yet it indirectly affects the circumstance of the PYD and YPG as affiliates of the PKK. This shall be highlighted later on in several parts within this research study. Nevertheless, the role of KRG or its effect on these Kurdish groups

is somewhat affected by its relations with Turkey. Thus, KRG's role as an external actor may to a large extent be part of the underlying challenges of this proxy warfare when it comes to the considerations of PKK's affiliates with other Kurdish groups.

Therefore, it is important to address the role of external actors in the Syrian proxy warfare to indicate how the alliances of PKK's extensions come across these external actors and how they affect it. In that sense, these external actors' role may form challenges for the PYD and YPG as allies of the U.S. and Russia. Ultimately, this shall reflect on the PKK and its stance against Turkey, especially with regards to external players such as the KRG which can reflect and greatly affect the relationships with other Kurdish groups as a whole.

2.2 Assistance Versus Challenges

This section focuses on addressing how the assistance accompanied by the alliance between the agent-sponsor actors in the Syrian proxy warfare take place. The challenges and obstacles facing these acts of assistance will be discussed. Nonetheless, the discussion of these challenges would clarify further the complexity of the situation and how the involvement of Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG has grown into more than receiving assistance, but to achieving actions that have been bearing further costs because of their alliances. This section aims to shed light on the important link between the PKK's affiliates with U.S.A and Russia. It clarifies how the assistance takes place from financial support to military aid and other possible forms of adjoining assistance. However, it also calls attention to the factor of dominance which adheres the agent players to the interests of the dominating sponsor players. After that, the focus is on the challenges and obstacles that this assistance-based alliance faces. Here The

argument is that since the PKK's affiliates have close relationships with the U.S. and Russia as allies to a certain extent, they are offered support and assistance from them. However, this support and assistance is bound by challenges and obstacles which make it hard to maintain the flow of this assistance-based alliance.

2.2.1 Alliances and Support

The U.S., as a dominant player has offered assistance to its agent actors while having other incentives in mind than just helping the PYD and YPG as its allies in Syria. As written in the Daily Sabah newspaper, the previous Ambassador of the U.S. has stated that, "Washington tried to use military force and financial pressure to compel Syrian dictator Bashar Assad to accept an autonomous zone for the YPG in the country's northeast" (Aslan, 2021). So, the U.S. has been trying to impose a certain reality on the Assad regime since it originally does not agree with the Syrian regime. While on the other hand, Russia maneuvers its alliance with the PYD and YPG also as its agent actors, but for the purpose of rebalancing issues within Syria for the benefit of its ultimate ally, the Syrian Assad regime (Taskomur, 2017). Therefore, the U.S. and Russia's offer of aid and assistance is bounded by a certain period of time until their incentives are fulfilled to a certain extent.

Accordingly, the U.S.A offers the YPG both financial support and military aid. As mentioned by TRT world, the U.S.A provides a large quantity of financial support for YPG every year since 2015. It also mentions that, "in 2021, Washington promised to provide Syrian opposition groups such as YPG an amount of \$200 million dollars" (TRT World, 2020). Thus, this amount of financial support along with military assistance provided by the U.S.A.'s ties with SDF, can greatly help the YPG maintain its power over the ground.

The U.S. also provides financial support through various USAID, or U.S. NGOs or other U.S. backed NGOs (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). They may support local businesses as well such as farms that are located locally. Hence, this may include the financial support or back up of agricultural generating businesses. For example, Dr. Azad Deewanee discusses possible support of wheat selling (Deewanee, 2021). He bases his argument on the fact that the areas which these Kurdish groups are located in, are rich in wheat planting lands.

However, the YPG as a military wing of the PYD and an extension of PKK is associated with the notion of terrorism upon receiving support from Russia. The Anadolu Agency mentions that PKK's subgroups which are the PYD and the YPG are terrorist groups funded by Russia (Anadolu Agency, 2016). The Turkish prime minister uses the term "hired soldiers" in which they have undergone battles against average resistance powers instead of targeting Daesh. Thus, as long as the YPG keeps on undergoing its battles and getting support from Russia, Turkey is put in a harsh position. Therefore, this may disrupt Turkey's relations with Russia and makes Turkey's stance within the Syrian proxy warfare harder since it backs oppositional Syrian groups.

The relation between the PYD as an agent and the U.S.A as a sponsor is based on the United States offering financial support and military aid to the PYD which greatly needs it to continue its battles. The PYD has been receiving assistance from U.S.A since fall 2014 during its struggle for Kobane against ISIS while it was protecting Rojava (Stark & Ahram, 2019). Thus, this support helps the PYD secure its initial benefits that is maintaining control against ISIS and other parties that may cause threat. However, this assistance-based alliance also helps the U.S.A since the PYD would be facing its rivals

in the battles. Therefore, it is essential to realize that PYD carries on direct involvement in proxy warfare while U.S.A is being involved indirectly by its assistance for a somewhat common objective.

Accordingly, the U.S. offers weapons directly to the SDF. Since Turkey claims that YPG and PYG have connections with PKK, Kajjo argues that the weaponries are being provided to the SDF directly (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). He also adds that the delivery of these weaponries takes place through a border crossing from Iraq which the U.S. has previously helped the SDF in attaining in 2017. In that sense, the journalist and political analyst, John Saleh, mentions in his interview that minimal to soft power weaponries are given to the PYD and YPG while offering the heavier weapons to the SDF (Saleh, 2020). This affirms that offering the PYD and YPG weaponry happens through the SDF.

As mentioned by the Middle East Monitor, “According to the Pentagon, the US military aid to several armed groups in Syria, including the PKK/PYD, are comprised of 12,000 Kalashnikovs, 6,000 machine guns, 3,500 heavy machine guns, 3,000 RPG-7s, 1,000 American AT-4 or Russian SPG-9 anti-tanks, 235 mortar guns of different calibers, 100 sniper rifles, 450 PV-7 night vision binoculars and 150 binoculars with infrared laser illuminator” (Middle East Monitor, 2017). It also mentions that the US has been giving military aid to the PYD and such groups since 2016. Thus, the PYD is largely dependent on this military aid to be able to cope with its battles against rival parties.

The PKK’s subgroups, the PYD and the YPG, act as agent actors that receive financial support and military aid from Russia as a principal actor within the Syrian

proxy warfare. Russia's assistance has helped the PKK's subgroups in extending their influence within Syria (Oweis, 2020). Yet, it is important to highlight that the U.S.A.'s backing up for the PKK's subgroups in 2018 has somehow affected the underlying relations. Thus, the interests of the U.S.A. and Russia are different, and this can greatly affect how the PKK's subgroups are being influenced as agent actors within the Syrian proxy warfare.

Moreover, Russia acts as a principal actor that fulfills its interests that coincide with the interests of its allies. Russia backs up Al Assad regime and Iran's position against that of the U.S.A. However, Turkey's stance is not stable within the Syrian proxy warfare since it tries to maintain relations with Russia which insists on supporting the PKK's affiliates (Anadolu Agency, 2016). Russia's interest underlying the alliance with the PKK's subgroups is far more vital than Turkey's stance. The Middle East Monitor mentions the amount of support and assistance which Russia provides the PKK's subgroups with and how useful it is (Middle East Monitor, 2017). Thus, the PKK's subgroups are dependent on the back up they receive from principal actors within the proxy warfare such as Russia and that is relatively related to underlying interests.

Therefore, the assistance and support offered by the U.S. and Russia, respectively, increases the chances of having them dominate to a certain extent the decisions or the situation of the PKK's affiliates directly, while influencing PKK's stance indirectly. This shall be further clarified in the next parts of the research study which will show how much the PKK's affiliates are dependent or need these acts of assistance. Thus, in the upcoming sections some of these challenges facing the PYD and YPG within the Syrian proxy warfare will be discussed.

2.2.2 Challenges and Obstacles

The relations between the YPG and U.S.A are agent-principal relations such as the case of YPG's initial group which is the PYD. However, the U.S.A has been backing up the YPG because it considers it as a very potent power based on the battles it has undergone against ISIS (Gurcay, n.d.). The U.S.A continues to back up the YPG both financially and military wise, even though this may jeopardize its relations with other participants such as Turkey. Gurcay's analysis highlights that U.S.A.'s initial reason behind assisting Kurdish groups such as the YPG is having it fight against ISIS and it is very difficult for YPG and other Kurdish groups to maintain their stance without its support (Gurcay, n.d.). Consequently, the continuity of the U.S.A.'s sponsorship is dependent on its interests and this indicates the large effect which it has on both the PYD and YPG, which ordinarily affect PKK.

The Kurdish-Turkish conflict is a clear insight of the possible stance of Turkey within the Syrian proxy warfare. Turkey views the PKK as a terrorist organization, and it has an ongoing struggle with PKK in Turkey. Thus, it views its extensions, PYD and YPG, as terrorist organizations as well (Stark & Ahram, 2019). However, Turkey had a somewhat different vision initially where it might have included the PYD in its battles against Al Assad regime in the period between 2013 and 2015 (Veen, Yuksel, & Tekines, 2020). The PYD has been considered as a threat by Turkey precisely after the talks with PYD's leader, Salih Muslim, have failed. The PYD has rejected Turkey's assistance with its case of autonomy and is greatly affiliated with the PKK's initial stance. Thus, Turkey's stance within the Syrian proxy warfare is against the extensions of the PKK that cause threat to its interests.

