

UNDERSTANDING NON-STATE ACTORHOOD: THE CASE OF THE YPG

A Master's Thesis

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To my friends and family



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THE YPG

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract: This thesis assesses the actorhood and agency of a violent non-state actor, the People's Protection Unit (YPG), through Aydinli's (2015, 2016) "Autonomy, Representation, Influence" (ARI) analytical and theoretical framework. The theory depicts the agency of this violent non-state actor (VNSA) via its aspects of "autonomy, representation and influence" between the 2014-2020 timeframe. This research shows how the YPG has transformed and continues to survive, despite threats to its actorhood from other VNSAs and states alike, while seeking to emphasize the increased autonomy, representation, and influence that the VNSA has had over the years. In doing so, it aims to also critique and provide suggestions to improve the ARI framework. This research also relies on supportive semi-structured interviews conducted with academicians, public officials, and politicians to analyze and gather insight on the YPG's actorhood from experts on the field.

Keywords: ISIS, PYD, SDF, USA, YPG, violent non-state actors, Syrian Kurds

ÖZET

Devlet Dışı Aktörlüğü Anlamak: YPG Örneği

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Özet: Bu tez, Aydınli'nin (2015, 2016) ARI analitik ve kavramsal çerçevesi kapsamında şiddet içeren devlet dışı bir aktörün, YPG'nin, aktörlüğünü ve kuruluş yapısını incelemektedir. Bu teori, 2014-2020 yılları arasında devlet dışı şiddet içeren aktörlerin (VNSA) kuruluş yapılarını, onların “özerklik, temsiliyet ve etki” yaklaşımından resmetmektedir. Bu araştırma, YPG'nin kendisine yönelik diğer devlet dışı şiddet içeren aktörler ve benzer şekilde devletler tarafından kendisine yönelik tehditlere rağmen nasıl bir dönüşüme uğradığını ve hayatta kalmayı sürdürdüğünü ARI teorisini kullanarak ve eleştirerek ve devlet dışı şiddet içeren aktörlerin sahip olduğu yıldan yıla artan özerklik, temsiliyet ve etkisini vurgulayarak göstermektedir. Ayrıca bu araştırma, sahadaki uzmanlardan YPG'nin aktörlüğüne dair bilgileri analiz etmek ve bir araya getirmek amacıyla akademisyenler, devlet görevlileri ve siyasetçiler ile gerçekleştirilmiş yarı-yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ile desteklenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD, IŞİD, PYD, SDG, Suriyeli Kürtler, şiddet içeren devlet dışı aktörler, YPG

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Have a pleasant read!

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKP – Justice and Development Party

AANES – The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

CENTCOM – United States Central Command

EU – European Union

FSA – Free Syrian Army

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

KNC – Kurdish National Council

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

NSA – non-state actor

OIR – Operation Inherent Resolve

Peshmerga – KRG’s military unit

PKK - Kurdistan Workers’ Party

PYD – Democratic Union Party

SDC – Syrian Democratic Council

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

SNC – Syrian National Council

TEV DEM - Movement for a Democratic Society

UN – United Nations

VNSA – violent non-state actor

YPG – People’s Protection Units

YPJ – Women’s Protection Units

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis research, entitled "Understanding non-state actorhood: the case of the YPG", aims to assess the actorhood and agency of the People's Protection Units (YPG), by applying the "ARI" theoretical framework (Aydinli 2015, 2016), which enables the author to look at a VNSA's agency via its "autonomy, representation and influence" aspects, further elaborated in the methodology chapter. While in 2014 it was not clear to which direction the Democratic Union Party (PYD)-led autonomous project would go and whether its Autonomous Administration (AANES) and the relations that it had developed with states and non-state actors would be sustainable, the PYD, its military-wing the YPG, and now, the umbrella military organization of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which is largely dominated by the YPG, seem to be managing one of the most challenging international relationships, that is, cooperating with powers like the USA, while having an impact on state-to-state relations - Turkey, which it considers the YPG to be a terrorist organization. Therefore, the main research question in this thesis is "What is the degree of actorhood of the Kurdish non-state actor entity (YPG), as tested by the ARI framework of Violent Non-State Actorhood?"

According to Küçük (2017:199), there are few cases in international relations where an NSA's actions have resulted in foreign policy crises. However, the YPG as an actor has had such an impact on Turkey-USA relations while trying to become a "second legal partner" for the superpower. This has had wider regional consequences showing what such largely formal cooperation between states and violent non-state actors can lead to in terms of state-to-state relations and regional conflict dynamics. Under international law, "sovereign states with certain population within a defined territory and an independent government have the right to have international relations

with one another” (Kücük 2017:204). Therefore, although not regulated by international law, the PYD, its military wing, the YPG and now, the umbrella military group, the SDF as non-state actors have developed into a state-like structure in its relations with powers like the USA, Russia and other European countries, while governing its local constituencies in Northern Syria.

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is considered as a terrorist organization by both the USA and the EU, is believed to have direct links with the PYD, based in Northern Syria. The PKK has been in conflict with Turkey since 1984, launching terrorist attacks against Turkey. The PKK’s Syrian branch, the PYD, was founded in 2003 and has enjoyed *de facto* autonomy since July 2012 when Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad pulled his military forces out from Northern Syria (Gunter 2014:37). Although the YPG-linked groups had been operating in clandestine since the early 2000s, it officially became the military wing of the PYD in 2012 by, firstly, establishing itself in the eyes of its international allies through the defense of Kobane as well as by helping to coordinate the rescue of the Yazidi community in Northern Iraq in August 2014 (Pusane 2018:76).

The umbrella militant group, the SDF, was established in October 2015 with the support of the USA military, and is largely dominated by the YPG. The SDF also includes Arab and Christian brigades and tribal fighters in their forces, making it easier to legitimize its actions and cooperation with the USA (Aljazeera 23.03.2019). Throughout this thesis, the PYD is referred to as the main and dominating political party of the *Autonomous Administration*, consisting of the three Kurdish-ruled cantons and territories “liberated” from ISIS, elaborated further in the next chapters. Moreover, the PYD is referred to as an administrative entity, providing and managing services to its constituents. The YPG is referred to as the official military group of the PYD-led administration, having received experience and training from the PKK while playing a big role in the Kobane battle in September 2014. The SDF umbrella military group, largely dominated by the YPG militants, is mentioned in this thesis by referring to the period starting from October 2015 which eased military cooperation with the superpower amid the fight against ISIS. Furthermore, the YPG’s cooperation

with other VNSAs such as the SDF is crucial to analyzing the VNSA's 'influence' aspect of the ARI framework.

As the SDF consists of different Arab tribes, Christian military groups and other minorities, the SDF has not been labelled as a terrorist organization by Turkey or other parties, although it is known to be dominated by the YPG. Currently, the SDF serves as the main security provider and official military body of the Autonomous Administration, politically dominated by the PYD. However, in official statements, the PYD has lately been holding a "low profile" as it had made the SDF's political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) as the main political body that is now officially running affairs in the three Kurdish dominated cantons and areas "liberated" from ISIS. As such, the SDF, not the YPG, is currently an official partner of the USA-led OIR *Inherent Resolve* military mission, being part of the Global Coalition against ISIS.

In summary, the PYD and the YPG first started as separate entities. In 2012, the YPG became the official military group of the PYD-led administration and the YPG transformed into the SDF in October 2015, consisting of different military groups and tribes. Since then, the PYD and its military wing, the YPG, have tried to portray in their public statements that the SDF and its political wing, the SDC, are in charge of the main aspects of Northern Syria.

Although in theory the PYD and the YPG both try to show that the official "power" with regards to affairs in Northern Syria are in the hands of the SDC and the SDF, this is not so in reality and such changes in names have rather been done "cosmetically" – the PYD and its military wing, the YPG still largely run affairs in Northern Syria. This is why in this thesis, the PYD and the YPG are mainly referred to be linked to each other and addressed as the PYD/YPG while after the period of October 2015, the author tries to emphasize the phrase, "and later the SDF" due to the fact that despite the SDF being dominated by the YPG, it still consists of other minorities and Arab tribes.

Moreover, the SDF is seen as the official and legal partner in the fight against ISIS, whereas the YPG is not, and was rather supported with the USA's military airstrikes during the Kobane siege between September 2014 and January 2015. The

SDF on the other hand has been receiving weapons, ammunition and official training from the USA – the YPG being evolved into the SDF starting from October 2015, with other elements in its ranks.

Although the YPG itself says that the SDF is a separate entity that emerged out of necessity in the fight against ISIS, in reality, the YPG evolved and transformed into the SDF, still being dominated by the YPG in terms of occupying the main commanding positions. Therefore, this thesis uses the terms of PYD/YPG to refer to the period before October 2015 while the author adds the term “SDF” and its political wing, the “SDC” after the period of October 2015, bearing in mind that while the two latter groups emerged afterwards, both are still dominated by the former groups, dominating these “new” organizations.

For the purposes of this thesis, the main actor of interest is the YPG and its transformation and influence capabilities regarding its relations with states and the USA in particular. However, its political wing, the PYD has also played a big role in the YPG’s actorness and is addressed to show how the VNSA has been able to operate in the region and transform itself. Thus, the PYD/YPG have been referred to as linked organizations. Although the SDF has been emphasized to have emerged as a separate entity, the author argues that it rather refers to the YPG’s transformative capability to evolve itself to the SDF with limited time amid the fight against ISIS.

Gunter (2014:73) has argued that the USA does not have and never had a well thought strategy towards the Kurds in the Middle East due to Kurds living in four different countries which requires different approaches, as seen also in Syria and elaborated further in the next chapters. The YPG as a military group, has a blurred line of what kind of a VNSA it is, with features of both state and a non-state actor - defined as a terrorist organization by Turkey, but by the USA as a local ally in the fight against ISIS. Although the YPG-USA relationship started with the town of Kobane’s siege and the fight against ISIS in 2014, the USA had already been cooperating with the Iraqi Kurds as far back as 1991 during the Iraq-Kuwait war and again later in the 2003 Iraqi war. The controversial relationship between the superpower USA and the YPG took both regional and international actors by surprise

when this so-called successful, temporary and tactical military cooperation made headlines during the town of Kobane siege in September 2014.

Over the years, the YPG and later, the SDF have portrayed themselves as motivated and experienced fighters in their fight against ISIS while cooperating with the USA-led Global Coalition military mission, the latter giving them direct and indirect acknowledgement and legitimacy. As such, the YPG's longevity and sustainability has been developing due to the dynamic relationship it has had over the years with the USA as well as European partners and, at times, Russia. Such dynamics clearly shows the YPG's influence in terms of its actorhood.

What makes the relationship between the YPG and later, the SDF and the USA unique, is the fact that the latter is a superpower, yet it has been openly defending and continuing its cooperation with the YPG since 2014 and later under the umbrella of the SDF, despite its NATO ally Turkey's opposition, on the basis of it considering the YPG to be an affiliate of the PKK and thus a terrorist organization. Moreover, the YPG has shown the ability to adapt to the changing nature of conflict as well as the changing nature of regional dynamics over the years. The fight against ISIS has also enabled the PYD/YPG to develop into a state-like entity, trying to promote Western values such as democracy and women's rights while providing security and services on a local level in areas "liberated" from ISIS. All this has been done with fighting experience from the PKK, high motivation to work with the USA, establishing itself both locally and internationally to possibly secure an agreement for future territorial and political aspirations in Northern Syria.

With the military support from the USA, the YPG's motivation and success has skyrocketed since ISIS' defeat in Kobane towards capturing the VNSA's *de-facto* capital of Raqqa in October 2017, contributing to the YPG's autonomy, sustainability, and influence. Together with the international support received in the fight against ISIS, the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF have been motivated to expand their territorial control in Syria in areas "liberated" from ISIS. Thus, the YPG has gained international acknowledgement and military support and has established partnerships with powers like the USA and Russia, showing its capability, influence and experience in the fight against ISIS (Ergun 2018:152). Nevertheless, the PYD's

declaration and goal of establishing a federation has remained unrecognized by states. Despite the PYD/YPGs difficulties in establishing a positive image among its constituencies, especially in Arab-populated areas, it has been successful in providing security and services to the local population due to its military and institutional experience, gained from the PKK. Moreover, it is argued that the PYD/YPG have been providing security and services as sources of legitimization internally, while relying on diplomacy and image management campaign externally (Ergun 2018:156).

For the USA, working initially with the YPG and later, the SDF against ISIS has also given the USA a somewhat legitimate justification to be present in Syria, although it was reluctant to get involved at first - be it for ISIS, curbing Russia's and Iran's influence or protecting Israel's interests in the Middle East. However, the USA's priorities have changed over the years with different administrations, and these were highlighted with president Trump's personal diplomacy with Turkey's president Erdogan as well as President Trump's sudden troop withdrawal decisions in 2018 and 2019. Despite this, the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF have managed to "survive" against all odds and are continuing to operate with increased autonomy, representation, and influence.

Dynamics

Since state cooperation with non-state actors is neither legally binding nor is there a regulated obligation to follow international law, states' cooperation with (V)NSAs is easier to manage and comes with fewer bureaucratic constraints. The same goes with the YPG-USA relationship, which did not require permanent commitments through official agreements (Ertem 2018:142). Nevertheless, this dynamic has been characterized by secret deals and decisions behind the scenes, only known to high military and political officials. Generally, cooperation with a superpower and the Coalition Against ISIS is served under the name of the fight against ISIS. The YPG has presented itself as a well-organized local ground force in the fight against ISIS, using both conventional warfare and guerilla tactics (Pusane 2018:76). The USA military and Pentagon have been welcoming in terms of its cooperation with the YPG and have tended to promote this relationship further.

Thus, when President Trump previously announced that he would pull out the USA troops from Syria, the military and some Representatives of Congress tried to fix the damaged image of the USA “betraying” its Kurdish allies in Syria. In the case of the USA, it has given the YPG and later, the SDF military training and supported them with airstrikes, while the YPG has provided the USA with both strategic and logistical support as well as suffering losses instead of American soldiers on the ground (Ertem 2018:142). This has also helped to portray the Kurdish image in a positive light in the media. For instance, compared with other VNSAs in Syria, the PYD/YPG have gained a positive image in international media through representations of female YPJ Kurdish fighters fighting against ISIS, especially amid the Kobane siege (Ergun 2018:155).

The YPG’s longevity and its relations with superpowers has served to make it an interesting case due to its actorhood portrayed in the literature, depending on the angle taken by the sources in the literature covering the issue. For instance, in Turkey, the organization has no distinction from the PKK and the YPG is seen as a terrorist organization, while the pro-Kurdish social media and news outlets are heavily filled with anti-Turkish propaganda. Because the relationship between the YPG and the superpowers has been changing and the Syrian Kurds have managed to establish their own autonomous region with the support of the superpower and other Western actors as well as Syria’s al-Assad regime, its success and transformation present an interesting and at the same time, puzzling case for the transnational alliances literature.

Although the USA-YPG relationship started off as one of collaboration, it soon transformed into an alliance against ISIS in Kobane and with the establishment of the SDF in October 2015, the alliance transformed into an International Coalition Against ISIS. It is claimed that the USA is now dependent on the SDF’s help and that even if Washington had been more lenient to Turkish interests earlier, it had no other alternative but to support the YPG and later, the SDF forces on the ground, especially with the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the region (Ergun 2018:165). Moreover, what started as a cooperation during the Kobane battle has now become an

“internationalized local struggle” with many actors and dynamics that “goes beyond inter-state strategic interaction” (Kardas and Yesiltas 2018:98).

The YPG is a unique example of a modern-day VNSA who cooperates actively with world powers while securing international acknowledgement over the years, actively contributing to the influence factor of its actorhood. The USA did not have a clear-cut strategy on how to proceed and who to cooperate with in Syria from the beginning - alliances and relationships emerged on the spot and at the time the YPG proved to be the most experienced and effective local partner on the ground. This, however, has made a fracture in the USA-Turkey strategic partnership.

Dynamics between states and violent non-state actors are generally easier to regulate than relations between states as the former can be quickly abandoned, and adaptation requires less bureaucracy to manage relations. Also, (V)NSAs tend to be more adaptable to change in conflict dynamics. However, one must not forget that one man’s freedom fighter could be seen as another one’s terrorist, like in the ‘threesome’ triangle between the USA, YPG and Turkey. At the same time, this cooperation-conflict triangle could be also called a ‘foursome,’ involving the USA-YPG-ISIS and Turkey with two VNSAs fighting between each other. This ‘foursome’ dynamic has provided both the YPG, and states present in the region with an ‘excuse’ of fighting ISIS and, thus, of staying in the region. At the same time, by both the YPG and the USA claiming that ISIS had been defeated during the Trump administration, it also served as a ‘curse’ for the YPG as the superpower was preparing to leave the VNSA alone and by threatening to cut off its military as well as political support. For the YPG, this would mean ending or decreasing its legitimacy, influence, and acknowledgement that the superpower has been providing throughout the years.

As such, this is why the YPG as a VNSA deserves to be studied in depth, as its actorhood appears to be one of the most advanced, especially with regard to its influence and its relationships with states, a superpower, in particular. Therefore, it might constitute the best case that would allow us to improve the conceptualization efforts for VNSAs’ actorhood and assess what type of an actor it is. Hence, this is why this study will apply the ARI’s actorhood framework to the YPG as it will help

us to better understand both this leading case as well as help to improve and critique the ARI framework.

Theoretical aspects

The theoretical scholarship on alliances as well as the VNSA literature today does not seem to cover the actorness and dynamics between state-(V)NSA relationships such as the one between the superpower USA and the YPG and now, the SDF. Moreover, one could draw parallels with Risse-Kappen's (1994:187) argument that it is relatively easy for the NSA to access the USA's political system due to its society-dominated and de-centralized structure. This is also seen in the case of the YPG, which has done much lobbying on the political level and is widely covered in the USA media as heroic fighters, thus winning the 'hearts and minds' of Representatives in Congress and the USA military officials alike, clearly showing the VNSA's influence aspect.

Non-state actors have existed much before states and they will continue to play a role in world affairs while at the same time, non-state actorness has been and is still evolving as well restructuring world politics (Aydinli 2015:439). Thus, this research looks at the agency and actorhood of the YPG, how it operates and what are its prospects for the future through a qualitative methodology and a case study, by applying Aydinli's (2015, 2016) ARI theoretical and analytical framework, supported by open-ended; semi-structured expert-interviews which will be further elaborated in the methodology section.

The ARI framework is based on principles of autonomy, representation and influence, providing broad criteria to understand VNSAs and evaluate their actorness as well as their potential for global politics (Aydinli 2015:424). The ARI can thus help to assess the representation, influence, and autonomy of the YPG and evaluate how this entity has been changing and evolving since 2014 until late 2020, with a specific focus on how its dynamic relationship with a superpower highlights the YPG's influence as an actor.

Puzzle

Based on the literature review and analysis done throughout the chapters, it can be said that the YPG as an actor is not fully a client nor a proxy of the USA, neither a sole terrorist organization or an insurgency, but borrows elements from both state and non-state actors as well as has evolved and developed throughout the years. Thus, the PYD/YPG and later, the SDF as VNSAs are not fitting into a conventional VNSA literature. At the same time, while the YPG as an actor uses insurgency tactics, it also operates as a military unit by fighting in the name of over sixty countries within the Global Coalition, having received high-quality training from the USA military. Thus, a puzzle regarding this thesis research seeks to understand the agency and actorness of the YPG and how it operates, has evolved, and developed over the years. This thesis also looks at what is the level of autonomy, representation and influence with regard to a phenomenon within VNSAs such as the YPG, by contributing both to the violent non-state actor literature and improving the ARI theoretical and analytical framework.

Thus, this thesis approaches a timely ‘hot-topic’ from an innovative scholarly perspective from the ARI framework, looking at the subject matter through a case-study. In terms of the YPG-USA cooperation, it refers to an unusually collaborative relationship between the world’s biggest superpower and a VNSA, one which has evolved from a merely tactical military cooperation to a military partnership with increasing political tendencies. The YPG has shown its ability to change and evolve over the course of the Syrian civil war and within different dynamics among other VNSAs and states - yet, it has survived all of these. The YPG has also shown its ability to change policy outcomes of big powers such as playing a role in helping to convince President Donald Trump to postpone his initial troop withdrawal decisions, led the USA high officials resign in protest of President Trump’s decisions and shown its ability to maneuver around different powers to secure a favorable outcome, showing the VNSA’s influence on an international level. This is why this research applies the ARI framework to the YPG as it will help to better analyze the VNSA while helping to improve and criticize the ARI analytical and theoretical framework.

Subquestions

With regard to the YPG's actorhood and agency, this thesis looks at what is a VNSA and what is the YPG in particular; how it operates; what are its prospects for the future; as well as analyzing the VNSA's sustainability. As part of the influence element of the ARI, although the USA-YPG cooperation was seen as of 'tactical and temporary' as reiterated by the State Department throughout the years, it is seen that the YPG's autonomy, representation, and influence has been much stronger than initially thought. Thus, this research aims to understand the evolution of the YPG's relationship with regional actors through its influence prism. In particular, it examines the drivers behind the YPG-superpower relationship as part of a distinct type of cooperation throughout the years, giving increasing legitimacy and acknowledgement to a VNSA that has had the confidence to gain influence and to express its demands and frustrations on an international level.

In this context, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions: what are the motivations for cooperation between the YPG and a superpower? How has the YPG, and later, the SDF managed this cooperation and how have these relationships been evolving and changing regarding the ARI's influence aspect? What are the drivers behind the YPG's sustainability and autonomy? How has the YPG-superpower relationship affected the VNSA's autonomy, representation and influence? The time period for this research focuses on the start of the ISIS' siege in Kobane in September 2014 and covers the period until late 2020, broadly covering the tendencies of different USA administrations and their approaches, while putting emphasis on the influence part of the VNSA's actorhood.

Structure of chapters

The history part of this thesis is applied to show the 'autonomy' and 'representation' aspects of the ARI analytical framework while chapters regarding the Kobane siege, ISIS and the YPG-USA relationship have been highlighted to show the relevance of the ARI framework's 'influence' aspects and its subcomponents. The

author argues that the YPG as a violent-non state actor is an advanced one because of the enormous influence that it has demonstrated over the years. Therefore, this thesis research shows how the YPG, and later, the SDF have acted on an international level, how it built up alliances over the years, how it fought a war against ISIS and handled local conflict dynamics. Yet, the YPG and now, the SDF have survived all of these relations and have established themselves both locally and internationally, despite the PYD/YPG's record of authoritarian governing style and human rights abuses.

The author argues that the main triggering points that led to the YPG's increasing influence and cooperation with a superpower involve the siege of Kobane in 2014 and the "liberation" of territory from ISIS in which the USA's military support to the YPG started to increase. After that, President Trump slowly started to downplay the role of the YPG in the fight against ISIS as he declared ISIS to be defeated, while putting more emphasis on its relations with Turkey, as was increasingly characterized by Presidents Trump and Erdogan's personal diplomacy.

As for the structure of the thesis, the second chapter looks at the history and the ARI's 'autonomy' part of the PYD/YPG's actorness, while also putting emphasis on the VNSA's 'representation' and analyzing how the PYD/YPG managed to take control of Northern Syria as well as how this has contributed to its overall representation and influence. The third, fourth and fifth chapters emphasize the 'influence' part of the ARI framework, while focusing on the Kobane siege, the role of ISIS and developments in the YPG-USA relationship. All of these chapters assess the role of the VNSA simultaneously and are supported by supportive expert-interviews that were conducted in spring-summer 2020.

In detail, the third chapter focuses on the Kobane siege and increasing cooperation between the VNSA and the USA by emphasizing the 'sustainability' aspect of the ARI, including the VNSA's motivation, flexibility and adaptability. The chapter looks at how the PYD/YPG handled Kobane and survived, as well as how they turned it to a symbolic birth of a nation/movement that has continued over the years. The fourth chapter focuses on ISIS and how the PYD/YPG kept building up its influence, which can be related to the 'transformative capacity' of the ARI framework because it showed how the group was able to quickly transform itself into something

that could fight against one of the biggest challenges in the Middle East – ISIS. This can be seen with the YPG's flexibility and adaptability to quickly transform itself into the SDF and involve Arabs and other minorities into its organization.

The fifth chapter focuses on the YPG, and later the SDF's relations with the USA and is linkable to the 'impact' aspect of influence in terms of 'compulsion'. As such, the YPG was able to convince a superpower to become a second legal ally to that superpower, together with the USA's NATO ally, Turkey. This can be seen as a diplomatic success, and all of that convincing to keep the USA's support to the VNSA over the years is a sign of compulsion capacity. Other elements of 'sustainability' can also be seen in the relationship with the USA or with ISIS. Overall, throughout the chapters, each ARI aspect is primarily about showing one main component of the framework. However, signs of other aspects of autonomy, representation and influence will also be revealed. The analysis chapter will also critically assess the ARI framework and show how this thesis contributes to developing the analytical framework and the theory further.

METHODOLOGY

Explaining the essence, dynamics and how violent non-state actors operate have generally been neglected by mainstream international relations theories. However, non-state actors have existed much before states and they will continue to play a role in world affairs while at the same time, non-state actorness is still evolving and restructuring world politics (Aydinli 2015:439). The same goes for explaining violent non state actors' behavior as well as structure to be a state-like entity, i.e. as the YPG, and later the SDF have been doing together with their political bodies. This has been supported by superpowers like the USA and other states who have provided the YPG and later, the SDF with legitimacy, acknowledgement, recognition, and influence over the years.

Therefore, Aydinli's (2015, 2016) ARI analytical framework offers scholarly value and background for how to explain the dynamics and actorness of the YPG as well as assess how it has been maneuvering around the superpower USA and other regional powers as well as lobbied for their cause internationally. Therefore, the YPG

has been trying to behave as a state-like entity by wanting their 'voice' to be heard while emphasizing the need to fight ISIS. Thus, this thesis is assessing the actorness and agency of the PYD/YPG, how it operates and what are its prospects for the future through a qualitative methodology and a case study, by applying the ARI analytical framework, supported by open-ended and semi-structured expert-interviews.