Similarly, the YPG link with the SDF raises the alert levels of Turkey especially since the SDF is linked with the U.S.A. However, upon having the growing threat along the North-eastern Syrian border, Turkey's interests were being satisfied by backing up Syrian rebels and Syrian oppositional groups (Frantzman , 2019). The Syrian proxy warfare which is designated by PKK's affiliates along with the U.S.A and Russia's assistance is somehow counter attacked by the Turkish proxies which are the Syrian-back rebels and oppositional groups. Therefore, the outcomes of the Syrian proxy warfare and Turkey's underlying role somehow project back at the Turkish government even though the PKK is not directly involved.

The PKK-triggered Kurdish-Turkish conflict initially sought the rights of the Kurds that were disregarded by the Turkish government. Although the PKK has a vision which includes the concern of the Kurds as a whole, yet it is important to note that not all of the Kurdish groups consider this as their main driver and not all of them share strong ties with the PKK. Ultimately, the relations between the PKK and its subgroups with other Kurdish groups are complex.

The PKK's subgroups, which are the PYD and the YPG, share relations with some Syrian resistance groups and that troublesome since Turkey supports this oppositional groups (Veen, Yuksel, & Tekines, 2020). According to the Daily Sabah, "Syrian opposition condemns recent convergence between YPG/PKK as Assad regime proxies" (Daily Sabah, 2020). They are viewed by the Syrian resistance in accordance with Turkey's stance, as terrorist forces related to Russia. Thus, these Syrian resistance groups carry out Turkey's plan in trying to keep the PYD and the YPG forces far from Turkish borders as a way to avoid having more Syrian refugees in Turkey (Evgenios,

2020). Therefore, it is in Turkey's best favor to maintain separation between Syrian Kurds and PKK's affiliates to diminish the chances of provoking other Kurdish groups in Turkey. Therefore, the PKK's subgroups suffer from the trajectories of other interests at hand such as that of Turkey's will to keep their relations with Syrian resistance group rivalry.

the PKK and its affiliates do not share a relative common ground with the KRG, which is known as the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KRG happens to have better relations with Turkey and the U.S.A than the relations it has with PKK and its subgroups (Sabri, Washington's Stance on Syria and Iraq and The Widening Rift with Kurds in Iran, 2020). However, the real question lies in whether the Kurds as groups or as a whole share the same stance with principal actors such as the U.S.A. relatively. Therefore, even though the PKK and its subgroups act as agent actors of the U.S.A within the Syrian proxy warfare, they do not share the same stance of the principal actor in accordance with the KRG.

However, it is vital to note that the Iranian Kurds are greatly affected with the outcomes of the Syrian proxy warfare. As Sabri tries to explain, the Iranian Kurds have been monitoring how the U.S. is backing up the Kurdish groups in Syria such as the PKK's subgroups (Sabri, Washington's Stance on Syria and Iraq and The Widening Rift with Kurds in Iran, 2020). The agent-principal relationship between the PKK's subgroups and the U.S.A may influence other Kurdish groups and entities even if they are not directly involved within the Syrian proxy warfare. Therefore, principal actors such as the U.S.A and Russia must play close attention onto how their sponsorship of the PKK's subgroups is being projected and at the same time the PKK's affiliates should be

careful on how their involvement affects their stance with other Kurdish groups and entities.

To sum up, the Syrian proxy warfare upholds a scenario which is viable because of the existing relation between the PKK's subgroups and the U.S.A, and Russia, respectively. The sponsor-surrogate relationships are bound by the self-benefits of each side which affects their role and proposed incentive within the proxy warfare in Syria. Thus, this is clarified more by the explanation of other participants' role and the challenge they form within the Syrian proxy warfare. Ultimately, this leads to the clarification of further assumptions that shall be explored in the upcoming chapters such as to what extent are the U.S. and Russia dominating the decisions and stance of PKK's affiliates.

Chapter Three

Limitations of Resources and options

After the main actors involved in the Syrian proxy warfare have been identified while highlighting the transactional basis of their assistance-based alliance, it is important to understand the persistent trigger behind this need for foreign assistance. The alleged dominance of the U.S. and Russia over the PYD and YPG has been taking place because of the limited resources available for these Kurdish groups. Nonetheless, they also have restricted choices ahead as far as seeking to make up for the shortage of resources. Sooner or later, this affects the stance of PKK on the long run.

This chapter concentrates on the PYD and YPG's limited allocation of resources and the options for maintaining control over the areas in Northeastern Syria. It discusses how the agent actors deal with the lack of available resources and to what extent they simulate the PKK's module of survival in some ways. This link clarifies how the limited allocation of resources forces them to participate in the Syrian proxy warfare as agent actors for the U.S. and Russia, which are the leader players that offer their resources for the survival of Kurdish groups. This indirectly affects PKK's stance against Turkey. Thus, a possible option is addressed, which is seeking better relationships and assistance from other Kurdish groups.

This chapter argues that the limitations of PYD and YPG as extensions of PKK are grounded by their resources and tactics. It tries to explain what these limitations are and what alternative options are available. These attributions are linked to the stance of

PKK and the effect of its subgroups' contribution to the Syrian proxy warfare.

Ultimately, this chapter confirms the continuous need of U.S.A and Russia's assistance while having low chances of assistance from Kurdish groups. Therefore, it explains the issue of having high chances of accelerating threats from Turkey to both PKK and its affiliates.

3.1 Limited Allocation of Resources

This section explains the issue of the limited allocation of YPG and PYD's resources in their continuous efforts to maintain control over areas in Northeastern Syria, and how they try to manage the situation. The claim is that PKK's affiliates need constant assistance from the U.S. and Russia. This part tries to clarify the shortage or limitation of available resources at the hands of these Kurdish groups to clarify why they seek this assistance that entangles them with the Syrian proxy warfare.

3.1.1 Strengths

The integration of the PYD and YPG within the Syrian proxy warfare as a whole was initiated by their abilities to fight against their potential threats. This fight has been supported to a certain extent by the U.S. aid and support which has been mostly given to the PYD and YPG by the SDF. As part of the strengths, the PYD has been seen as a group who gained from the Syrian civil war through its involvement in the Syrian proxy warfare. Savelsberg considers PYD and YPG's back up by the U.S. and Russia as a point of strength (Savelsberg, 2018). Therefore, the strengths of the PYD and YPG have evolved because of the U.S. and Russia's alliances as leader actors.

According to Dr. Alan Semo, the PYD representative in UK, “America realized that this is the group we wanted even though we don’t like them ideologically or even if they are independent, but they are sufficient... They are sufficient in Syria. They are working as good troops... We don’t need to send an American soldier training them, and they are loyal to the Syrian and to Syria, and they are loyal to the American support and to the coalition” (Semo, 2020). This is important to show that although such Kurdish groups may seek support from U.S. to keep up the fight, however they have capabilities to fight and keep up the fight as a fighting ideological defensive group claiming its rights.

Yet, the control of some areas in the Northeastern part of Syria, has been possible due to the intervention of foreign powers such as the U.S. which acts as a leading player in the Syrian proxy warfare which offers assistance. In that sense, the PYD and YPG’s control over these areas in the Northeastern part of Syria are considered strengths for them as long as they can maintain controlling them and advancing on their own. According to Ozcelik, the PYD has used its military wing YPG in order to gain control over these territories in Northeast Syria, yet it tries to implement democracy and democratic elements into its administration (Ozcelik, 2019). Therefore, having to handle the strengths and limitations of the PYD and YPG is a challenging role that needs to be considered especially when PYD is trying to spread democracy within its administration while having its military wing fight to maintain its control over the areas in Northeastern Syria.

The PYD and YPG’s module of fight and aim at having a designated autonomous region is largely similar to the aim of the PKK’s module. However, the PYD and YPG seem to be much closer to achieving this reality on the ground rather than

the PKK which has a distinct ideological path and seems to lack international support. Yet, the PKK is listed as a terrorist group while the PYD and YPG are not listed as a terrorist group although they are considered as affiliations or extensions of the PKK.

Professor Edmund Ghareeb, who is an expert on Kurdish and U.S. issues, justifies this instance by saying the following, “Well, basically because the U.S. would very much like to separate the two, you know because they... For the PYD and Qasad (Arabic acronym for SDF) are helping serve American interests to a certain extent while they think they are serving their own interests as well” (Ghareeb, 2021). Therefore, this can be explained by the fact that the terminology of terrorism is sort of relative especially since interests collide while having to use this terminology. That’s why Turkey may have accused the PYD and YPG several times as being terrorist groups with links to the PKK while at the same time the U.S. and other international foreign players do not consider the PYD and YPG as terrorist groups since they fight ISIS in Syria which is among the interests of the U.S.

The areas which are currently controlled by the PYD and YPG located mainly within the Northeast part of Syria are rich in resources. These resources include two main parts which are the agriculture, and the gas and oil. If the PYD and YPG were to make use of these two resources, their economic status would be more capable of matching up to their needs. Thus, it is important to highlight how capable they have been in making use of these resources to generate their own local revenues.

The PYD and PYG manage to grow wheat and grains which are known as being popular agricultural activities in Syria for a long time. These are one way which helps by increasing the chances of having income generating businesses. Nonetheless, this may open the door towards achieving the generation of local revenues within the autonomous

administration. According to the PYD representative in UK, Dr. Alan Semo mentions the PYD's capabilities to harvest wheat (Semo, 2020). Yet, he highlights that not only wheat, but also cotton is being shared harvest with the regime in Syria. Thus, the agricultural harvests are bounded by the issues of sharing them with the regime there.

The lands controlled by the PYD and YPG are known for being areas that are rich in gas and oil. This means that they can sell and trade gas and oil as part of generating local revenues. This would not only enhance the structure of their economy, but also this may greatly affect their relations with other neighboring countries. However, this is affected by the whole atmosphere around these areas and the situation of Syria as a whole even if they are aiming to acknowledge themselves as having independent autonomous administration of authority within the areas of Northeastern Syria.