The conceptual and analytical framework

Ersel Aydinli's ARI analytical framework helps to assess the representation, influence and autonomy of the YPG and see how this has been changing and evolving since 2014 up until late 2020, with a specific focus on its dynamic relationship with a superpower, that has been enabling and contributing to the sustainability of a VNSA throughout the years, yet not with a clear strategy neither towards the Syrian regime nor towards the YPG who has been fighting against ISIS together with the USA-led Global Coalition since 2014.

The ARI is the analytical framework used in this research in order to understand the actorness and the agency of the YPG, and as seen later, the SDF. The ARI framework helps to evaluate the global potential and actorness of VNSAs who have started to impact and challenge the traditional role of states, by shifting power from states to non-state actors (Aydinli 2015:424). The ARI criteria is working best if addressed its autonomy, representation and influence aspects together while complementing each other in which the potential for global actorness can be addressed (Aydinli 2015:428). For instance, some VNSAs can have little autonomy but high influence (i.e. private military company) or high autonomy while having low representation, i.e. small terrorist groups (Aydinli 2015:428). At the same time, a VNSA that is "actively autonomous", has good representation and shows both sustainability and impact aspects of the ARI, contributing to its influence, has the potential to affect politics and international relations at a global level (Aydinli 2015:428).

The 'autonomy' part of the ARI framework relates to the "distinction and distance" of NSAs from states and mostly focuses on two characteristics: 1) the amount of influence that states have over the VNSA, i.e. whether VNSA is relying on

states for financial or other type of support and 2) degree of the VNSA's connection with statist principles, i.e. does the VNSA hold on to all or some of the state norms and regulations or does the (V)NSA fight against a state (Aydinli 2015:429). Thus, the fewer ties the VNSA has with states, the more autonomous it is considered, according to the ARI framework (Aydinli 2015:429). Nevertheless, the main purpose of looking at VNSAs' distance from states by addressing the former's global potential is to look at whether the VNSA is "beholden to any state" (Aydinli 2015:429).

Table 1. Elements of VNSA autonomy

Distance from the state	Distance from the international state system
Free from state involvement Able to survive state persecution	Being sovereignty-free

Table 1. Elements of VNSA autonomy (Aydinli 2015:429).

Whether the VNSA is able to survive state persecution or survive without any state support is another element of the ARI's 'autonomy' criteria, having either active or passive autonomy (Aydinli 2015:430). For instance, "passive autonomy" relates to VNSAs that are able to sustain themselves free from any state involvement while "active autonomy" indicates that the VNSA is able to defend itself against states seeking to defeat it (Aydinli 2015:430). Moreover, the VNSA's distance from the state-focused regime and its level of autonomy can be addressed in terms of to what extent does the VNSA create new alternative agencies and whether the VNSA would be in a position to manipulate weaknesses within the state-regime in order to keep functioning and sustain itself (Aydinli 2015:430). In general, while distance from the state relates to how much is the VNSA beholden to a state or for state support; distance from the state-focused regime looks at how much is the VNSA beholden to general statist ideas and practices (Aydinli 2015:430).

The second criteria for the ARI framework is 'representation'. Non-state actors, and violent non-state actors in particular, have to maintain and recruit new members

in order to keep representing itself as a VNSA (Aydinli 2015:431). Thus, the ‘representation’ part of the ARI framework asks questions whether the VNSA can keep supplying its members and constituents to keep itself active by attracting new and keeping old members (Aydinli 2015:431). At the same time, the scope of potential new members, VNSA’s level of recognition and legitimacy as well as its ability to generate loyalty among its constituencies should also be paid attention to (Aydinli 2015:431). Moreover, Aydinli (2015:435) argues that without regenerative capacity, there would be no continuity and thus, the VNSA would not be sustainable (Aydinli 2015:435).

<i>VNSA representation</i>		
<i>Regeneration</i>		<i>Managing overstretch</i>
<i>Attracting members</i> (Recruitment strategies)	<i>Maintaining members</i> • Generating loyalty	Organizational Ideological
Determining scope Building recognition/establishing legitimacy		

Table 2. Elements of VNSA representation (Aydinli 2016:11).

Aydinli (2015:431) argues that a VNSA’s potential for regeneration is limited if the VNSA is focused on only one ethnic group as its possible group members could then be narrowly defined, i.e. ethnic groups or when a group is concentrated to one specific region, i.e. Northern Syria for the purposes of this research. In the case of the YPG, the group has been flexible to expand their ‘Kurdishness’ by trying to focus on recruiting more Arabs to the SDF, mostly to please and stay in line with the superpower USA who has provided the VNSA with training and weapons over the years. However, if a VNSA is ideologically motivated such as jihadists, Aydinli (2015:431) argues that their range for possible new recruits is larger.

Establishing legitimacy and building recognition play an important role in a VNSA’s representation, with its ability to increase legitimacy within its current or

future members (Aydinli 2015:431). Thus, the PYD/YPG has been successful in the ARI's aspect of representation as it has been providing security and services to the people it governs, especially in areas "liberated" from ISIS. It is argued that the more a VNSA can generate loyalty among its constituency, the more a VNSA can keep its representation and have a bigger role in world politics (Aydinli 2015:433).

Nevertheless, under 'representation' an issue of overstretch may affect a VNSA negatively, meaning that when a VNSA has too much "regeneration success," it may end up becoming too diverse while not being able to manage it successfully (Aydinli 2015:434). Therefore, VNSAs like ethnic-based terrorist organizations are less likely to have problems with overstretch compared to ideological VNSAs, as seen from the PKK and its alleged Syrian branch, the YPG. Overall, the aspect of 'representation' relates to a VNSA's ability to manage tension between regeneration as well as control overstretch in order to maintain a VNSA's organizational security and unity (Aydinli 2015:435).

Gaining recognition and legitimacy are both linked to the 'representation' and 'influence' part of the ARI framework (Aydinli 2015:433). Thus, when referring to 'influence,' legitimacy increases when states find it obligatory to respond and "recognize" the VNSA (Aydinli 2015:433). Moreover, Aydinli (2015:435) argues that a VNSA is seen as being influential if it shows proof of "sustainable capacity" and is able to make a "transformative and compelling challenge" to states. As such, the "influence" aspect of the ARI analytical framework can be divided into elements of sustainability and impact.

Table 3. Elements of VNSA influence

Sustainability	Impact
Deterrent-resistant motivation Flexibility/adaptability	Compulsion Transformative capacity

Table 3. Elements of VNSA influence (Aydinli 2015:429).

Moreover, if a (V)NSA's position is not challenged by states, they can be seen as having "implicit legitimacy" in a certain area (Aydinli 2016:18). It could be said that so far, the YPG, and later the SDF have been considered as only 'legitimate' and experienced fighting force in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, if states openly acknowledge that a (V)NSA is "able to set policy rules or guidelines" in some areas, states may give "explicit legitimacy and recognition" to the (V)NSA (Aydinli 2016:18). This has been seen with states providing increasing legitimacy and acknowledgement initially to the YPG and later, the SDF in the fight against ISIS.

According to Aydinli (2015:436), a VNSA is likely to survive if it can and is willing to make "significant changes" to their strategies, tactics as well as to its organizational ideas and practices. Therefore, the YPG has been able to sustain, adapt, maneuver and transform itself into the SDF amid pressure from the USA and generated increased influence with regard to the ARI analytical framework. At the same time, continuous USA military support has contributed to the YPG's sustainability as well as their motivation while it could be considered as having high influence since regional powers, including Russia and the USA have been unable to ignore the VNSA by granting it either direct or indirect recognition. When it comes to assessing VNSAs' overall sustainability, it should be looked at whether it continues to exist and operate despite obstacles (Aydinli 2015:437). All of these characteristics will be further elaborated throughout the next chapters.

Thus, the ARI sets an analytical framework through a detailed account of what makes the YPG as an actor, how it works and how has it evolved while showing how the YPG-USA relations have evolved by illustrating this through the 'influence' part of the ARI framework. The 'influence' part of the ARI framework helps to understand how the YPG, and later, the SDF have continued its relationship with a superpower like the USA and how the YPG-USA relationship almost 'broke up', showing that the VNSA's influence is strong with regard to the YPG and the SDF to which it later transformed. Therefore, the ARI framework is used in a case study by applying the theoretical framework on analysis to understand the YPG's actorhood. At the same time, the ARI framework helps to assess changing global environment by

looking at different elements relating to the autonomy, representation and influence that serve as a base for evolving VNSAs actorness (Aydinli 2015:440).

Single case study method

The ARI analytical framework helps to assess single cases of violent non-state actorness while analyzing comparative cases can be done in order to identify differences among several VNSAs and therefore, assess where they stand on a global level (Aydinli 2015:440). For the purpose of this research, a single case of a VNSA actorhood assessment is considered, and the ARI framework is providing a common structure to do so. This thesis is therefore based on qualitative research methods, mainly through an explorative case study to ask the question *what* rather than *why*.

According to Gerring (2004:341), a case study is best defined as an intensive study of a single entity with an aim to generalize across a bigger set of units. Goertz and Mahoney (2012:89) point out that a case study is what the researcher carries out over-time by doing processual analysis while different observations in different timeframes are considered when assessing a case, enabling the researcher to identify important historical points when key events have directed the case towards certain outcomes. A within-case analysis also enables the researcher to see ways of historical events being linked across time and to each other, producing an order of causes that “culminate in the outcome of interest” (Goertz and Mahoney 2012:89). Moreover, Gerring (2004:341) argues that a case study method is best seen as defining, rather than analyzing or representing causal relations.

George and Bennett (2005:18) argue that a case study is a “well-defined aspect of a historical episode that the investigator selects for analysis, rather than a historical event itself.” The aim of this research is not to use process-tracing or trace historical events but mainly, look at the actorness and the level of its autonomy, representation and influence of the YPG in a broader sense, considering the timeframe between 2014-2020. Thus, the YPG is a case of a VNSA with high influence, borrowing elements from the ARI framework and having evolved with complementing elements of both state and a non-state actor.

Case studies have advantages in “identification of new variables and hypotheses through the study of deviant or outlier cases and in the course of field work”, i.e. interviews with participants, area experts and historians, as the researcher has done for this thesis. Also, case studies have an advantage for research to be of an exploratory nature (Gerring 2011). Moreover, van Evera (1997:57) notes that case studies can have motives of testing and creating theories; “identifying antecedent conditions”; testing the importance of such conditions as well as explaining cases of importance.

Moreover, Gerring (2011) argues that a single case study is still a single example of a larger phenomenon. Thus, the actorhood of the YPG is a larger phenomenon of how violent non-state actors operate and evolve. Nevertheless, the researcher is aware that conducting a case study faces issues of representativeness because it includes a small number of cases of a general phenomenon (Gerring 2011). However, the researcher is compensating this with an in-depth research on the YPG actorness based on the ARI framework over a certain timeframe and linking this to a wider phenomenon of violent non-state actors. Moreover, the ARI framework has already been tested with regard to anarchists and jihadists by Aydinli (2015, 2016) and thus, can be considered as generalizable. Moreover, the researcher is aware that case studies are not suitable for determining cause and effect aspects as such case studies may not make relevant predictions (Gerring 2011). As such, finding cause and effect relationships has not been the aim of this thesis.

Data collected

Throughout this thesis, qualitative research methods through a case study and the ARI analytical framework are applied. Main sources used for this research have been secondary sources, including pro-YPG and the SDF’s *Twitter* social media accounts as well as the YPG’s and the SDF’s websites and public statements. The author has monitored different sources on social media over the years, including the USA-led *Operation Inherent Resolve* mission’s social media to see how the USA portrays its cooperation with the SDF. Emphasis has been put on statements by the top USA officials like President Donald Trump, the previous presidential envoy to the Global

Coalition Brett McGurk and the Republican Senator Lindsey Graham in order to assess their views on cooperating with the YPG and later, the SDF as well as assess the USA bureaucratic institutions' changing discourse over the years. Emphasis has also been put to the PYD-opposition related news outlets such as Rudaw and Kurdistan 24, who use somewhat more neutral language, compared to pro-YPG outlets such as ANHA and ANF news. Due to evolving events, timely subject and changing relationship of the YPG's actorness, large amount of the sources used for this research are based on news in order to get the essence of the current VNSA-superpower dynamics in terms of the YPG's influence and the YPG's overall actorhood.

Scholarly sources from authors such as Michael M. Gunter, Harriet Allsopp and other prominent Kurdish experts are also used. However, as the issues with regard to the YPG 'influence' aspect of the ARI framework have been evolving over time and can change fast, as seen from President Donald Trump's December 2018 and October 2019 sudden withdrawal decisions and the backlash that followed in which events and decisions changed within hours, using sources like newspapers and social media statements have proven to be beneficial for this research.