The PYD and YPG have managed to establish an administration that seeks to be a place not just for Kurds, but also for a variety of other groups within Syria. These groups include Arabs, Christians, Assyrians, and others. They are working on having a place which advocates the rights of many such as women rights and equal rights for all. This was greatly highlighted by the UK representative of the PYD party, Dr. Alan Semo (Semo, 2020). This has helped in having assistance within the administration from people of various backgrounds in Syria instead of just having the PYD and YPG establishing the administration on their own.

The administration of Northeast Syria has managed to establish an educational system within its area. This educational system relied on educated people and teachers sparing their free time in order to help teach students. Nonetheless, this is a voluntary work in which these instructors are devoted people who do this with no income in return

while having to other income generating jobs to support their families and children (Semo, 2020). Therefore, the people within this administration themselves are participating and volunteering in order to make this work.

3.1.2 Limitations

The limited allocation of resources advocates integration within the Syrian proxy warfare because of the need for assistance. Accordingly, the PYD and YPG have to work with what they have. The PYD and YPG work hard on trying to maintain their control over some areas in their North-East part of Syria. However, their initiatives to build a so-called autonomous administration are barreled by the limited resources they have. Thus, they try to manage themselves while having very limited resources available.

Nonetheless, the harvest of resources such as wheat as well as sales of oil and gas are dependent on Kurdish groups' cooperation with the Assad regime. That is why the YPG and PYD face limitations regarding prospectus local generation of income. Accordingly, the issues affecting the Syrian regime and neighboring affiliations have been affecting the PKK's assumed extensions within Syria. Thus, this dilemma encounters shortcoming prospects instead of high-end prospects that pave the way towards the independent survival of the potential autonomous administration within the Northeast of Syria.

The issue of having income generating businesses is somewhat affected by the intervention of the U.S. as a sponsor. Although various Syrian areas were known as being agricultural and that Syrians were experienced in nurturing grains and wheat, yet the U.S. organizations sought to help them. As stated by the political writer Baraa Sabri,

the U.S. organizations offer help in agriculture, but the problem is that they treat them as if they know nothing about agriculture and that's not true (Sabri, Author's Interview with Mr. Baraa Sabri, 2020). The problem is that they depend on U.S. support for agriculture because they lack recognition which they need to have trade.

As far as potential sales of gas and oil, the PYD and YPG are bogged down because of the issues going on in Syria. The Caesar act initiated by the U.S. on the Syrian regime more than eight years ago greatly affects the sales of gas and oil within Syria. It has been imposed by the U.S. as an act for protecting the rights of the Syrian civilians and protestors against the Assad regime and it consists of economic sanctions which are meant to limit the Syrian government's capabilities especially regarding the oil and gas sector (Al Shami, 2020). Nonetheless, this not only limits the Syrian regime's capabilities, but it also limits the capabilities of those which deal with it such as the PYD and YPG when it comes to selling gas and oil and their need to cooperate with each other. As stated by the political writer Baraa Sabri, the amount of oil and gas barrels that used to be sold in Syria is quite minimal compared to the amount of oil and gas barrels which they can sell now (Sabri, Author's Interview with Mr. Baraa Sabri, 2020). They are limited by the ongoing situation in other parts of Syria and their lack of recognition makes it even harder for them to manage the potential sales of gas and oil on their own without seeking help and assistance from other such as the U.S.

During the Trump administration, approximately seven-hundred American troops were based in Syria to keep the fields of oil in Deir El Zor away from the control of the Assad regime (Aftandilian, Kurdish Dilemmas in Syria, 2021). This was an attempt to prevent the Syrian Assad regime from having income from the sales of oil there, and to generate an income for SDF which runs prison camps for holding detained

Deash fighters. This was considered as part of the assistance offered by the U.S. to Kurdish groups fighting against ISIS. Yet, after Trump's withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG have become skeptical of the U.S. alliance relation (Washington Kurdish Institute, 2019). Thus, the PYD and YPG have realized that they need to obtain other strategies that might prevent them from losses similar to those which happened because of Trump's previous decisions within Syria.

Although the administration of Northeast Syria has been trying to establish an educational system, it still has a long way down that road. They might have had devoted people who are willing to work voluntarily unpaid while sacrificing their time and having to go to income generating jobs also during the day, yet this is not always the applicable case, and it cannot survive like this. As Dr. Semo mentions, there are lots of people who are well-educated and fit to teach, yet they refuse to be part of this education system. The reason behind their refusal is the issue of volunteering in which no real income is offered. Therefore, the educational system is greatly limited by the options at hand and still needs much advancement and funding to survive and have chances of expanding into a real profound educational system.

The PYD and YPG originated from the PKK. This is the usual argument or fact voiced to point out fingers and accusations. However, it is essential to note that PKK has greatly influenced and helped its affiliates at the beginning. Illustrating this point is Sirwan Kajjo, journalist and Kurdish expert, who says that no one can disregard or hide the fact that PKK has greatly helped PYD initially in Syria when it first started (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). Nevertheless, the issue of having previous members and leaders of the PKK being included or taking part of the PYD has

influenced it in a positive way to a certain extent by having people within the party who have previous experience regarding training and military discipline.

However, the PYD and YPG tend to disregard direct affiliations with the PKK. This is because of the allegations of having PKK listed as a terrorist group. Nonetheless, the listing of PYD and YPG among the terrorist list might make them lose the advantage of getting the resources they need from dominant actors, such as the U.S. and Russia. Yet, Guney Yildiz, a research fellow at the German Center for Strategic Studies, argues that the name listing among the terrorist list is somehow relative and is greatly influenced by political incentives (Yildiz, Author's Interview with Mr. Guney Yildiz, 2020). So, as long as PKK is on the terrorist list, the PYD and YPG will keep denying their connections with them since that might affect the issue of foreign assistance.

3.2 Limited Options

This section deals with the limited options of PKK's affiliates that might make up for their limited allocation of resources and their need for foreign assistance from the U.S. and Russia. Mainly, it includes seeking these resources or making up for them by reaching out to other Kurdish groups. This is largely affected by the nature of these PKK's affiliates and PKK's relationships with other Kurdish groups. As well as it being affected by how much other Kurdish groups can really offer.

3.2.1 Other Kurdish Groups

The PKK and its affiliates have complex relations with other Kurdish groups. However, the connections between PYD, YPG, and PKK, with other Kurdish groups might work as an alternative option to make up for the need to seek assistance for leader players as agent actors which serve proxy warfare attempts within Syria. Yet, this option

undergoes various obstacles such as the unbalanced relations with Kurdish groups such as the KRG which have close relations with opposing players like Turkey. Nonetheless, the enhancement of PKK's relationships with other Kurdish groups has minimal chances of succeeding while having accelerating tensions with Turkey. Therefore, the viability of cooperation between Kurdish groups and the extent of efficient negotiations as an alternative option is to be explored while highlighting the various possible outcomes.

Throughout time, there have been various Kurdish groups which have been formed. For example, The Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), was initiated in 2005 and it includes various Kurdish parties which are located in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran (Winter, 2017). The PKK, PYD, and YPG are part of this patronage grouping which also includes PJAK¹, PCDK, and the HPG (White, 2015). The common ground between all of these Kurdish groups has been their belief in having autonomy with focus on the initial calls of Abdullah Ocalan. Therefore, the bond between Kurdish groups is possible, however the continuity of this bond is to be questioned because of other external issues involved such as foreign intervention.

The unification of Kurdish groups in Syria might take place even while having various distinct Kurdish groups included. An example would be when ISIS was considered as a danger for all Kurds combined. At that time, Barzani who is the KRG president and Salih Muslim who is a PYD leader, both called for the unity of Kurdish groups against ISIS (Kardas & Yesiltas, 2018). Therefore, common grounds between

¹ PJAK is known as the Party of Life of Kurdistan and is a nationalist Kurdish party located in Iran (Military Wiki, n.d.).

PCDK is known as the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party and its location is in Iraq (Reuters, 2018). HPG is known as the People's Protection Forces and was previously known as the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan. (Taucher, Vogl, & Webinger, 2020).

Kurdish groups can be found, but it has been the foreign powers that have made Kurdish groups' unity a complex issue.

However, combination and inclusion efforts between previously contrasting Kurdish groups such as the PYD and the KNC, known as the Kurdish National Council, and others have taken place. As mentioned by Kurdistan 24, an attempt to combine 25 Kurdish groups in northern Syria was initiated by the KNC (Wilgenburg, 2020). The KNC's previous relations with the PYD as the PKK's affiliate were disrupted. According to Kurdistan 24's news, the KNC has stated that, "necessity and importance of achieving unity serves the cause of the Kurdish people in Syria and the consolidation of their legitimate rights in the context of a federal, democratic, multi-national, and multi-religious Syria" (Wilgenburg, 2020). Also, the KNC believes that the U.S.A backs up such initiative. Similarly, Yildiz talks about the U.S.A.'s role in advocating peaceful relations between Kurdish groups within Syria and how that may diminish Turkey's aggressiveness in northern Syria (Yildiz, The US pushes for Kurdish unity in Syria with Turkish hostility and future Syria talks in mind, 2020). Therefore, the question lays in how much the U.S.A. as a principal actor really cares about having its agent actors united with their relative affiliations. Therefore, the relationship between the PKK's subgroups and other Kurdish groups within the Syrian proxy warfare is somewhat affected by the principal actors.

Accordingly, Sirwan Kajjo discusses how the prospects for Syrian Kurdish unity can mostly be achieved only through the back up of the U.S. although various sides of Kurdish groups in Syria have been willing to talk and discuss ongoing related issues (Kajjo, Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics, 2020). So, even if the various Kurdish groups within Syria are willing to talk and to

achieve cooperation between each other, the intervention of the U.S. would still be important to insure the outcoming results of such talks and discussions. Nevertheless, Sibel mentions the latest updates regarding the PYD and KNC union meetings going on in Syria which have been challenging especially because of the wants and desires of the different Kurdish groups involved (Sibel, 2021). The negotiations have not reached any solution on the ground, but the YPG is attempting to work out things for its best interests within the discussions of the KNC. Therefore, the difficulty and challenging part of having union ship between Kurdish groups is that fact that there are many foreign interventions going on.

3.2.2 Possible Assistance from Kurdish Groups

The relationship between the PYD and YPG with KRG might have a mutual understanding strong enough to make ways for potential sales of oil. Since the journalist and Kurdish analyst Sirwan Kajjo argues that, “it’s technically illegal because you know the Kurdish region, this autonomous region in Northeast Syria is not internationally recognized, right? So, you can’t make sales, you can’t export oil legally, but they do have certain agreements, certain type of understandings with the KRG in terms of sending crude oil and in return getting access to the market in Iraqi Kurdistan basically.” (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). Thus, the potential sales of oil with a Kurdish affiliation such as the KRG, might have great impact, yet it is still to a certain extent bound by KRG’s affiliations with Turkey.

As far as military cooperation between Kurdish groups, Dr. Azad Deewanee sees that having a unified collision of Kurdish groups in the military sense is hard to achieve because it is very difficult for two militant groups to satisfy working together such as the

YPG and the Peshmerga (Deewanee, 2021). Similarly, Sirwan Kajjo, mentions that the situation if, “Look parts of the talks between the KNC and the PYD right now, these unity talks right now is to bring 8,000 Peshmerga, Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga forces, that have been trained in Iraq, in Iraqi Kurdistan, to... Back to Syria, ... Having two Kurdish forces, two Kurdish fighting forces will be problematic you know like having basically a state within a state” (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). Nonetheless, a military alignment between two strong Kurdish groups is hard to imagine because it is very difficult to achieve.

In conclusion, PKK’s affiliates are grounded by the continuity of support, aid, and assistance from the U.S.A and Russia. The option of seeking assistance from other Kurdish groups is not as efficient since other Kurdish groups seek foreign assistance as well and do not have enough resources themselves, and even some of these Kurdish groups offer conditional assistance. Therefore, the available choice for the PYD and YPG is seeking cooperation and compromises with other involved actors such as the Syrian regime, yet even considering such a choice may have drawbacks and costs that these Kurdish groups cannot bear like losing more of the areas they control.

Chapter Four

Strategies and Implications

This chapter aims to uncover the actions, combat, and battlefield strategies carried out by the PYD and YPG within the Syrian proxy warfare. In so doing, this chapter aims to highlight how the U.S.A and Russia directly influence PKK's subgroups through military means while indirectly influencing the PKK. Thus, it starts by discussing the inputs regarding PYD and YPG's strategies as far as maintaining their call for autonomy of the administration in the Northeastern part of Syria. Ultimately, it ends by paving the way towards measuring the possibilities of PKK's independence ambitions and the viability of its affiliates' convergence from the Syrian proxy warfare.

4.1 Strategies of Cooperation and Compromise

The PKK's affiliates have been trying to maintain their hold of control over some areas within the Northeast of Syria. However, although the PYD and YPG are willing to keep up the fight in order to achieve the acknowledgement and independence of the autonomous administration authority of the Northeast of Syria, yet they are also willing to cooperate and compromise with other sides within the Syrian proxy warfare. Thus, cooperation and compromise has had its attributes and costs which have reflected on the PYD and YPG directly, while reflecting on the PKK indirectly.

4.1.1 Cooperation

This section explains how much PYD and YPG are willing to cooperate within the Syrian proxy warfare. The reason behind the PYD and YPG seeking cooperation with other sides is to try and maintain their control over the areas in the Northeast of Syria, however the reality behind cooperation is very different than the assumptions or talks which usually take place. Thus, the exploration of cooperation choices available for the PYD and YPG will indicate how this would further lead to more costs and compromises than reaching the interests of these Kurdish groups.

The main targeted cooptation of The PYD and YPG within the Syrian warfare is their alliance with the U.S. and Russia. The PYD and YPG's alliance with the U.S. and Russia was strategic according to them because these Kurdish groups needed to maintain control over their territory and were eager for international support (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). Yet, there are many consequences and drawbacks which have taken place because of this proposed strategic alliance. Thus, these strategies not only reflect on the PYD and the YPG, but also on the PKK indirectly.

The UK representative of the PYD party has clearly stated that it is willing to cooperate with other sides even if they oppose them and are very distinct from them (Semo, 2020). This has even been the case before when the PYD and YPG has cooperated with other sides such as the Assad regime. A clear example would be the cooperation between the Assad regime and the PYD and YPG over sales of gas and oil. However, the cooperation between these two sides usually takes place by the intervention of Russia. Nonetheless, Russia is willing to help and support the PYD and

YPG while actually seeking its own interests and doing what is in favor of its ally the Assad regime.

It is important to highlight that according to Bozsogi, the option to have a more positive situation with less costs can be through the cooperation with the Assad regime than with other major powers (Bozsogi, 2019). This is based on the fact that currently it is very distinct for leading players such as the U.S. to grant the PYD and YPG their interest of achieving their designated acknowledgement of the Northeastern parts of Syria controlled by them. Also, Meininghaus and Schlusing argue that drawing a connection with the local government which is the Syrian Assad regime is a better option for YPG as an armed group to have less probabilities for later breakdown (Meininghaus & Schlusing, 2020). Therefore, cooperation with Assad regime has been considered as a reasonable option for the PYD and the YPG.

Yet, even if the PYD and YPG have chosen to cooperate with the Syrian Assad regime, this is probably going to be mediated through Russia. As Dr. Azad Deewanee, an expert on peace studies and conflict resolution, explains that there is a great possibility to have the Russians establish cooperation between the Assad regime and the Kurds, but only to serve the interests of the Syrian regime (Deewanee, 2021). Thus, this means that even the option for reaching out for cooperative matters with other sides such as the Syrian regime would also take place through foreign intervention.

The PYD and YPG have tried cooperating with the Syrian Assad regime on many occasions. An example of such incidents is the incident of Afrin which is indicated by Professor Ghareeb. He mentions that the PYD and YPG reached out for the Syrian Assad regime's help to handle the Afrin situation at that time of struggle against the

Turks and they ended up losing Afrin while having the Turkish troops take over it (Ghareeb, 2021). The Afrin incident took place when the Turkish troops in Syria along with the Free Syrian Army attacked the SDF in Afrin between the 20th of January and the 18th of March in 2018 under a military operation called “Olive Branch” (OCHA, 2018). The PYD and YPG called for the Syrian regime’s help in Afrin because they were not capable of maintaining the situation, but this puts them in an awkward situation as allies of the U.S. since it opposes the Syrian regime. Therefore, cooperation with other participants within the Syrian proxy warfare may encounter several drawbacks and complex interrelated issues that the PYD and YPG have to be aware of.

Nevertheless, cooperation which is focused on a short period of time rather than a long period of time is bound to have several drawbacks. Bozsogi elaborates on this issue by saying that, “In using and supporting local proxies, foreign powers favor short-term calculations over long-term arrangements and sustainable alliances. Short-term pressures overriding long-term considerations risk stability, development, and strategy to fall victim to tactical thinking” (Bozsogi, 2019). This shows that the cooperation attempts with other sides probably lead to further drawbacks and costs unless it is well thought of and is designated to a long amount of time rather than a short period of time. Therefore, these choices of cooperation would lead to further compromises with no real interests achieved as far as Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG.

Cooperative measures are considered as alternative options for the PYD and YPG to be able to survive with less or even minimal U.S. or Russian assistance. However, Guney Yildiz, mentions that the Caesar sanctions may largely affect the issue. He also says, “An alternative could be Iraqi Kurdistan region. Another alternative could be Turkey, but all these requires lots of political arrangements like if there is peace

process between PYD and... Between PKK and Turkey, then you can see some sort of trade between turkey and the region can start not necessarily immediately officially, but gradually..." (Yildiz, Author's Interview with Mr. Guney Yildiz, 2020). This means that the PYD and YPG's possible cooperative measures might require compromises or undergoing certain peace negotiations which may pave the way towards having more efficient options available.

4.1.2 Compromise

This section highlights that the PYD and YPG are greatly willing to compromise with other players. Yet, this compromise does not include giving up the potential autonomy of the Northeastern administration in Syria. Nonetheless, the compromises regarding areas next to the Northern borders of Syria might cause a threat to the PKK.

The areas which have been controlled by the PYD and YPG in the Northeastern part of Syria are very important and they would consider undergoing compromises but not to the extent of letting go of these areas. Sirwan Kajjo, the journalist and Kurdish analyst, affirms that during his interview with the author of the thesis by saying, "That's the only thing that makes them... Keeps them relevant, okay? And that's the only card right now because they don't have any representation in the international arena in terms of peace talks between the opposition and the regime, they really want to hold on to this as a card. This is the only thing that makes them important basically. If they don't have that, if they give it up then nobody would care about them" (Kajjo, Author's Interview with Mr. Sirwan Kajjo, 2021). Therefore, the autonomous authority cannot be a mean or tool which the PYD and YPG could use to deter from the Syrian proxy warfare, it is their ultimate designated goal which they cannot let go of.