In order to assess the YPG's dynamics and actorhood, one way is to analyze how it manages relations with states by looking at publicly available information that the VNSA has published on its websites and social media as well as see how the superpower USA has defined its relationship with a VNSA. In general, the pro-YPG media and social media accounts are heavily characterized by propaganda in terms of their language, focusing mainly on anti-Turkey discourse. Turkey's military operations to Northeast Syria have often been referred to by the YPG as well as the SDF as 'genocide' in which international states should take responsibility. At the same time, the PYD/YPG is known to have acknowledged criticism and accusations of the VNSA's human rights violations and recruitment of child soldiers by trying to fix its image on the international arena, i.e. addressing reports of the Amnesty International and the UK Government as well as apologized for the SDF's violent wrongdoings in attacking hospital staff in Northeast Syria early 2021.

The researcher has observed that the social media accounts and websites of the SDF are much more reserved and diplomatically worded compared to the YPG. This may be due to the fact that the SDF has got the training, both military and of public diplomacy, from the USA advisors and thus, know how to address the public by displaying itself as a neutral and experienced actor, concentrated solely on the fight against ISIS. However, this is different when it comes to the PYD/YPG's governing practices that have been portrayed as authoritarian. The SDF does generally not mention the YPG in their statements nor *retweet* the YPG posts while the latter shares and posts about the 'successes' of the SDF's counter-terrorism operations. Throughout the years, there have also been mixed messages coming from both the Department of State as well as the Pentagon with regard to its approach towards the Syrian Kurds and its cooperation with the YPG and later, the SDF. Therefore, there has been a need for the researcher to draw conclusions from both sides and try to link this to the ARI framework in terms of assessing the VNSA's actorness.

Expert-interviews

As a supporting material, semi-structured expert-interviews were conducted with subject-matter scholars; MPs from Turkey; journalists experienced in Northeast Syria; previous Turkish Ambassadors, human rights activists from Turkey and from Syria; politicians as well as officers from both the Department of State and the Department of Defense of the USA in order to get a glimpse of how the YPG's actorness, its relationship with a superpower and sustainability is seen to either support or neglect the VNSA's autonomy, influence and representation in today's international environment and in the context of the Syrian civil war. Conducting semi-structured interviews also enabled further discussion with the interviewees on the subject matter and for assessing future prospects of the VNSA. Thus, the interviews are used as a secondary supportive material to assess the actorness of the YPG in this thesis.

In total, 21 individuals were interviewed in which only one of them was interviewed in-person and others were interviewed via Zoom, Skype, or WhatsApp calls, lasting for about 25-45 minutes each. The interviewees were contacted via e-

mail and selected based on their knowledge, different viewpoints or familiarity with the VNSA-related topics. For the purpose of this thesis and the sensitivity of the research, most of the interviewees preferred to remain anonymous due to their occupation and therefore, their comments are represented anonymously. However, some names can be mentioned and I am extremely grateful for all of the interviewees who allocated their time for phone-interviews during the pandemic. The majority of the interviews were conducted between April-July 2020.

Some of the interviewees that were interviewed and whose names can be mentioned in this thesis are the previous Foreign Minister of Turkey and a former Ambassador to the UN Office in Vienna, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia Mr. Yasar Yakis; previous Ambassador to the USA Mr. Namik Tan; Assoc. Prof. Stefano Braghiroli; journalist Fehim Tastekin; HDP MP Mr. Hisyar Özsoy; Prof. Dr. Şaban Kardaş, security expert Dr. Metin Gürcan; Syria expert Dr. Amman Kahf; previous Middle East Advisor to the Department of Defense Ms. Jasmine El-Gamal; senior USA Army advisor and a member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff Mr. Rich Outzen; and the director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation Mr. Luke Coffey. Such range of people was beneficial for the researcher to further assess and analyze the actorhood of the VNSA, elaborated throughout the next chapters.

Considering the sensitivity and timely subject matter, the reluctance of high officials, especially from the American institutions, was clear. Thus, the majority of the interviewees were found via the snowball effect and referrals by asking the people interviewed for further contacts and suggestions. Not surprisingly, pro-Syrian Kurdish experts were more eager to share their views about the subject matter, yet anonymously for security reasons. However, standpoints of Turkey as well as of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials in this thesis have been compensated by media statements due to reluctance to comment on the subject matter.

Relevance

The time period for this research covers mostly the period beginning from the ISIS siege of Kobane in September 2014 until late 2020. Covering such long period

has enabled to address three different USA administrations and their approaches towards the YPG as well as the SDF. It has also enabled the researcher to see how the YPG as an actor and its relations with the superpower USA have evolved and changed over time, illustrating the VNSA's ability to maneuver around states as well as increase its legitimacy and influence.

According to Aydinli (2015:440), given the importance of non-state actors, their changing, evolving nature and role in world politics, "dynamic frameworks of analysis" are needed to trace historical aspects and identify new patterns of today's VNSAs. As such, addressing and assessing the YPG's actorness is an attempt to do so. Moreover, this thesis research has been supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia's Master's thesis stipend for its innovative approach, relevance and added value to foreign policy research that covers the VNSA's influence, addressing the YPG-USA relationship and the VNSA's overall actorhood, showing possible parallels to small state-superpower relations and regional dynamics.

Limitations

The main limitation for this thesis research has been the political sensitivity of the subject matter in Turkey as well as limitations of approaching and addressing this research from a scholarly perspective in a politically tense environment. Therefore, the researcher has faced questions and judgements towards her scholarly approach to a politically sensitive topic in Turkey's domestic and foreign politics. Another limitation of this research has been the reluctance of experts, political and military officials as well as scholars to openly share their knowledge and viewpoints on the subject matter, which was seen during the supportive expert-interview process. At the same time, not all people who were interviewed had up to date knowledge of the ongoing YPG affairs and its relationship dynamics with states. This is mostly due to the relevance and recent time-period of the subject matter in which certain political and military agreements are largely done behind closed doors, by both the VNSA as well as countries who directly or indirectly cooperate with the YPG and later, the SDF.

Most people interviewed, whether having a political, scholarly or a diplomatic post, have been reluctant to share information due to sensitivities regarding revealing their identities or have otherwise been reluctant to agree for an interview. Nevertheless, pro-Kurdish politicians, human rights activists and scholars have been more open to share their knowledge and been more open to talk. However, the author of this thesis is aware of possible biases and the lobbying aspect for the subject matter from certain groups. Therefore, diversity of backgrounds among the people interviewed has come as a benefit in assessing the information. Furthermore, the author had planned to travel for interviews within Turkey and Northern-Iraq but this was not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Another limitation of this research has been the lack of access to primary data, both for the interviews and for the analysis due to the political and sensitive nature of the subject matter. Because it is not possible to interview with the PYD/YPG and the SDF nor with high USA officials close with the topic, this thesis has been focused on the secondary data. Nevertheless, the researcher is aware that many of the YPG's related *Twitter* social media accounts and websites have often been restricted to access in Turkey or have been changing over time due to being shut down. Therefore, using secondary data for this research has proven to be more reliable due to the evolving and changing nature of the subject matter.

As the author was unable to reach the top Turkish and USA officials to comment on the subject matter, most of the statements have been taken from the media to cover the USA's as well as the VNSA's approaches. This is also because much of the decision-making of the YPG-USA cooperation as well as Turkey's approach to the VNSA, has been centralized and only a small number of people hold relevant information behind the closed doors. The YPG as an actor has also been able to hide and openly not share what lays behind its cooperation with the USA, possibly trying to show itself as a reliable partner in the eyes of the superpower and fighting against ISIS in the name of the Global Coalition. As the YPG as an actor has been a controversial and a contested concept regarding whether it is an insurgency or a terrorist organization, the author is aware that the logic of *one man's terrorist is another one's freedom fighter* applies for the subject matter. The same goes for

arguments whether the YPG and the SDF are proxy organizations of the USA or are acting as a separate actor.

The author is also aware that the ARI analytical framework for addressing the VNSA's agency does not come without limitations and there are areas of the VNSA's actorness and its relationships with states that the framework does not explain or cover. Klotz (2008:52) points out that single case studies can be used effectively in order to test theories and see whether they would fit into some categories, i.e. some cases would be easier for a particular theory to explain but it may fail to meet expectations. However, Aydinli (2015:428) acknowledges that while the ARI framework does not represent clear measures for what constitutes a VNSA with a global potential, the ARI framework nevertheless provides common points for discussion, analysis as well as comparison of a VNSA's global actorness. This will be further elaborated and critically assessed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS AND STATES – GROWING INFLUENCE

Introduction

Literature on violent non-state actors generally seem to refer to the transnational security aspect with a large part of literature focusing on state support to terrorism or the context of civil war. However, states supporting VNSAs on a mutual benefit and through formal contracts in a cooperative relationship is often a less covered topic than general state support to terrorism or using proxies in warfare. State-(V)NSA relations throughout history can help draw parallels to today's security environment. Such relations can range from military alliances to strategic cooperation on an international level. These relations can be of a temporary or a long-term matter. On the other hand, "one man's freedom fighter can be another one's terrorist" logic also transfers to the state-VNSA relations as seen from the case of the YPG-USA cooperation. Looking at VNSA's actorhood through its influence and relationships with other states, i.e. the USA for the purposes of this research, can be a big indicator for addressing the VNSA's actorhood.

Thus, this chapter focuses on general literature of how VNSAs are seen as an actor and what type of relations have been covered in the literature with regards to mainly addressing VNSAs' influence aspect of its actorhood and how could this theoretical background explain the case of the YPG-USA relationship. Although this thesis is about the VNSA's actorhood, the VNSA's relationships with states constitute the primary reflection for studying actorhood, corresponding with the 'influence'

aspect of the ARI framework. However, one should keep in mind the changing nature of alliances and personal interests of state leaders in terms of interacting with (V)NSAs. Nevertheless, relationships between VNSAs and state as well as the actorhood of a VNSA itself, can change and evolve over time. This is something that the literature has overlooked, as seen in the case of a VNSA such as the YPG and later, the SDF.

Overview and background of VNSAs

According to Aydinli (2015:424), the most important shift that is happening in international politics is the „shift in polity power from the predominance of state to the rising importance of nonstate actors.” As such, power in international politics is shifting to at least two directions. Firstly, in a geographical sense, meaning that power is moving from strong states and regions, i.e. the West to the East or Eurasia (2015:424). Secondly, there has been a shift in the power of polities, i.e. from statehood to non-state actors (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996; Ferguson et. al. 2000 cited in Aydinli 2015:424). Furthermore, Aydinli (2015:424) argues that although both are significant transformations, the shift in the power of polities is more “dramatic” in terms of the effect it can have on international politics.

While geographical shifts take place within state system, polity shift is different as it has can have consequences that is relatively little known about as (violent) non-state actors can act in an unpredictable way compared to states (Aydinli 2015:425). Therefore, knowledge on VNSAs, how they act and change over time, is limited (Aydinli 2015:425). Moreover, when it comes to understanding (V)NSAs, it is argued that this understanding is still statist inspired as the goal has been exploring potential declining role of the state (Avant et.al. 2010; Slaughter 2004 in Aydinli 2015:425).

In terms of non-state actors, these have usually been divided into categories such as insurgents; other domestic militant groups; warlords and urban gangs; private militias and companies; terrorists as well as criminal organizations (Aydinli 2015:427). Moreover, Aydinli (2015:428) has argued that while previous literature has focused on how to define and categorize VNSAs with regards to their

relationships with states, less focus has been put on VNSAs' potential role in global politics and thus, its influence.

In general, a wide literature has been written on non-state actors. Less has been done in a systematic way involving their interactions with states. The VNSA literature often involves a transnational perspective, which lacks the focus on the ability of VNSAs to adapt into the changing nature of conflict and the changing nature of alliances. According to Dipaolo (2005:167), transnationalism usually focuses on social movements and global civil society and emphasizes non-violent, not-for-profit nature of NSAs. Although VNSAs range from organized crime to paramilitaries, little attention is paid to VNSA's foreign relations and the relationship dynamics with superpowers in particular that would address VNSAs' actorness. While many NSAs coexist peacefully with states, others directly challenge the state (Kausch 2017:36).

Most literature on formal alliances focus on official state to state relations, rather than characteristics of VNSAs and reasons why these two different entities go into either cooperation or a conflictual relationship. For instance, alliances between states are referred to in literature as alignment, coalition and an alliance. Alignment is seen as a general commitment to cooperation or collaboration while a coalition is seen a commitment of two or more states to "coordinate their behavior and policies in order to perform particular functions or pursue specific goals", i.e. a single military or a non-military issue (Krause and Singer 2001:16). An alliance between states is based on a written "formal agreement, treaty, or convention between states who confirm to coordinate their policies in the contingency of military conflict" (Krause and Singer 2001:16). Less is talked about state relations with regard to VNSAs, in particular.

On the other hand, state-VNSA cooperation is not always traceable to certain decisions from VNSA or state leaders' perspective unlike state alliances (Maoz and San-Akca 2012:721). However, cases like Iran's support to Hezbollah, such cooperation can still be institutionalized while others are not (Maoz and San-Akca 2012:721). Within the dynamics of VNSA-state relations, states select VNSAs which they want to give support to while VNSAs select the countries from which they accept the support and resources from (San-Akca 2016:1). Moreover, Staniland

(2015:771) emphasizes that regime ideology has a big role to play in shaping state strategy towards militias unlike the usual understanding of theories that states use militias as “easily controlled solutions to tactical problems of local information and weak state capacity”. Moreover, as regimes’ and VNSAs’ ideologies change over time, so does the relationship between them (Staniland 2015:772).