On the other hand, when considering the option of compromising, it is vital to remember how much the PYD and the YPG have limited allocation of resources with even more limited options and choices. Gregory Aftandilian, who is a scholar and expert of profound familiarity with the U.S. policy and the Middle East, says regarding the PYD and YPG's option of compromise, "Well, to compromise towards what? In other words, that's the big unknown question. They don't want to go back to what the situation was before the war... Civil war started, because they felt that their rights were infringed upon. But that may be the best option considering all the other options if the U.S. were to pull out, and Russia does not support them (Aftandilian, Author's Interview with Mr. Gregory Aftandilian, 2021). Aftandilian bases his assumption on the PYD and YPG's anticipation of what the new U.S. president Biden's outcomes may be towards the Syrian Kurds and Syria as a whole. Therefore, this sheds light on the fact that the PYD and YPG's attempts of compromises have great risks especially because it has to deal with leading players and foreign interventions.

It is interesting to realize how much the PYD and YPG are willing to compromise by hosting negotiations with other sides. Guney Yildiz says that, "I see the compromise between the Assad regime theoretically more theoretically easier... Than compromise between the YPG and the pro-Barzani Kurds" (Yildiz, Author's Interview with Mr. Guney Yildiz, 2020). This means that PYD and YPG's choice of upholding compromises in order to achieve their designated goal of autonomy may include cooperation with the Syrian Assad regime.

It is important to note that the PYD and YPG are willing to offer conditional compromises. This means that they can compromise to a large extent, but not to the extent of letting go of their potential autonomous authority in the Northeastern areas of

Syria. This is a reality that the Assad regime till this day fails to bare. Nonetheless, the Assad regime will continuously call for regaining the areas controlled by the PYD and YPG in Northeast Syria since it fails to accept the reality of how hard it is to regain power over all the areas in Syria such as in the pre-2011 period as highlighted within the author's interview with Mr. Sabri (Sabri, Author's Interview with Mr. Baraa Sabri, 2020). Therefore, the compromises which the PYD and YPG are willing to make will never include the assumption that the Assad regime has in mind.

Similarly, an important event which has taken place as far as the compromises that the PYD and YPG have made, is the U.S. previous president's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria. As highlighted by Mr. Gregory Aftandilian during his interview with the author of this thesis, the American officers and troops felt as if they were betraying the Kurds (Aftandilian, Author's Interview with Mr. Gregory Aftandilian, 2021). This feeling of disappointment and sense of betrayal due to Trump's previous order of U.S. troops' withdrawal from Syria was clearly mentioned by Dr. Alan Semo (Semo, 2020). Therefore, the compromise committed by the PYD and YPG at that time has cost them to lose some areas which they had control over in Syria.

Although the direct effect of implementing compromises was on the PYD and YPG, yet it has had indirect compromises for the PKK as well. The stance of PKK is affected by these compromises due to its effect on the surrounding areas where it is located. They are mostly located near Qandil mountains and next to the Turkish borders. Therefore, any decline from the side of the PYD and YPG close to the borders would drawback and reflect on the PKK.

The PKK has had continuous clashes and ongoing struggles with Turkey. The stance of PKK is very sensitive compared to what goes on in Syria's borders. This

means that any compromise that PYD and YPG take, may reflect on the border issues which involve the PKK. The strategies of the PKK need to inhale the possible scenarios of having the PYD and YPG calling for cooperation and compromises. The PYD and YPG are willing to keep up the fight and not letting go of the areas which they have controlled within the Northeastern part of Syria, and the PKK has to consider both the comebacks and drawbacks of that especially since the tensions with Turkey are accelerating because of that.

4.2 Implications Entangled

This part specifically focuses on showing how the PKK's affiliates' attempts at seeking compromise and cooperation as means have various drawbacks and risks of greater costs. Nonetheless, the implications of their involvement within the Syrian proxy warfare include having agreements that do not properly answer to the PYD and YPG's wants. Also, the implications entangled regarding the agreements that have taken place pave the way towards measuring the PYD and YPG's capabilities of deterring their involvement within the Syrian proxy warfare. Therefore, the broader projection towards the PKK's stance against Turkey shall be clarified.

4.2.1 Agreements

In this section, the focus will be on how the agreements have taken place by foreign powers such as the U.S. and Russia, and how they have affected the controlled areas by the PYD and the YPG within Northeastern Syria. Nonetheless, the focus will be on the reality of the international talks along with the agreements that have taken place. Thus, this would clarify further how interests collide while compromises and

cooperation reach a place of having implications entangled especially while noting how this has been affecting the PKK's stances indirectly.

Although the PYD and YPG are willing to cooperate and compromise in order to maintain their control over the areas in Northeastern Syria, yet several implications have taken place which make it hard to progress. These implications are bounded by the reality of not having proper inclusion of PYD, YPG, and other Kurdish groups in Syria, in the Geneva talks. The purpose behind the Geneva talks that have been going on ever since the Syrian crisis started, is to establish a UN mandate which stops the ongoing war within Syria and ultimately calls for having elections under the supervision of the UN (Cumming-Bruce & Jakes, 2019). As noted by Dr. Alan Semo, the representative of the PYD party in the UK, "Sochi agreement², Geneva meetings as negotiations, as you see they will be failed because we're not deciding. That's not me and you and another people who deciding... It's not Syrian people. It's Russian wanted that way, American wanted the other way, and Turkey's reckoning everyone, and Iran wanted different way...' (Semo, 2020). This indicates that although the PYD and YPG might have alliances of some sort with the U.S. and Russia, yet that alliance is restricted, and the bigger interests of the leading players are more considered rather than their interests as agent actors.

Similarly, Dr. Azad Deewanee, who is an expert on peace studies and conflict resolution, mentions that "The American diplomats, they try to connect it to the Geneva processes and then... But it is not enough for the Northeastern Syria because people there have their own administration. They have their own demands. They have their own

² The Sochi agreement is an agreement between Russia and Turkey which took place in the city of Sochi in Russia on the 17th of September in 2018 (Salaymeh & Acun, 2018).

ambitions also, kind of self-administration, economy, and they are not represented in the Geneva process because of the lobbying and Turkey” (Deewanee, 2021). Therefore, the costs or price of being involved within the Syrian proxy warfare is to have the interests and political attributes of the U.S. and Russia dominate those of Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG.

Accordingly, an example to clarify further implications which have been taking place is the safe zone agreement. The safe zone is usually established to maintain war-free protection zones for civilians (Nevett, 2019). However, in the case of Syria, the safe zone agreement was proposed by Turkey and agreed upon with Russia while U.S. troops withdraw from northern Syria in 2019. As Aydintasbas explains, she links the safe zone agreement with the border policy of Turkey with Syria. She mentions that “The safe zone comprises areas under direct Turkish rule – Tel Abyad, Jarablus, and Afrin – and Idlib, which is under Turkey’s military protection but ruled by an autonomous administration” (Aydintasbas, 2020). However, she describes what is going on there with reference to the safe zone as being part of the “Gazafication” of that area. Also, Turkey’s actions were described as invasions within Syria (Washington Kurdish Institute, 2020). Thus, the amount of danger and risk there is very high since foreign interventions are too self-centered and care minimally about what might happen to Syrian Kurds there and PYD or YPG.

Nevertheless, it is important to shed light on important agreements and incidents such as the safe zone agreement on several areas in Syria. Such agreements were described by the political writer Mr. Sabri as being security agreements rather than agreements which are aimed at imposing real safe areas within Syria (Sabri, Author's Interview with Mr. Baraa Sabri, 2020). He explains more in the interview which has

been conducted by the thesis' author on how Turkey makes use of such agreements to monitor and observe along with causing terror and threats to people located in these areas. Therefore, the implementation of such agreements is considered a large compromise for the PYD and YPG since it may cause danger within the areas controlled by them.

The main focus as far as agreements which have taken place within Syria is on the safe zone agreement because its trajectories have highlighted a sort of warning for the PYD and YPG. This warning was the realization that the assistance offered by alliance from U.S. as well as Russia does not accurately lie within the interests of the Kurdish groups in Syria, or it is in reality conditional. The U.S. former president Trump's decision to pull out American soldiers from the Northeaster part of Syria was regarded as an act of betrayal towards Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG (Evgenios, 2020). Needless to say, because of that decision the Turkish soldiers set foot in areas controlled by Kurdish groups while having by their side the Syrian opposition which is supported by Turkey.

Yet, the negotiations or agreements which have taken place in Syria so far have been mostly centered towards its claimers and no real incentives for establishing peace within Syria between groups has been effective. In a news report for the Orient, Sikora mentions that although the Syrian regime and Russia were willing to contribute within the Geneva talks previously, yet they were seeking their own benefits and he highlights their will to revenge (Sikora, 2016). This means that even if negotiations between the PYD and the Assad regime take place, the outcomes would mostly be of benefit to the Syrian Assad regime and Russia rather than the benefit of all sides.

4.2.2 Measuring Potential

This section concludes by considering the Kurdish groups' (PKK and its subgroups), dependency potential course correction versus the hegemony of proxy warfare intact. The PYD and YPG's assumed scenario to deter from their current position within the Syrian proxy warfare is hard to achieve especially that they are still trying to achieve their ultimate interests of having a recognized and independent autonomous administration within the Northeast of Syria. Turkey and other foreign powers or sides are not in favor of having the PYD and YPG achieve this goal and that projects indirectly on the PKK.

The complexity of the situation requires the need to understand the stance of each of the main actors and the participating actors. According to Wimmen, while the PYD and YPG are aiming at establishing an autonomous authority within the Northeast of Syria, the tensions between PKK and Turkey are at rise especially because of the border sensitivity and the U.S. involvement beside PYD and YPG in Northern Syria (Wimmen, 2017). This means that the several ongoing interrelated issues with regards to the PKK and Turkish opposing relations and the U.S. and Turkish conflicting relations, will make it very hard for Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG to find a way out of the Syrian proxy warfare with least costs.