Although it is believed that future wars will be mostly fought not between states, but between states and NSAs, states still play a role in shaping NSAs (Dipaolo 2005:164). It is argued that it is the relations between states that make NSAs to exist and flourish and that when VNSAs are looking for influence or social change, they are increasingly acting state-like and adapt to the changing nature of conflict (Risse 2000 cited in Dipaolo 2005:166). Thus, states have a role to play in creating (V)NSAs as well as in maintaining them while contributing to their sustainability.

A lot of examples in the literature seem to relate to terrorism or insurgencies, civil war context or failed states, rather than looking at the context and the state-VNSA relationships systematically. However, in several cases the history helps to draw parallels with the current security environment and the role of VNSAs in the international system. Moreover, VNSAs have been referred to as groups that challenge the state and the traditional state system (Dipaolo 2005:164). In many cases, VNSAs can also be security providers for states.

It is generally believed that states want to influence or seek certain political outcomes in other countries by supporting non-state actors that are located within their rival or enemies’ territory (Asal *et.al.* 2019:208). On the other hand, VNSAs also play a role in international politics and have power to influence both domestic and foreign politics of a state. This can come in the form of terrorist attacks against a state to change its course of (military) action in specific countries or VNSAs influencing state policies through lobbying to make its voice heard through seeking certain actions.

Although (V)NSA-state relations portray a dynamic structure with different interests, these relationships can range from military alliances to complex strategic cooperation on an international level. Such cooperation often, but not always, seem to be rather short term with no long-term outline from the state’s perspective that would

guarantee also the (V)NSAs non-abandonment and protection at a later stage. On the other hand, the outlier in this case seems to be Iran who has successfully supported Lebanon's Hezbollah over the years and continues to support the group both militarily and economically.

Behaviour and reputation of VNSAs

Behavior of VNSAs also plays a role in terms of addressing their actorhood. Tokdemir (2021:1) argues that VNSAs, in particular, terrorist groups, depend on its reputation, the latter further depending on policies and actions that the group takes with its constituency as this determines the degree to which each group finds potential recruits, resources and support for its goals and ideas. This is also evident with the case of the PYD/YPG and the SDF whose reputation locally and internationally has been its main source of legitimacy, especially after the Kobane siege in 2014. Nevertheless, relations with states also play a big role.

Furthermore, Tokdemir (2021:1a) points out that building a positive reputation has a bigger impact on the VNSAs' chances on staying in power as it may attract loyal followers. Moreover, Tokdemir *et al.* (2021:1) argues that the pressure of competition forces VNSAs to differentiate themselves ideologically from their rival groups in order to maximize their chances of survival and success by offering certain products and services to their members. As such, rebel groups are more likely to adapt and change their ideologies and demands from states amid competition from rival groups, seen throughout this research (Tokdemir *et al.* 2021:1).

Furthermore, Duyvesteyn (2017:669) has argued that most of the literature on legitimacy has been emphasized within the concept of state despite the fact that rebel groups have also claims for legitimacy and continue to do so. Taking this into a fact, (V)NSAs apply both violent and non-violent strategies in their approaches. Taking this into account, Alakoc *et.al.* (2021:1) have argued that groups that use both violent and non-violent strategies are better able to attract new members to its ranks. This can also be seen within the examples of this thesis.

Principal-Agent model

In terms of state-NSA relations, one of the aspects that has been focused on in the literature is the principal agent model. This has been referred to as being a two-way relation between a supporter and a recipient which is mutual, often connected to state support to rebel groups (Rauta 2016:93). In the model, the state can get the benefit by supporting anti-governmental groups in a different state while delegating (V)NSAs to carry out fight for the state's own interests (Ekmekci 2011 cited in Asal et.al. 2019:210). A principal-agent theory focuses on maximizing benefit and shifting responsibilities based on somewhat formal contracts (Rauta 2016:93).

It is argued that a principle may give the task to an agent because it lacks relevant expertise or time to do it itself, hence giving it to a group who gets benefits in exchange (Gilardi 2008:29 cited in Rauta 2016:93). This can also be seen as delegating authority to a third party and acting on behalf of the patron. It has also been emphasized that in general, the sponsor provides rebels with certain support to fight against the target government and in return for rebels' support, sponsors expect them to "cooperate over goals, organization, strategy, and tactics" (Popovic 2017:924). Such relationship is generally seen as somewhat official and often characterized with some form of contract that creates an agency between the principal and the agent carrying out the tasks. However, there is always a risk that rebels may not always do what the principal is expecting from them.

In practice, state-VNSA relation is non-binding and does not guarantee long-term support after the task is completed, unlike state-to-state relations with a certain binding framework such as treaties, laws and legislation. However, this has a downside because a sponsor cannot be sure if its agent is acting in line with the proposed goals and on the agent's side it is not guaranteed that the sponsor would protect them if needed. As such, this model has a state centric view and does not capture the changing nature of a state-NSA relationships (Asal *et.al.* 2019:210). For instance, several VNSAs had relied on superpower support during the Cold War, like the mujahideens during the Soviet-

Afghanistan war. However, post 1991, many of these VNSAs lost superpower's support with the changing nature of interests.

Client-patron model

With regards to the client-patron relationship, it is usually renewed and renegotiated across time. Examples of client-patron relationship can be found in everyday life and among people as well as between states. Moreover, clientelism has been described as a “direct and personal exchange between citizens and their representatives” of which political support is exchanged to material support, making the relationship reciprocal but with different weight level of resources and capabilities (Veenendaal 2017:565). However, governments do not usually admit that they use such relationships in order to establish their goals, both internationally and domestically.

While principle-agent structure may relate to a delegation of tasks to a group from an outside state, client-patron relation can translate to a more everyday type of relation and can be referred to a usage of domestic politics. For instance, the relation may include political, material and economic aspects as well as buying political votes. As such, political clientelism is seen as “the distribution of benefits targeted to individuals or groups in exchange for electoral support” (Encyclopedia 2019). However, on an international level, great power relationships with small states also translate to such model and this can be stable over time, especially when binded by international organizations and laws and thus, create loyalty within the partners.

Veenendaal (2017:561) has come up with the “international patron-client framework” that helps to understand the dynamic of small states' decisions and actions with regard to the patron. Such relationship can often be seen in the United Nations voting system in which small states vote in line with their patron, i.e. for recognizing Abkhazia as a form of political support to get economic assistance in return from the patron (Russia). As such, a patron state can aim to have ideological convergence, international solidarity and strategic advantage from its client state which relates to patron's strengthening of its geostrategic position (Veenendaal 2017:566). Overall, both principal-agent model and client-patron relationships are, in general, of cooperative nature.

Small state-great power relations

Small states' relations with bigger states are usually based on client-patron relationship and they tend to operate their foreign policy through international organizations where they usually feel more equal to other states. It is argued that small states rely on their socio-political strength as close communities and can pursue a strategy of national resistance against an aggressor (Sveics 1969:69 cited in Veenendaal 2017:563). Such patterns can also be seen among VNSAs. However, small states can also use their vote in exchange to political or military support, just like VNSAs can switch partners and maneuver around their patrons. Small states can demand different forms of compensation in return for their support to the bigger state (Veenendaal 2017:564). Bailes *et.al* (2016:2) argue that the alliance theory does not explain small state behavior and the theory should be seen from the small states' perspective instead - from the concept of alliance "shelter", referring to a form of small state relationship with a great power, regional or an international organization where the small state produces control of its political decision-making in certain areas (Bailes et.al 2016:2).

Moreover, Schmidl (2001:86) has emphasized that small states have an advantage in certain aspects - they are more flexible compared to bigger states as well as work with smaller budgets. Although Schmidl (2001:86) argues that small states invite somewhat less polarized reactions, when i.e. someone burns a flag of a small state compared to the U.S' flag, the reactions that a VNSA such as the YPG has got from worldwide shows its influence in world politics - perhaps even more than a small state in international system.

Proxy/auxiliary-benefactor relationship

A proxy-benefactor relationship is usually of cooperational and tactical nature. However, it depends whether it is the benefactor that is benefitting or the proxy, or both, while this can be informal or formal (Mumford 2013:45). Moreover, the proxy warfare is often undertaken by superpowers, especially after 9/11 and in the context of asymmetric warfare (Mumford 2013:45). Proxy warfare is also a common strategy by

superpowers in today's Syria. Although the literature of violent non-state groups is developing, the changing nature of conflicts seem to develop faster than the ongoing literature.

There is a distinction in the literature whether a proxy is acting *on behalf* or *acting in conjunction* of the benefactor (Rauta 2016:103). Acting *on behalf* of the benefactor is a type of relation in which a benefactor can be a state or a NSA that is external to the dynamic of the conflict and their chosen proxies are in control of weapons, training and funding from external actor (Mumford 2013:11 cited in Rauta 2016:103). Furthermore, acting *in conjunction* of the benefactor refers to proxy forces being replaced with auxiliary forces and this is referred to in the literature as receiving less attention. Overall, in proxy relationship, the proxy group wages war against a target in the name of a benefactor (Rauta 2016:103). Such actions can also relate to principal-agent relations as discussed above. However, the literature seems to be missing that even in a proxy relationship, fighting on behalf of the benefactor may also be beneficial for proxy's own security and political interests and may go much deeper than indicated in the literature.

Moreover, auxiliaries have received less attention in the literature compared to the proxy warfare. Auxiliaries are seen to be rather collaborative and associative compared to proxies (Rauta 2016:103). Auxiliaries are referred to as fighting under and with the military - their contribution to fighting is complementary and being part of the military actions (Rauta 2016:103). For instance, Hezbollah fighting in collaboration with the Syrian army could be seen as such, however it can be seen as a proxy when fighting for Iran as a benefactor. Therefore, there is a blurred line with regard to types and groups of VNSA-state relationships, depending on whose perspective is being considered.

Using proxies/auxiliaries and hybrid warfare strategies among states has become more popular than conventional warfare. As such, a threat to small states as well as to non-state actors is not only military but also using different means, i.e the deployment of "little green men" to change the dynamics of the outcome, especially during Russia's intervention in Georgia and Eastern Ukraine years earlier. As such, when the crisis started in 2014, media played a lot of attention to the issue of "little green men" being part of Russian Special Forces and in this case, 'proxy agents', 'surrogate militias', 'state-

sponsored terrorists', 'insurgents' and 'auxiliaries' were all used interchangeably as actors (Rauta 2016:92).

Moreover, Rauta (2016:93) has come up with an analytical tool to assess the outcomes of using non-state armed actors in different interventionist scenarios - *sovereign defection*. Furthermore, this is developed into inward and outward classifications. As such, the inward refers to a political and ideological one while the outward refers to a physical, territorial breakaway (Rauta 2016:93). Although the outward sovereign defection is used as territorial seizure and annexation of Crimea by Russian Special Forces, this could be linked to the PYD/YPG's timing for taking control in Northern Syria. As such, the role of auxiliaries can also be non-violent as seen by the "little green men" example.

According to Hashemi and Sahrapeyma (2018:89), there are four types of links and relations between proxy war and smart power that have played a role in shaping the dynamics of proxy wars throughout history. For instance, when a state uses another state (as a surrogate force); a state uses a VNSA (terrorist organization, militia group, private military companies); a non-state actor uses a state for its own interests; and a NSA can also use another NSA as a substitute force (Hashemi and Sahrapeyma 2018:89). Moreover, benefactor-proxy relationship includes "funding, training, arming and equipping the use of the sponsor's territory as a sanctuary" (Hughes 2012:12 cited in Rauta 2016:99).

On the other hand, Staniland (2015:770), argues that research on militias see them as proxies of governments that are used to achieve tactical goals. However, this relation is more diverse, and states can pursue different strategies towards militias, like suppression, incorporation, containment and collusion while regime's ideology has a role in shaping how they deal with militias (Staniland 2015:770). Suppression and incorporation seek the elimination of a VNSA as an independent entity through different policies (Staniland 2015:773). On the other hand, containment and collusion tolerate the existence of a VNSA, but use both cooperation and repression in its tactics - containment seeks to limit the VNSA's activities below a politically acceptable threshold, while collusion seeks to coordinate VNSAs activities with government policies (Staniland 2015:773).

Overall, Kausch (2017:36) argues that proxy relations between NSAs and their state patrons in the Middle East can weaken regional stability as NSAs can be a “tool and a decisive factor in shaping inter-state competition between regional powers”. According to Kausch (2017:37), Iran’s relations with Hezbollah, Qatar’s patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood and Russian and the USA support to Syrian and Iraqi Kurds show “how state’s proxy warfare and the increasing influence of NSAs can erode or strengthen statehood”. However, San-Akca (2016:2) points out that VNSAs such as ISIS and al Qaeda are much more resilient and have distinct dynamics in their relations with states. Thus, considering how such groups operate in parallel to both with and against the orthodox state order in the international system, such interactions cannot be reduced to the idea of only being a proxy war (San-Akca 2016:2).

Proxy wars also come with uncertainties. For instance, Hashemi and Sahrapeyma (2018:94) have pointed out that proxy forces can be abandoned or manipulated by their external sponsors as well as face critical weaknesses in combat against Syrian regime’s military and lead to violence between different rivalries. As such, while these relationships are mostly non-binding in nature, there is no guarantee for the violent non-state groups that they will be protected or supported with military, political or economic aid later on. Thus, the changing nature of state-to-state alliances go hand in hand with the changing nature of state-VNSA alliances, as seen in Syria.

To illustrate, the use of proxies in indirect conflicts was common during the Cold War between the two superpowers, especially during the Soviet-Afghanistan war in 1980s. With regard to the Soviet-Afghanistan war, the USA’s abandonment of military support to mujahideens paved way to Taliban rising into power that eventually gave an opportunity for the Al Qaeda to operate on Taliban’s controlled territory in Afghanistan and make attacks against the USA on 9/11. Osama bin Laden had previously joined Pakistani mujahideens and fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Later on, he was the head of Al Qaeda, responsible for 9/11 attacks. However, years later, the U.S. President Donald Trump was considering peace talks with its long-term enemy Taliban in Afghanistan. This shows the changing nature of how alliances can go from being cooperational to conflictual and vice versa. However, in terms of the possibility of USA abandoning its Kurdish militia as an ally

in Syria, history may repeat itself and this may give rise to the possible re-emergence of ISIS that is believed to have the capacity to conduct attacks in the West.

State support to terrorism

“Terrorism” is a political and undefined concept which makes assessing state support to terrorism difficult. On the other hand, the term *one man’s terrorist is another one’s freedom fighter* tends to be true in both VNSA-state and state to state relations. As such, state support to VNSAs, i.e. to terrorism comes with certain conditions and can be either formal or informal. For instance, there has been a debate on a state supporting NSAs as well as creating false ones in an effort not to engage in violence, but still influencing outcomes of normal political processes outside, i.e Russian meddling in USA elections (Asal et.al. 2019:2018).

Such behavior has also been seen in Estonia during 2007 riots when Russia was encouraging non-violent youth groups to take up violence and sending NSAs from Russia to influence political outcomes within their rival countries like Ukraine and Georgia. By doing so, carving for influence can be less costly while maneuvering around other state’s domestic politics. Furthermore, mixing conventional means with unconventional warfare is often referred to as hybrid warfare and this has become more common in both state and NSA warfare. However, this again shows a blurred line of whether a state supports terrorism or is using proxies to reach its goals.

While some VNSAs counter states, others rely on them. When it comes to VNSAs like foreign fighters, Byman (2018:931) argues that foreign fighters rely on the state system that they reject and at the same time, some of the biggest foreign fighter movements receive state support on a high level - politically, economically, and militarily. However, this still proves that states are important for the survival of VNSAs, be it either in a cooperational or a conflictual relation. Also, states may tolerate foreign fighters in order to get rid of radicalization in their own countries (Byman 2018:934). On the other hand, the case of Pakistan tolerating VNSAs’ activities in its territory has shown state’s level toleration while at the same time, fighting against terrorism when it comes to its relations with the superpower USA. Byman (2018:935) describes Pakistan as working with USA to stop foreign fighters

that are connected to the al Qaeda, while allowing weaponry, money and fighters going to jihadist groups with external links.

Sometimes states deny their support for certain VNSAs, while other times the cooperation is official. Some states facilitate the flow of fighters informally and may hope that this would influence politics in another state. For instance, Byman (2018:931) believes that fighting against ISIS would have been much easier if states would not have overlooked or tolerated the flow of foreign fighters in their territories. Thus, states can make full use of foreign fighters for their own interests domestically and abroad that they are trying to influence.

For instance, Iran has sent thousands of Shi'a militia fighters to fight together with Syria's al-Assad army while having close ideological links and interests in keeping the Syrian regime in power. As such, Hezbollah has proven to be an effective VNSA both politically and militarily. According to the US State Department Country Report on Terrorism 2015, Iran has been a state sponsor for terrorism since 1984 while supporting NSAs in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq (Kausch 2017:39). Moreover, the above literature has shown that states generally tend to support VNSAs that are proven to be motivated and have shown its previous strength in fighting, being experienced fighters at the time of their "recruitment".

However, certain states' interests may also have negative consequences for their collaborative agent. For instance, Byman (2018:933) argues that because of Hezbollah's focus in Syria, it has taken away its general focus from its traditional adversary, Israel. However, the biggest impact of Shia fighters in Syria is that they are integrated into a military structure that is coordinated by both Syria and Iran (Byman 2018:933). This makes the classification of a relation more difficult – Hezbollah's role can be seen as Iran having proxies in Syria, Iran supporting terrorism or using auxiliaries in a warfare. As such, just like the VNSA-state relation is changeable and flexible, so is the type of relation they are in, i.e. going from cooperational to conflictual as well as from a proxy to a military alliance and vice versa.

Support to ethnopolitical organizations

According to Asal *et. al* (2019:208), literature on violent non-state actors has failed to capture the changing nature of relationships. Moreover, their research shows that the outside support for resistance is influenced by a certain context in the post-Cold War period as well as the behavior and characteristics of organizations that are looking for support (Asal *et. al* 2019:208). The authors found through analyzing the Middle East Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (ME-MAROB) that VNSAs are more likely to obtain outside support than non-violent organizations in both Cold War and post-Cold War period (Asal *et. al* 2019:208). It is argued that groups participating in normal political processes like elections, are less likely to get external support (Asal *et. al.* 2019:209). Moreover, Asal *et.al* (2019:218) argues that the reason why outside states may support groups less who participate in elections is that it is generally looked negatively if a state interferes with another's electoral processes. However, this is not the case with the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF as participating in somewhat democratic processes has given them more international acknowledgement. Moreover, there is a difference in state support to violent and non-violent groups. For instance, receiving assistance from an outside country could harm the reputation and support of a (V)NSA because it may be seen as serving foreign interests (Stephan and Chenoweth cited in Asal *et. al* 2019:209).

The VNSA's organizational popularity, capability and kinship with state sponsors play a role after the post-Cold War period which refers to the shift in international system after the collapse of the bipolarity (Asal *et. al* 2019:208). Furthermore, when it comes to supporting ethnonational organizations, kinship bonds between an ethnically dominated state and its kin in other countries may influence state support, especially because such minorities are often disadvantaged and seek political change, while looking for outside support for their activities (Asal *et. al* 2019:209). Also, tactics play a role in external support. External support from states tends to go to VNSAs who show competence, commitment and whose ideology is somewhat similar to the sponsor (Asal *et.al* 2019:212). For instance, the YPG has shown its commitment to democratic values, secularism as well as women's rights that also appeal to the Western world while being repressed by the Syrian regime

earlier. As such, according to Asal et.al. (2019:212), groups that have experienced repression may be easier to get sympathy from outside.

Tacit relationships

Siniver and Lucas (2019:510) have developed the tacit security regime (TSR) literature by defining TSR as an “interest based, limited and informal process of cooperation between states” in order to deconflict their interests over a certain security issue. Generally, states adopting the TSR model are not in an ally-like relation and the tacit security regime is not based on reciprocity, or the achievement of shared long-term goals in which strong leaders’ personal relations between the two countries play an increasing role (Siniver and Lucas 2019:513). Although the TSR relates to states relationships who occasionally come together for a common security cause, it can also help to draw insights to the VNSA-state relationship. As such, Russian and Turkish increased relations between the presidents may be described as a tacit relationship with regards to Syria and the ‘deconfliction’ of the situation. However, this new reality seems to be of a formal, rather than of informal nature.

VNSA-VNSA relationships

According to Idler (2012:63), the literature has overlooked how different VNSAs interact with themselves, and what type of relations exist among VNSAs and what affects violent non-state actors’ decision-making. Thus, the author came up with a typology of VNSA interactions, “conceptualized as a two-dimensional 'clustery continuum' of VNSA arrangements”, taking into account the transnational perspective where VNSAs operate (Idler 2012:63). Just like state-to-state and state-VNSA relations, VNSA-VNSA relations are built upon certain interests and can range from conflict and competition to cooperative nature, and from tactical alliances to contract relationships or simple business relations (Idler 2012:68). Moreover, VNSA links are more adaptable, resilient and prone to expansion compared to states (Idler 2012:68). According to Idler (2012:68), there are seven categories of arrangements of convenience among VNSAs: violent combat; spot sales and barter agreements;

tactical alliances; subcontract relations; transactional supply chain relations; strategic alliances and pacific coexistence. However, these categories are not strict - they are flexible and changeable within VNSA relations, depending on specific circumstances and time. However, trust plays a key role in both VNSA-VNSA and state to state relations.

Motivations for state-VNSA relationships

Rauta (2016:93) argues that there are two competing dynamics of violence, such as *delegative* and *non-delegative*, i.e. delegating violence to third parties. Furthermore, for the beneficiary in the relationship, “delegating” roles to a third party can be less costly and at the same time external actors can play an important role in shaping the insurgency while having control over it (Salehyan 2010:501 cited in Rauta 2016:93). As such, the USA’s President Dwight D. Eisenhower has once been caught saying that proxy wars are “the cheapest insurance in the world” (cited in Mumford 2013:40).

Relying on proxy warfare also saves the lives of state soldiers on the ground and thus, appeals to domestic politics and local constituencies. This has also been the case with current USA’s strategy in Syria where most of the fighting against ISIS is done by local Kurdish forces on the ground. According to Kausch (2017:44), the Kurds fighting ISIS also helped to restore regional stability while neutralizing other VNSAs that threaten the existing state system. This proved useful for other states interested in the regional stability. Therefore, proxy/auxiliary war strategy may be more suitable for a superpower considering domestic politics at home. Byman (2018:933) argues that states may support VNSAs like foreign fighters because it enables the state “to channel domestic energy into bolstering its popularity among key constituencies” or enhance the state’s prestige among its own communities.

According to Asal *et.al* (2019:213), understanding, similar views and goals make information sharing easier and reduce the likelihood of miscommunication between states and NSAs. Although this may be true, there may still be the risk of betrayal or abandonment from an outside supporter that the literature seems not to cover. Moreover, Kausch (2017:38) argues that outside states may prefer to support the

NSAs who have “domestic roots, connections and knowledge, but lack the financial and military resources” as well as ideological or political support to advance their goals. Moreover, this can give rise to a mutually (asymmetric) beneficial partnership in which authority can be traded for influence, while the degree of autonomy and VNSAs leverage over the patron can change over time (Kausch 2017:38).

As states are more interested in strong NSAs, the groups’ capacity to challenge its home state’s institutions can make these (V)NSAs more attractive as a strategic partner for external states who have regional interests (Kausch 2017:38). However, when rebel groups become less centralized and formalized, rebels are likely to defect against their sponsor states, instead of taking their orders (Popovic 2017:922). Thus, the more organized the VNSA seems to be, the more likely it is to also have external state support.

States have a big role to play, even if indirectly, on VNSA decision-making by shaping the options that are available to group’s leaders (DeVore 2012:85). As such, when states offer NSAs sanctuary, political support and financial assistance, they also contribute for these NSA’s longevity and adapt a long-term perspective to their cause (DeVore 2012:85). On a more direct assistance level, states may seek to pursue certain foreign policy interests through their relationships with VNSAs or pursue VNSAs to attack states’ opponents or targets that they would not want to attack themselves (DeVore 2012:88).

Gartzke and Weisiger (2013:25) argue that in systems where democracies are scarce, it is believed that democracies co-ally but when a democracy becomes common, incentives that make democracies align weaken. Moreover, while in client-patron relations, patrons that share similar interests with their clients can be more confident that their partners would not take them into unwanted conflicts and clients at the same time do not need to worry much about abandonment or being exploited by their patrons because each partner shares similar preferences (Christensen and Snyder cited in Gartzke and Weisiger 2013:29). However, in VNSA-superpower relation, the reality seems to be of something else.

Furthermore, Saleyhan *et.al* (2011:709) argue that the “supply side” logic of outside rebel support is influenced by characteristics of the rebel group and linkages

between these groups and actors. The authors draw attention that the reasons why some VNSAs get more outside support than others is not thoroughly understood and mostly, state involvement in civil war is explored more than the former. Moreover, while states may sympathize with groups that share similar goals, “they are unlikely to provide direct aid unless they have some incompatibility or dispute with the state in question, since assisting rebels is clearly a hostile act” (Saleyhan et.al 2011:712).

In case of the USA-YPG relationship, the USA’s interest at the time was defeating ISIS, not directly aiding YPG out of sympathy. On the other hand, the “demand side” of external support lays the assumption that rebels want to maximize the resources they have at their disposal to challenge the state as well as the autonomy they have over their own actions (Saleyhan *et.al* 2011:715). Overall, Saleyhan *et.al* (2011:734) found that transnational links and interstate rivalries are “very important for support for rebel groups, and that conflicts where the government side has external support are much more likely to also see support for the rebels”. For Maoz and San-Akca (2012:720), characteristics of rivalries and the perceptions of states engaged in them affect the probability and level of support they provide to VNSAs. In particular, states that are not happy with the status quo, but lack the capability for a direct confrontation with a rival state, are likely to offer support for VNSAs who would target their rivals instead (Maoz and San-Akca 2012:720).