The incidents accompanied by the withdrawal of American troops from Northeastern areas of Syria are proof that the dependency of PYD and YPG goes beyond just military aid and financial support. Dr. Azad Deewanee, an expert on peace studies and conflict resolution highlights that, "In terms of diplomacy, there is coalition or Syria... Northeast Syria office in Washington, and also there's one in Paris. There are in

Europe... Their offices in Europe and in Arab Gulf countries, Emirates, and one in Egypt. So, ...They have their own offices, but the diplomatic support is limited...” (Deewanee, 2021). Thus, although they have diplomatic offices in several cities around the world, they lack international acknowledgement of the autonomous administration within the Northeast of Syria. Therefore, without diplomatic support from leading players such as the U.S. and Russia, the PYD and YPG will remain restrained.

These Kurdish groups lack proper political and diplomatic representation at international talks although they have accomplished a lot just by means of seizing control of several areas within the Northeastern part of Syria. Needless to say, they need their alliance with the U.S. and Russia although the political and diplomatic assistance provided by them are very minimal and are more biased towards these leading powers’ interests. Thus, this dilemma is a continuous ongoing process which needs grass-root changes.

Accordingly, Guney Yildiz, a research fellow at the German Center for Strategic Studies, discusses that, “I mean there are two ways out of this conflict for the autonomous administration; One is through Ankara, and one is through Damascus” (Yildiz, Author's Interview with Mr. Guney Yildiz, 2020). This means that it is either the PYD and YPG try and seek having better relationships with the Syrian Assad regime or Turkey in order to have their goal of achieving autonomy within the Northeast of Syria happen in reality. Both of these scenarios are almost impossible to happen since according to the political writer Baraa Sabri, the Syrian regime still thinks it can regain control over all the parts of Syria even if in reality than is impossible to happen (Sabri, Author's Interview with Mr. Baraa Sabri, 2020). Also, Turkey is very far from

supporting the wills of the PYD and YPG since it considers them as a threat because of assuming they have close ties with the PKK.

Similarly, the situation of PYD and YPG in the Syrian proxy warfare projects on the PKK in an indirect way. As Guney Yildiz, says that “in other areas it provoked Turkey that... You know very highly, so that Turkey started cracking down on the pro-PKK Kurds in Turkey. Not only pro-PKK Kurds, most Kurds in Turkey, which limited their activity quite severely” (Yildiz, Author's Interview with Mr. Guney Yildiz, 2020). In other terms, Kurds and specifically pro-PKK Kurds in Syria might face restrictions in Turkey because of the current situation going on in Syria between the PYD and YPG regarding Turkey or Turkish troops.

Nevertheless, the odd of having the PYD and YPG handle their situation on their own is very minimal especially while having interrelated issues linked to the PKK because of Turkey’s continuous accusations. The options available to stop seeking assistance from the U.S. or Russia are very limited. The PYD and YPG have various obstacles regarding its relationships with other Kurdish group, if they were to choose this path in order to make up for their need of foreign assistance. Also, the impact of PYD and YPG’s choices reflect indirectly on PKK which makes its affiliates involvement within the proxy warfare of Syria even more complex. Similarly, the path of seeking cooperation and compromises with other participants increases the risks of having more costs rather than decreasing them. Therefore, the PYD and YPG have their hands tied within this Syrian proxy warfare.

This chapter concludes that PKK and its subgroups’ dependency is to be considered with regards to the hegemony of the Syrian proxy warfare. Nonetheless, the two assumed scenarios to outgrow the Syrian proxy warfare and unlink from the U.S. and Russia as

leading powers, are having to deal with Syria and Turkey which also have interrelations with foreign major powers. Therefore, the dependency of the PYD and YPG will continue to take place especially since the course of reflection extends the Syrian borders onto the inclusion of PKK Kurds even if they are not located in Syria.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This chapter concludes by emphasizing the importance of the module utilized within this thesis as far as clarifying the PYD and YPG participation in the Syrian proxy warfare as dominated actors which need assistance from the U.S. and Russia as dominating actors. It draws on the issue of having minimal potential course correction in the dependency relationship within proxy-warfare because of the restricted options and strategies available. Also, it addresses the prospects of the Kurdish question with regards to the PKK and its affiliates' ambitions in Syria. Finally, the focus is on the increasing tensions between the Kurdish groups and Turkey, while also discussing the new U.S. president Joe Biden's prospective positive impact as implied by most of the experts interviewed by the author.

Whether the proxy warfare in Syria continues or not, this mostly depends on certain factors which cannot be predicted in the near future and are interlinked with actions that the various parties involved might commit. Accordingly, the possibility of this dependence is really a case and a possibility which depends on what USA and Russia might decide. This is because of having a dominant agent-approach that has U.S.A and Russia greatly affecting the options and ambitions of the PYD and YPG which affect the stance of the PKK in an indirect way. The options of the PYD and YPG include the potential sales of wheat, oil, and gas, while their ultimate ambition is achieving the recognition of the areas controlled by them in the Northeast of Syria as an

autonomous authority. Eventually, this reflects on the stance of the PKK indirectly by triggering its tensions with Turkey and making it even harder for them to obtain their own goals of autonomy.

Nevertheless, the dependency relationship between the dominant leading actors and the dominated agent actors will most probably carry on into the future. PKK's affiliates have to continue seeking assistance from the U.S. and Russia especially since the options and strategies they have are restricted by factors they cannot control. The limitations of the options and the strategies which the PYD and YPG have are ground locked by Turkey, Syria, and the complex relationships they have with other Kurdish groups. Therefore, the PYD and YPG must try to maintain their alliance with the U.S. and Russia in the near future because the current alternative options are very costly and make it harder for them to achieve their ambitions.

In conclusion, from the perspective of the issue of the Syrian proxy warfare, the PYD and YPG will continue to need their transactional and need-based assistance from the U.S. and Russia, respectively. The PKK's affiliates have no current chances of relying on themselves and by themselves, so they shall continue being agent actors of leading actors such as the U.S. and Russia. Ultimately, this would continue to reflect on the PKK's stance and especially while Turkey insists on labeling PKK and its affiliates as terrorist groups.

5.1 Kurdish Independence

In this section, the discussion will focus on the attempted PKK's question of Kurdish state independence and recognition, and where it is now. Thus, it will explain

how the involvement of PKK's extensions, PYD and YPG, within the Syrian proxy warfare has greatly affected the Kurdish question as a whole. This is especially significant since the PYD and YPG are aiming to achieve the acknowledgement of the autonomous administration in Northeastern Syria as an independent entity with international recognition. Therefore, the original quest of PKK for an independent and well-bordered defined Kurdish entity has shifted by its extensions which are now calling for an entity that includes several identities rather than just the Kurdish identity.

As extensions or affiliates of the PKK, the PYD and YPG's involvement within the Syrian proxy warfare has projected on PKK's situation and vice versa. This means that any progress regarding the potential autonomous administration in the Northeast of Syria, is considered as a sense of achievement for the PKK even if it did not have direct involvements. Yet, the Kurdish question has been subject to various tensions especially because of the conflicts occurring near the border of Syria. As mentioned by Duran, it is hard to achieve a solution for the Kurdish question in a peaceful manner as long as the tensions and security matters at the border are still at rise (Duran, 2021). Therefore, the PKK is still very far from achieving its ambitions regarding the Kurdish question especially with its extension's involvement within the Syrian proxy warfare.

Simultaneously, Turkey will continue its fight against PKK, PYD, and YPG while considering them as terrorist groups since it views them as a form of threat both internally and externally. According to a Turkish news broadcast, up to eight people were arrested in Turkey who are affiliated to the PKK, PYD, and YPG, because they were accused of illegally entering Turkey and being terrorists (A Haber, 2021). This shows that having negotiations or talks related to find a solution for the Kurdish question will not take place as long as the link between the PKK and its extensions is still drawn by Turkey while also

linking them to terrorism. Therefore, the transnational Kurdish-Turkish conflict is still spilling over onto the Syrian proxy warfare while having drawbacks even internally in Turkey and other places.

Nevertheless, the Kurdish question has long been linked to the ongoing Kurdish-Turkish conflict. As Shareef and Stansfield mention, Turkey will continue to claim that anything that has to do with Kurds and the Kurdish question whether it is PKK or other Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG, it will be a threat to Turkey (Shareef & Stansfield, 2017). They also try to dismantle the Kurdish question by revisiting it in places other than Syria such as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. However, the Kurdish question of the PKK has now shifted and has become more interlinked towards what is happening in Syria regarding the PYD and YPG's proclaimed autonomous authority over areas in the Northeast of Syria.

Even though the PYD and YPG's ambition of autonomy makes them willing to obtain cooperation and compromises with the Syrian regime, yet the Syrian regime might greatly consider them as a threat. Their ambition of having the areas controlled by them in the Northeast of Syria, being acknowledged and legitimized causes the Syrian state's influence to shrink (Helou, 2021). This means that instead of the Syrian regime having full control over Syria's areas and its resources, it has to share them with these Kurdish groups. Thus, this is a continuous challenge for not only Syria, but also Russia which tries to balance its alliance with the PYD and YPG, while maintaining its interests with the Syrian regime.

It is vital to note that the PKK's extensions' control over areas in the Northeast of Syria can be considered as a point of strength for the PKK although the PYD and

YPG continue disregarding having any ties with the PKK (International Crisis Group, 2017). Accordingly, in order for the PYD and YPG to gain their prolonged independence and recognition of autonomy over the areas in the Northeast part of Syria, they must not let their assumed connection with the PKK get in the way. Thus, the PKK's stance with regards to the border and its relation to the PYD and YPG, might greatly affect the prospects of the autonomous administration especially because of its growing tensions with Turkey.