Gaps in literature

In today’s international environment and relations between VNSAs and states, the literature seems to overlook the phenomenon of fighting for a common enemy, such as the ISIS. Although it has been talked about path-dependency, the YPG-USA’s cooperation has continued despite ISIS previously being largely defeated. With regards to the abandonment of a VNSA from a state, the literature usually covers it only from a small state’s perspective. Thus, the reasons why this is done are generally missing from the VNSA literature and relates to the aspect of the changing nature of conflict that the literature is yet to follow. Overall, changing nature of alliances was addressed in very few recent articles. Kausch (2017:63) argues that the lines between state and NSAs have become blurred and the dichotomy of traditional

IR theory between state and NSAs seems to be not suitable to assess power relations in today's international system. Also, the literature overlooks that different armed groups and their ideologies can change over time and place. For instance, militias can become insurgents and vice versa or move towards regular politics. As such, also the political roles of VNSAs are changeable and so are their relations with states (Staniland 2015:772).

Kausch (2017:38) argues that while much literature looks VNSAs as a challenge for the state, transnational role of NSAs have been less focused on. As such, a VNSA that is a threat to one state, can be an ally of another state. Also, Barak and Cohen (2013:16) argue that trans-border non-state violence has not been studied systematically and not been conceptualized, differentiated between various manifestations and its occurrence in different time period have not been explained. Thus, VNSAs' motives, ideologies and the interplay of these factors have been understudied (Barak and Cohen 2013:16). This also leaves the gap for exploring systematic VNSA-state relationships and their motives. Also, from the state's perspective, the literature generally focuses on the military and its cooperation with VNSAs, less with other type of political cooperation and diplomatic maneuvering.

Also, general literature believes that violent non-state actors are by nature prone to violence and it is part of their diplomacy in order to achieve their goals (Dipaolo 2005:167). However, when it comes to VNSAs like the Kurdish forces in Syria, the aim and amount of violence to achieve their goals are more dynamic. On the other hand, Veenendaal (2017:562) argues that even small states' foreign policy analysis has been understudied. This is also the case with VNSA's foreign policy perspectives and their ability to maneuver in diplomacy, in which parallels can be drawn with small state dynamics.

Saleyhan *et.al* (2011:734) have suggested that more research should be paid to characteristics of VNSAs in order to better understand the reasons for outside states support to it. On the other hand, Aydinli (2016:3) argues that VNSAs have usually been looked through the sub-area of terrorism studies or studies of organized criminal activities. Thus, VNSAs as a separate phenomenon with distinct characteristics and

relationships with states at different time periods and circumstances have been left unnoticed in the literature.

Moreover, although the alliance theory of neorealist perspectives may have helped to explain the alliances in a bipolar world, there is not a one single theory that could help to explain superpower-VNSA relations. Literature on external support to (V)NSAs differ and so does the motivations of VNSAs. Bailes et. al (2016:2) argue that the literature has overlooked the small state alliance behavior and domestic incentives behind it – thus, this cannot be done by simply referring it to bandwagoning or balancing. In the literature, although both the principal-agent and patron-client relationship seem to lay out parallels that can be used to VNSA-state relation analysis, this comes with gaps when it comes to analysis. However, state-to-state relations still seem to matter more and come with more gains and benefits.

An aspect that is left unnoticed in the media is the growing role of media and how state support to VNSAs is related to it. However, it is often the media that helps to legitimize non-state actor's actions in the Western world. For instance, the YPG's actions and fight against ISIS have often been portrayed as heroic Kurdish actions that have close democratic and secular values to the West. However, portraying all Syrian Kurds and the YPG to the same pot can be questionable as the group has often faced backlash from local Kurdish and Arab opposition groups and political parties as well as been accused of human rights violations. Furthermore, a VNSA who has a relation with any state, but especially with a superpower, finds it easier to have its cause and organization legitimized with the help of an external support. Moreover, (V)NSAs can also have influence on its patron's domestic and foreign politics. This seems to be rather overlooked in the literature, as seen in the case of institutional division in the USA administration in terms of supporting Kurdish militias in Syria.

In the case of the USA, personal relations of politicians and the president pay a role with different counterparts, especially in terms of states' relations to VNSAs. The role of personality is also overlooked in the VNSA-state relationship literature as the conflicts and the international environment is constantly changing. Moreover, the literature seems to overlook the 'common enemy' concept. Sometimes, VNSAs and states cooperate to eliminate a common enemy, being not only a proxy relation. This

type of motivation or incentive for cooperation seems to be increasing, especially in terms of states who want to spare its soldiers and money instead, as seen also in Syria.

Conclusion

The key word for VNSA-state relations, both conflictual or cooperative, strategic or tactic, seem to be the changing nature of relations, often based on personal relations of leaders. However, this phenomenon needs to be researched more as there is no single international relations theory that can cover the VNSA-state increasing relations. Proxy war often proves to be less costly for great powers as well as saves the lives of soldiers on the ground. This has also been the case with the current USA's strategy in Syria where most of the fighting on the ground is done by local Kurdish forces. Hence, proxy war strategy has proven to be suitable for a superpower.

According to Byman (2018:940), it is easier to change the behavior of the state that is exploiting or tolerating foreign fighters than to affect a VNSA like foreign fighters. Hence, state-to-state relations seem easier to regulate and manage towards a certain pattern of behavior and are more formal. Although getting into a cooperative (or conflictual) alliance with VNSAs may seem easier and less regulated, it is harder to predict the outcome and gains that the state wishes to achieve. Moreover, Byman (2018:940) argues that a state is usually acting for "cold strategic or political reasons" while VNSAs like foreign fighters are less open to threats and persuasion by force.

Idler (2018:69) argues that VNSA-VNSA relations can change from tactical alliances to subcontract relationships that later on may be transformed into strategic alliances or to violent combat. This can also happen to VNSA-state relations as the YPG-USA case have recently shown. Although the YPG-USA relationship fits to the above relationship types in some aspects, it seems to borrow a piece from everything, yet does not clearly fit to a particular one. At times, it is conflictual while at other times it seeks cooperation with previous adversaries or allies who have already betrayed the VNSA. Although the YPG in a way acts on behalf of the U.S. when it comes to fighting ISIS on the ground, such relationship is not necessarily defined in formal terms, but is rather non-binding.

For instance, when it comes to the principal-agent model, the two partners have a clash of interests in which the YPG as an agent does not fully act on behalf of the USA but also has its own interest in defeating ISIS and already had it before the USA decided to help the YPG with air support in Kobane. Thus, translating such relation to the pure principle-agent model is questionable. On the other hand, while the YPG is a client of the USA in terms of military assistance, it has proven to adapt to the circumstances and changing nature of the conflict and can survive without being a mere client of the superpower in the region. As such, client-patron relationships are prone to change and are adaptable to different circumstances just as the (V)NSA-(super)state relations are. At times, the USA has been a principal while the YPG has been fighting on the ground against ISIS instead of the USA troops, while on the other hand the YPG has had an influence over the USA in which the USA has been advocating the cause of the YPG among the West while the group has been affecting the USA-Turkey relations on an international level.

Furthermore, Idler's (2012) VNSA-VNSA relation typology and tactical alliance in particular may also translate to the superpower-VNSA relation in Syria. According to Idler (2012:73), tactical alliances are temporary collaborative agreements in which trust is somewhat low among violent groups and the relation is based on immediate benefits, usually with personal considerations and are somewhat institutionalized. Also, main benefits of such relation has increased local status and economic profits in VNSA-VNSA relations (Idler 2012:73). As VNSAs are challenging and changing the international state system, states also understand NSAs' growing influence by relying on sub-state partners in fight against ISIS, for instance (Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2016:33).

Furthermore, it is often argued that states have complicated systems like internal inefficiencies, bureaucracy and are unable to coordinate strategy across government institutions, i.e. similar to the USA (Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2016:34). Thus, this makes it easier for the VNSAs to do the job instead of states. Moreover, states fighting against terrorism are a prime example of a conflictual relationship with VNSAs as well as VNSAs fighting with each other. For instance, the fight against ISIS is one such example, while also VNSA such as the YPG fights with ISIS - being

in a cooperative relation with the USA, while in a conflictual one with Turkey. Overall, the dynamics between the state-VNSA and VNSA-VNSA relation is a very complex one. Several states themselves have the responsibility of playing a role in creating VNSAs themselves. Thus, state-VNSA relations should not be taken as something extraordinary or outside the normal state-to-state alliances in international system. VNSAs increasing role and influence in world politics is a new reality that should not be overlooked or under-theorized.



CHAPTER III

GROWING AUTONOMY OF THE PYD AND THE YPG

Introduction

The Kurds of Syria have long been struggling for their political rights as most of the Kurdish political parties had either been restricted to conduct their activities or been banned throughout the years. This changed with the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, followed by the PYD taking control of parts of Northern Syria. However, such sudden rise to power and increase in legitimacy for the VNSA since the Syrian regime forces withdrew in July 2012 has not been as democratic as the Western media have portrayed. The reality and practice by the PYD-led administration and its military wing, the YPG and later, the SDF is different of what they have been advocating for in theory, with the PYD/YPG been accused of autocratic governing practices as well as child recruitment. Nevertheless, the PYD-led Kurds have proven to be quick and adaptable in terms of seizing power after the withdrawal of the Syrian forces as well as proven to be a flexible and experienced VNSA in the eyes of the international community. Moreover, the PYD-governed area has remained to be one of the most stable part of Syria up until this day (Al-Monitor 07.02.2020).

According to Aydinli (2016:8), the first aspect of the ARI framework relates to the essence of non-state actorness and as such, the distinction and distance of (V)NSAs from states. Just as states can vary along the lines of being weak or strong, so can (V)NSAs as they can move along the lines of being “relatively more statist to relatively more non-statist” (Aydinli 2016:8). The variation along this range is linked to two main aspects: firstly, the amount of influence that states hold over (V)NSAs such as whether (V)NSAs rely on states for financial or any other support and

secondly, the degree of (V)NSAs' connection with statist propositions such as does a (V)NSA stick to all or some state principles and regulations or does it fight against states (Aydinli 2016:8).

Furthermore, the degree of a VNSA's autonomy can be considered from two aspects: how well is a VNSA able to create new alternative regime practices or adapt to existing ones and also, how well is a VNSA able to manipulate weaknesses within the state-centric regime (Aydinli 2016:10). Examples of these alternative instruments could include using legal companies to finance a VNSA's operations and this could also be related to the YPG and the SDF who now finance themselves by controlling over 50 percent of Syria's oilwells and through deals done with a private USA oil company, as elaborated in the upcoming chapters.

'Representation', on the other hand, is related to what extent (V)NSAs work to maintain its members and attract new ones (Aydinli 2015:431). Moreover, Aydinli (2015:431) argues that assessing VNSA's representation capacity requires not only looking at issues such as a VNSA's strategies and tactics but also the scope of potential recruits, the group's level of recognition and legitimacy as well as its ability to generate loyalty among its members.

This chapter focuses on the history of the Syrian Kurds and how the PYD and the YPG managed to seize control in Northern Syria as well as how this has contributed to its autonomy and representation. However, as seen from the upcoming chapters, although the PYD/YPG have built up relations with states over the years, including the USA, it is questionable whether the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF can survive and sustain themselves without the Syrian regime's concession of letting them operate in the Syrian territory as well as whether the YPG and now, the SDF can be sustainable without the superpower USA's support.

Background

Although the Kurds have been divided among four nation states, they see *Kurdistan* as a single unit - *Bakur* as related to the North or Turkey's Kurdistan; *Bashur* refers to the South or Iraqi Kurdistan; *Rojhelat* is the East or Iranian Kurdistan and *Rojava* is seen as the West and the Syrian Kurdistan (Bengio 2014

cited in Dalay 2018:82). Although in theory, the Kurds do not see *Kurdistan* as a divided land, in practice, there has been a power struggle both at the local and on the regional level. Nevertheless, history for the Syrian Kurds has been difficult due to the state's restrictions on their rights as a minority. On 10 October 1962, hundreds of thousands of Kurds in Syria were deprived from their citizenship; right for having loans; being employed by the state, were taken away the right of receiving state benefits; as well as having access to the state's health system and education (Gunter 2014:32). As this practice continued until the Syrian civil uprising, by 2011, there were up to 300,000 stateless Kurds in Syria (Özcelik 2019:5).

While the Iraqi Kurds had achieved autonomy in the post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Syria's Kurds were less successful as they had become critical of the Syrian regime's unwillingness to address Kurdish political and economic demands, while the political repression against the Kurds had been growing in the country (Sary 2016:6). Anger towards the regime increased with the Qamishli riots in Al-Hasakah province in March 2004, when the Syrian regime's security forces clashed with Kurdish youth. This was triggered by tensions between the Arab community and Kurds after a local football match, eventually spreading from Qamishli to Deir Ezzour (Sary 2016:6). Although the regime responded violently, these riots were followed by opening new ways of communication between the Syrian regime and local Kurdish politicians years later as well as deepened political awareness among the Kurds in Northern Syria, leading to increase in establishing Kurdish political parties (Sary 2016:6).