5.2 Further Consideration

This section discusses the options that the PKK and its subgroups might have while trying to retain their oppositional stance towards Turkey. It also mentions the possible positive impacts of the new U.S. president on this issue. Ultimately, the prospective considerations of the Syrian proxy warfare and the involvement of the PKK's affiliates is discussed with regards to their stances as agent actors to leading players and their reflection on the PKK.

It is vital to highlight the fact that the Trump administration's decisions or way of altering things is sort of different than that of Biden's present elected administration. With regards to the familiarity with the issues and how the previous U.S. president Trump's way of dealing with the issues related to Kurds in Syria, Dr. Azad Deewanee, an expert on peace studies and conflict resolution claims that Trump was not very familiar with these issues. He says that "Trump was not... Was not familiar with the Kurdish problem or question as a whole question" (Deewanee, 2021). Thus, Trump was to a certain extent more interested towards relationships with Turkey and a clear example is the famous phone call he has with Turkish president Erdogan in which he

ended up complying with Turkey's wishes. Therefore, the previous U.S. Trump administration has definitely left a large impact on the Syrian proxy warfare situation in a way that reflected as drawbacks on the Syrian Kurds to a certain extent.

However, according to the PYD representative in the UK, Dr. Alan Semo, the PYD are very optimistic regarding the new elected Biden administration (Semo, 2020). Similarly, Dr. Azad Deewanee, an expert on peace studies and conflict resolution mentions that, "Biden is a... As a president is well informed. Biden is in politics since more than possibly about fifty years you know, since he was young. So, Biden knows strategy more than trump" (Deewanee, 2021). Biden's knowledge regarding the Kurdish issues underlying Syria, might pave the way towards further considerations that weren't possible during the times of the previous U.S. president Trump. Therefore, the odds of having the PYD and YPG's interests achieved are higher during the times of the current U.S. president Biden.

The new U.S. presidency of Joe Biden might be sort of challenging in terms of the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey. As mentioned in the article written by Gurbuz and Aslan, "Biden openly suggested that the YPG should be supported in Syria while questioning the presence of NATO missiles in Turkey's Incirlik Air Base (Gurbuz & Aslan, 2020). This means that even though Biden may understand the wants and needs of the YPG, yet the tensions with Turkey are probably going to accelerate. In that sense, the political scholar and expert, Gregory Aftandilian, confirms during his online interview with the author that, "But McGurk also has displayed a lot of sympathy towards the Syrian Kurds and their ability to fight against the ISIS. So, my sense is that not much is really going to change except that the U.S.-Turkish relationship will not be as friendly as it was under Trump" (Aftandilian, Author's Interview with Mr. Gregory Aftandilian,

2021). Therefore, if the U.S. assistance for the PYD and YPG increases during Joe Biden's term, this means that the tensions with Turkey might increase and further complexities might take place.

Similarly, Iddon discusses that although the appointment of McGurk under Joe Biden's administration is in favor of Kurdish groups such as the YPG, PYD, and PKK, yet the realities that the Turkish troops have drawn are very different than what Biden's administration is expecting to take place. He mentions that "... Turkey has launched successive ground incursions against the SDF/YPG. It invaded the isolated northwestern enclave of Afrin in January 2018 and later conquered a large swath of territory between the main Syrian Kurdish regions in the northeast in October 2019. In light of these operations, Turkish officials calculate that they have created "new realities" or facts on the ground in northern Syria that will give the Biden administration and McGurk little to no space to maneuver in that country" (Iddon, 2021). Also, it was mentioned in the Daily Sabah article that along with the U.S. leadership McGurk has, "rebranded the YPG as the Syrian Democratic Forces as an attempt to confuse people in Washington and to hide the real nature of the YPG/PKK" (Aslan, 2021). Ultimately, the challenges between the U.S. and Turkey will progress as long as the U.S. under Biden administration chooses to continue its support and assistance to the YPG.

Nevertheless, from Turkey's side, Erdogan is willing to work on enhancing its relations with the U.S., yet the issues related to the U.S.'s assistance to YPG make it hard for the U.S.-Turkish relations. Idiz describes that, "The dialogue of the deaf between Ankara and Washington over the YPG issue is set to continue for the foreseeable future" (Idiz, 2021). This means that Erdogan has the potential of working on having better U.S.-Turkish relations, but that is only depending on his conditions

which he seeks to fulfill. Similarly, Celikbas mentions in his article that Turkey urges the U.S. to stop giving assistance to such groups while describe these groups as being terrorist groups, yet Ankara believes that it is more possible to find relative intuitions regarding the Assad regime in Syria (Celikbas, 2021). Thus, escalations between Turkey and Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG are bound to take place in the near future because of the unwillingness to have cooperation between them from Turkey's side.

Accordingly, Turkey's recent claims indicate that it has no attempts of dropping out its accusations of PYD and YPG having direct links with the PKK. In an article written by the Arab News, the issue regarding the killings of 13 Turkish troops hostages in Iraq by PKK has been discussed. It was mentioned that 'The Turkish approach is also complicated by the presence of the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG forces in Syria, and the anger of a growing number of increasingly radicalized young Iraqi Kurds. Indeed, Turkish actions in northern Iraq are partly driven by developments in northern Syria'' (Arab News, 2021). This means that anything that goes on within Syria shall reflect the issues that go on outside Syria between the Kurdish groups and Turkey, and vice versa. Therefore, the transnational conflict might probably continue to presume whether it is from the PKK's side or the side of its extensions the PYD and YPG.

In that same sense, Turkey might try to deviate the U.S. from giving assistance to Kurdish groups such as the PYD and YPG with their links to PKK. After the current incident of having the 13 Turkish soldiers killed in Iraq by PKK fighters, Turkey blames the U.S. for giving assistance to PKK's assumed extensions which are the PYD and YPG in Syria. In Majeed's article, he mentions that Turkey's president Erdogan has stated, "Did you not say you don't support the PKK, the YPG, or the PYD? You are

with them and behind them pure and simple” (Majeed, 2021). Also, Kanat said that the U.S.’s position with regards to the killing of those 13 troops by Kurdish forces is very problematic towards the not only Turkey but also the democratic public (Kanat, 2021). Therefore, as long as the U.S. continues to be an ally for the PYD and YPG in Syria, Turkey will not rest until this alliance is broken.

Consequently, as the dependency course of action implies within the Syrian proxy warfare, the resources, options, and actions of the PKK’s affiliates are limited by the decisions made by the U.S. and Russia. This indicates that the acceleration of tensions between the PKK’s affiliates and Turkey is grounded by the decisions made between U.S. and Turkey on Syria. Joe Biden might have a positive impact on the PKK’s affiliates as far as offering assistance to them in the near future, but this does not guarantee that the situation of the PYD and YPG within the Syrian proxy warfare would enhance. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee that the ambitions and goals of the PYD and YPG would be fully fulfilled or that the Kurdish question might finally have all inquiries related to it answered. Therefore, it is vital to observe the future prospects of the Syrian proxy warfare while also considering the viable attributions of the dominant-agent possible ongoing dependency and how that might reflect on the stance of both the PKK’s affiliates and PKK with regards to other players within Syria.

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Appendices

Appendix I: List of Questions

Appendix I-a : Assistance/ Support

- **First Main Question:** How far are the U.S.A and Russia willing to support and aid the PKK's affiliates?

Prompts:

- A. What is this support?
- B. As allies of the YPG and PYD, how sustainable is the U.S.A and Russia's financial support and military aid to such groups?
- C. As an expert what potential obstacles confront this alliance? Are they internal issues or externally imposed in your opinion?
- D. How does each of U.S.A and Russia deliver equipment to the PKK's affiliates?
- E. Do you have any details about what kind of weaponry is provided as part of military aid?
- F. How does financial support take place? How are these transactions obtained?
- G. What are other forms of assistance that also take place?
- H. What is the possibility of having potential agricultural income generating businesses?
- I. What about potential sales of oil? How can this take place?

- **Second Main Question:** To what extent does direct U.S and Russian assistance to the PYD and YPG affect PKK indirectly? please describe how so?

Prompts:

- A. How does the control of PKK's affiliates over some areas in Northern Syria affect PKK's stance indirectly?
- B. How does PKK project the involvement of its subgroups in the Syrian proxy warfare?
- C. How can you explain the increasing tensions between PKK and Turkey because of this?
- D. What do you think of the safe zone agreement? What is its impact on PKK?

E. What are other possible agreements or policies that might take place? How can they affect PKK's stance?

- **Third Main Question:** How far can other Kurdish groups support PKK's affiliates and the PKK?

Prompts:

- A. What is your opinion on having a unified union of the Kurdish groups in Syria? How possible is that?
- B. How possible is it for PKK's affiliates and the PKK to have better relationships with other Kurdish groups in Syria?
- C. What are the obstacles facing the relationship between PKK's affiliates and PKK with other Kurdish groups in Syria?
- D. What kind of support can be offered by other Kurdish groups?
- E. How possible is it for the support offered by other Kurdish groups to make up for PKK's subgroups' need of assistance from the U.S.A and Russia?

Appendix I-b : Options

- **Fourth Main Question:** Although PYD and YPG are branched from the PKK, yet they somehow differ in future goals and strategies. How can you explain this?

Prompts:

- A. How can you explain the difference between the PKK and its subgroups as far as potential goal of autonomy?
- B. To what extent are PKK's subgroups' strategies affecting PKK's strategies?
- C. How can you explain the issue of not having PKK's affiliates listed as terrorist groups although PKK is considered as a terrorist group? What are the prospects of this issue?
- D. How far are either PKK's affiliates or the PKK willing to cooperate or compromise with external actors?

- **Fifth Main Question:** The PYD and YPG seek assistance from the U.S.A and Russia because of their limited allocation of resources. What are possible alternative options?

Prompts:

- A. How can PKK's subgroups make local revenues?
- B. How can the attainment of autonomous authority affect this?
- C. What other parties are willing to offer military aid and financial support? And how?

- D. To what extent can other Kurdish groups make up for PKK's subgroups' limited allocation of resources?
- E. How can cooperating with Assad regime work as an option?

- **Sixth Main Question:** How far are the PKK's affiliates willing to compromise potential autonomous authority as an option to somehow deviate from the Syrian proxy warfare?

Prompts:

- A. How can achieving autonomous authority affect the stance of PKK's subgroups?
- B. How far are the PKK's subgroups willing to compromise or cooperate?
- C. To what extent are the PKK's affiliates willing to cooperate with Assad regime?

- **Seventh Main Question:** If PKK's affiliates were to give up potential autonomous authority in Syria as an option to deviate from the Syrian proxy warfare, how would this affect the PKK?

Prompts:

- A. What options does PKK have as far as the projection of its affiliates?
- B. What happens if the safe zone agreement or other similar policies turn out to be successful?
- C. How far can PKK still achieve its potential goal of Kurdish autonomy as a recognized and well-bordered nation?
- D. How can this affect the acceleration of tensions between the PKK and Turkey?
- E. How far can PKK keep up its fight against Turkish troops?

Appendix I-c :Prospects

- **Eighth Main Question:** What are the future prospects of the Syrian proxy warfare?

Prompts:

- A. To what extent is it possible for a peace agreement to take place?
- B. How far are PKK's subgroups willing to keep up the fight?

- C. What is your outlook on the possibility of the deviance of PKK's subgroups from the Syrian proxy warfare?
- D. How can the role of external actors evolve?
- E. What is the impact of the new U.S. president on this issue? What changes might occur as far as U.S. foreign strategy regarding the Syrian proxy warfare?

Appendix II: IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board (IRB)

لجنة المراجعة

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL

To: Ms. Ghida Itani
Dr. Joseph Helou
Assistant Professor
School of Arts & Sciences

NOTICE ISSUED: 7 December 2020
EXPIRATION DATE: 7 December 2021
REVIEW TYPE: EXPEDITED / INITIAL

Date: December 7, 2020

RE: **IRB #:** LAU.SAS.JH1.7/Dec/2020

Protocol Title: *The Kurdish-Turkish Quandary: Foreign Intervention, Proxy Warfare and Limited Resources*

The above referenced research project has been approved by the Lebanese American University, Institutional Review Board (LAU IRB). This approval is limited to the activities described in the Approved Research Protocol and all submitted documents listed on page 2 of this letter. **Enclosed with this letter are the stamped approved documents that must be used.**

APPROVAL CONDITIONS FOR ALL LAU APPROVED HUMAN RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

LAU RESEARCH POLICIES & PROCEDURES: All individuals engaged in the research project must adhere to the approved protocol and all applicable LAU IRB Research Policies & Procedures. **PARTICIPANTS must NOT be involved in any research related activity prior to IRB notice date or after the expiration date.**

PROTOCOL EXPIRATION: The LAU IRB approval expiry date is listed above. The IRB Office will send an email at least 45 days prior to protocol approval expiry - Request for Continuing Review - in order to avoid any temporary hold on the initial protocol approval. It is your responsibility to apply for continuing review and receive continuing approval for the duration of the research project. Failure to send Request for Continuation before the expiry date will result in suspension of the approval of this research project on the expiration date.

MODIFICATIONS AND AMENDMENTS: All protocol modifications must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

NOTIFICATION OF PROJECT COMPLETION: A notification of research project closure and a summary of findings must be sent to the IRB office upon completion. Study files must be retained for a period of 3 years from the date of notification of project completion.

IN THE EVENT OF NON-COMPLIANCE WITH ABOVE CONDITIONS, THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR SHOULD MEET WITH THE IRB ADMINISTRATORS IN ORDER TO RESOLVE SUCH CONDITIONS. IRB APPROVAL CANNOT BE GRANTED UNTIL NON-COMPLIANT ISSUES HAVE BEEN RESOLVED.

If you have any questions concerning this information, please contact the IRB office by email at irb@lau.edu.lb



The IRB operates in compliance with the national regulations pertaining to research under the Lebanese Minister of Public Health's Decision No.141 dated 27/1/2016 under LAU IRB Authorization reference 2016/3708, the international guidelines for Good Clinical Practice, the US Office of Human Research Protection (45CFR46) and the Food and Drug Administration (21CFR56). LAU IRB U.S. Identifier as an international institution: FWA00014723 and IRB Registration # IRB00006954 LAUIRB#1

Dr. Joseph Stephan
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED:

LAU IRB Exempt Protocol Application	Received 30 November 2020
Research Proposal	Received 30 November 2020
Informed Consent Form	Received 30 November 2020, amended 3 December 2020
List of Questions	Received 30 November 2020
Suggested Interviewees	Received 30 November 2020
IRB Comments sent: 3 December 2020	PI response to IRB's comments dated: 3 December 2020
CITI Training – Joseph Helou	Cert.# 39846130 Dated (1 December 2020)
CITI Training –Ghida Itani & CV	Cert.# 37876362 Dated (21 November 2020)



Appendix III: Consent Form

Consent to participate in an Interview

The Kurdish-Turkish Quandary: Foreign Intervention, Proxy Warfare and Limited Resources

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project by completing the following consent form. I am a student at the Lebanese American University, and I am completing this research project as part of my master's thesis research. The purpose of this interview is to shed light on proxy warfare in Syria and the Kurdish politics.

By continuing with the consent form, you agree with the following statements:

- 1. I have been given sufficient information about this research project.*
- 2. I understand that my name and identity shall be visible when applicable.*
- 3. I understand that if I choose to speak on condition of anonymity my identity will remain anonymous. My name will not be written nor be kept in any other records. I also have the option to use a pseudonym.*
- 4. On condition of anonymity, when the results of the study are reported, I will not be identified by name or any other information that could be used to infer my identity. Only researchers will have access to view any data collected during this research however data cannot be linked to me.*
- 5. I understand that I may withdraw from this research any time I wish and that I have the right to skip any question I don't want to answer.*
- 6. I understand that my refusal to participate will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which I otherwise am entitled to.*
- 7. I have been informed that the research abides by all commonly acknowledged ethical codes and that the research project has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Lebanese American University*
- 8. I understand that if I have any additional questions, I can ask the research team listed below.*
- 9. I have read and understood all statements on this form.*
- 10. I voluntarily agree to take part in this research project by completing the following consent form*

Kindly answer the following questions:

How do you prefer to have the interview recorded?

- a) Audio and video*
- b) Audio only*

How do you prefer to be identified?

- a) Directly: By title*
- b) Indirectly: By reference to a pseudonym (such as expert 1, expert 2...etc.)*

If you have any questions, you may contact:

<i>Name (PI)</i>	<i>Phone number</i>	<i>Email address</i>
<i>Dr. Joseph Helou</i>	<i>+961 3444090</i>	<i>Joseph.helou01@lau.edu.lb</i>
<i>Ghida Itani</i>	<i>+961 3122880</i>	<i>Ghida.itani02@lau.edu</i>

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or you want to talk to someone outside the research, please contact the:

*Institutional Review Board Office,
Lebanese American University
3rd Floor, Dorm A, Byblos Campus
Tel: 00 961 1 786456 ext. (2546)
irb@lau.edu.lb*



Appendix IV: List of Interviewees

Name	Title	Date and Time of Interview
John Saleh	Journalist and political expert ³ (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, n.d.).	12-12-2020
Alan Semo	Representative of the PYD party in UK ⁴ (BBC World News, n.d.).	19-12-2020
Baraa Sabri	Journalist and political expert ⁵ (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, n.d.).	20-12-2020
Guney Yildiz	Research fellow at the German Center for Strategic Studies ⁶ (Middle East Institute, n.d.).	29-12-2020
Azad Deewanee	Expert on peace studies and conflict resolution ⁷ (Azad Deewanee, n.d.).	18-1-2021
Gregory Aftandilian	Scholar and expert of profound familiarity with the U.S. policy and the Middle East ⁸ (American University, n.d.).	25-1-2021
Sirwan Kajjo	Journalist and Kurdish analyst ⁹ (Kajjo, Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics, 2020)	5-2-2021
Edmund Ghareeb	Professor and expert on Kurdish and U.S. issues ¹⁰ (Arab-American Business & Professional Association, n.d.)	2-3-2021

³ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (n.d.). *John Saleh*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/john-saleh>

⁴ BBC World News. (n.d.). *Alan Semo*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from BBC World News: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3ct5tk7>

⁵ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (n.d.). *Baraa Sabri*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/baraa-sabri>

⁶ Middle East Institute. (n.d.). *Guney Yildiz*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from Middle East Institute: <https://www.mei.edu/profile/guney-yildiz>

⁷ Azad Deewanee. (n.d.). Retrieved February 18, 2021, LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/azad-deewanee-a39bb9172/>

⁸ American University. (n.d.). *Gregory Aftandilian*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from American University: <https://www.american.edu/sis/faculty/aftandil.cfm>

⁹ Kajjo, S. (2020, October 19). *Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics*. Retrieved December 19, 2020, from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prospects-syrian-kurdish-unity-assessing-local-and-regional-dynamics>

¹⁰ Arab-American Business & Professional Association. (n.d.). *Edmund Ghareeb*. Retrieved February 18, 2021, from Arab-American Business & Professional Association: <https://abpadc.org/edmund-ghareeb/>