The situation for the Kurds started to get better in 2011 when President al-Assad, being under pressure from the civil uprising, gave citizenship rights back to the Syrian Kurds as well as withdrew from Northern Syria rather peacefully, giving territorial control for the PYD-led Kurds. By doing so, the PYD has been keeping a neutral viewpoint or a "third way" towards the Syrian regime by not fighting and not openly being vocal against it. Although there have been some recent occasional clashes between the pro-regime forces and the YPG-dominated SDF, the PYD/YPG have reiterated over the years that it respects Syrian territorial unity and is not seeking any kind of secession.

Following the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Syrian Kurdish parties were divided of how to react to the unfolding of events and became involved with a power struggle and rivalries among themselves. Political and military developments in the region, mainly the rise of ISIS, together with the rise of the PYD-led *Rojava Movement for Democratic Society* (TEV-DEM) played a role in Kurdish political scene. On 19 July 2012, the PYD-led Kurds started to take control of the areas that had previously been under the control of the Syrian regime such as Kobane, several towns close to Al-Hasakah and the Afrin region and by August 2012, the PYD had taken control over most Kurdish cities in Northern Syria (Özcelik 2019:6). However, the Arab majority Qamishli and Al-Hasakah itself were taken control by the PYD at a later stage (Özcelik 2019:6). The literature as well as the PYD/YPG's statements of what led to the Syrian regime's rather peaceful withdrawal and how the two sides came to these terms, has not been clearly defined. However, it is believed that at the time the Syrian regime was focusing on fighting with the opposition in other areas, while still operating parallel systems with the PYD-controlled areas in Northern Syria.

Early history of Syrian Kurdish parties

The first Syrian Kurdish party, the PDK-S, was founded in 1957 and most of the Kurdish parties at the time had been advocating for equal rights between Kurds and Arabs (Tezcür and Yıldız 2019:1; Allsopp 2019:48). The 1957 parties did not take arms against the Syrian regime and instead, lobbied for a diplomatic solution on the Kurdish issue in Syria (Allsopp 2019:58). At the time, these rival parties were not as divided as they are now but were mainly based on tribal and family linkages. At the start of the uprising in 2011, there were about twenty active Kurdish parties in Syria (Allsopp 2019:49). By the beginning of 2017, four of these parties had united to form the KDP-S, which is related to Masoud Barzani's KDP in Northern Iraq, eleven parties were represented within the KNC, one party had declared itself as independent while five other parties cooperated with the PYD-led administration by forming the Kurdish National Alliance in Syria (Allsopp 2019:49).

Such divisions among political parties were related to their viewpoints either being at the left, right, or at the center spectrum (Allsopp 2019:49). Moreover, these

differences arose when the original 1957 party was targeted by the Syrian government in early 1960s and by 1965, the same party split in two in which differences in Kurdish politics started to arise (Allsopp 2019:50). For instance, the left emphasized the definition of the Kurds as a national group living in their historical land that should be recognized in the constitution of Syria while the right wing defined themselves as an ethnic group seeking minority and cultural rights in Syria (Allsopp 2019:50). Moreover, those who considered themselves to be a minority group had better relations with the state with certain benefits such as power to mediate regarding issues concerning the Kurds (Allsopp 2019:50).

Further differences were related to the Iraqi Kurdish parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) involvement in Syrian politics (Allsopp 2019:50). As such, the KDP umbrella was divided in 1964 and this led to the formation of the PUK in 1975 by the Talabani faction while the Kurdish left was influenced by Barzani (Allsopp 2019:50). At the time, Kurdish political parties in Syria were illegal and subject to criminal punishments and the variety of political parties and similarities in their doctrines made it harder to take the leading role once the Syrian uprising started in 2011 (Allsopp 2019:50).

Competition for power

As the civil war evolved, Barzani linked KDP-S was formed in 2014 in which four different parties unified. The KDP-S, just like the PYD, had been advocating for federalism but the two parties disagreed in terms of cooperating with the Syrian opposition (Allsopp 2019:52). The KDP-S organized protests both against the Syrian regime as well as against the PYD which it considered as cooperating with President Al-Assad and thus, abusing power (Allsopp 2019:53). The opposition umbrella organization to the PYD-dominated TEV-DEM, is the Kurdish National Council (KNC/ENKS) which was founded in Erbil in 2011 as a response to the Syrian uprising by ten different parties (Allsopp 2019:54). The KNC is backed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani, having close relations with Turkey. Although the USA has given support to the model of the KRG's Iraqi

Kurdistan, the superpower has not supported the PYD's political legitimacy that the VNSA has been lobbying for.

The KNC is related to the *Rojava Peshmerga* military group and has been operating since July 2015, trained by the Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces in Northern Iraq (Middle East Centre 2016:7). The Rojava Peshmerga is estimated to have about 2000-6000 members and have also cooperated in the fight against ISIS together with the Global Coalition (Allsopp 2019:59). However, the militants' group cooperation with the PYD/YPG has not been without rivalries as the PYD has previously requested that the fighters within the *Rojava Peshmerga* should be absorbed within the YPG to avoid any conflictual military interactions (Allsopp 2019:59). Furthermore, the KNC previously rejected the proposal to join the YPG due to the latter's close links with the Syrian regime (Allsopp 2019:59). However, there was cooperation between the KNC and the TEV-DEM during the Kobane siege in 2014 and during ISIS' attacks on the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq in August 2014.

Furthermore, the KNC has played a role in the Syrian National Council (SNC) since August 2013, the latter being based in Turkey (Middle East Centre 2016:7). The PYD, on the other hand, is excluded from the SNC and has not had a say in the international peace processes with regards to the future of Syria. The relationship between the SNC and the KNC has been characterized by difficulties as the Syrian opposition is not interested in granting more rights and introducing de-centralization in the future of Syria (Allsopp 2019:60). However, difficulties that the KNC has faced, has contributed to the sustainability and legitimacy of the PYD/YPG as the popular support for the KNC has been diminishing. Nevertheless, both the KNC and the PYD-dominated TEV-DEM compete for political power and for the support of the international community, equally wanting to have a share of influence and representation.

The KNC parties and the TEV-DEM had previously tried to work together on the production of the 'interim administration' of Rojava that was declared in 2013 and tried to find a common ground on local issues. For instance, on 11 July 2012, the KNC and the PYD signed the Erbil Agreement that was mediated by Masoud Barzani (Lowe 2014:228). However, this seemed to rather benefit the PYD and encouraged it

to move forward in terms of getting control of the Kurdish areas in Northern Syria. Eventually, the KNC withdrew from the agreement due to lack of trust and political differences with the PYD.

As the local community were more supportive towards the PYD and its security providing services amid ISIS' advance in the area, it also provided the PYD/YPG with a trademark of winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population, despite the KNC accusing the PYD of one-party autocratic rule. The PYD has insisted throughout the years that other parties should accept the *Autonomous Region's* system, while often being accused of taking political prisoners and making rival parties illegal to operate in their activities (Middle East Centre 2016:7). Several members of the KNC/ENKS have been arrested by the leaders of the *Autonomous Administration* due to their links with Turkey, which is now considered as an enemy from the perspective of the PYD/YPG. In 2016, the *Rojava* authorities banned the activities of the KNC/ENKS as well as closed about 40 KNC's offices because it had allegedly refused to follow the PYD Administration's procedures on opening political offices (Rudaw, 03.02.2020).

Although both the KNC and the PYD advocate for federalism and want Kurdish rights to be added to the Syrian Constitution, their views of how this should be done, differ. For instance, the KNC sees federalism as being ethnic rather than democratic-confederal and should not be unilaterally imposed (Middle East Centre 2016:7). The KNC promotes ethnic rights for the Syrian Kurds in the Kurdish-dominated areas while the PYD has advocated for radical communalism - with bottom-up governing style, supposedly for all ethnic and religious groups living in the PYD/YPG's controlled areas (Al-Monitor 04.02.2020)

The KNC did not recognize the PYD's governance system and condemned the Administration's declaration of federalism in March 2016 (Allsopp 2019:56). Moreover, it has expelled some parties its ranks who chose to cooperate and join the PYD instead (Allsopp 2019:56). The KNC has supported the Syrian uprising and the opposition but accuses the umbrella organization of the KCK to which the PYD is a member of, cooperating with the Syrian regime (Allsopp 2019:56). On the other

hand, the TEV-DEM, including the PYD has accused the KNC in attempts of establishing parallel forces for competition (Sary 2016:10).

Furthermore, tensions between the KNC and the PYD increased when the KDP-led KRG built a trench between Northern Syria and Northern Iraq in 2014 which it said was against terrorists arriving to the Kurdish region of Iraq (Ögür and Baykal 2018:57). Rivalries between the two groups were ongoing until ISIS attacked Kobane in September 2014 and President Barzani was under pressure to act and show solidarity with the PYD/YPG. After negotiations with Turkey and pressure from the USA, Barzani agreed to support the YPG's fight against ISIS by allowing its fighters and weapons into Kobane in November 2014 (Sary 2016:10).

President Barzani had previously been under pressure in defending Erbil in August 2014 when ISIS was advancing, by asking support from the UK and the USA (Sary 2016:10). Thus, analysts have assessed that such new cooperation between the two umbrella organizations would help the KNC to blend in to the region and dismiss accusations of being under Turkey's control while the cooperation would help the PYD diminish its image as being Syria's branch of the PKK (Al-Monitor 04.02.2020). Good relations between the two rival groups would contribute to the PYD-led administration's sustainability and influence in the region, by being flexible and adaptable as it is currently trying to portray good neighborly relations within the Kurdish unity talks that started in 2020.

The Democratic Union Party and its provision of services

The Partîya Yekîti ya Dêموkrat (PYD) was founded in 2003 as a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) although the PYD and the YPG have both tried to emphasize that the PKK has no influence over the VNSA, other than its organizational structure and views regarding democratic autonomy. Nevertheless, relations with the PKK, its military background of the PYD/YPG's members and organizational experience have played a big role in the PYD/YPG's "success", especially when it comes to its foreign relations and international support.

At the beginning of its activities, the PYD was not established with a particular focus to gain power in the Kurdish areas of Syria - this evolved with the start of the

civil war in 2011. However, it has been argued to have been successful in seizing power, showing opportunism and implement its program in order to exploit the war in Syria (Middle East Centre 2016:5). Allsopp (2019:47) argues that the PYD's sudden rise to power in Northern Syria demonstrates the importance of political power, resources as well as popular mobilization to administration. The PYD/YPG came to the spotlight in September 2014 amid the siege of Kobane, even though it had been present in Syria since 2003 (Özgür and Baykal 2018:44). The PYD's governance has extended beyond security, taxation and also includes institutions, judiciary, education, health services as well as focus on gender related issues (Tezcür and Yildiz 2019:2). Thus, the PYD has been trying to act as a secular state-like entity and by providing different services to locals, by increasing its loyalty and representation. Such build-up of service provision has also contributed to the VNSA's increased autonomy as it has been operating on the territory of the Syrian state throughout the years, from military support from the USA.

According to Khalaf (2016:10), the PYD relies on the provision of security, services and public diplomacy in order to legitimize itself. The PYD as a political party, has tried to put emphasis on the democratic nature of the organization, such as taking the party's decisions with two-thirds of majority (Tezcür and Yildiz 2019:5). However, this is questionable in practice as the VNSA has been accused of autocratic governance and one-party rule over the years. Its military wing, the YPG, has faced similar accusations, ranging from recruitment of child soldiers to controversial conscription policies and dominance within the SDF.

Despite this, it is argued that the siege of Kobane in September 2014 resulted in increasing support to the PYD/YPG from the international community (Tezcür and Yildiz 2019:5). Moreover, it could be said that the PYD owes its "success" to the YPG's fight against ISIS, its ability to secure international cooperation and having previous training experience from the PKK. Moreover, the YPG has "liberated" not only the Kurdish areas, but also the Arab populated areas since July 2012, when it took control over Kobane, and eventually over several towns in the Jazira canton (Middle East Centre 2016:6). Nevertheless, both the PYD and the YPG have been accused of forcing its rule on Arab populated areas. Moreover, the local population

initially seemed to appreciate the PYD/YPG's provision of security and services amid ISIS' atrocities in the region. For example, electricity and water access improved when the YPG recaptured the Euphrates Tishreen Dam in January 2016 (Sary 2016:13).

The PYD has been successful in getting support from the minorities under its controlled territory. While keeping the region "conflict-free", this also meant protecting the minorities from Islamists, jihadist and Arab nationalist groups (Ögür and Baykal 2018:61). Nevertheless, an important factor for local support to the PYD was the level of threat and that the PYD could offer stability and provide services to the local population, both against the Syrian regime and ISIS (Özcelik 2019:10). For instance, areas that had not been under the direct threat of ISIS, support for the PYD/YPG was generally less than in other areas (Burchfield 2017 cited in Özcelik 2019:10). Moreover, the PYD offered salaries and land property to some Arab tribes and motivate them for joining or accepting the PYD and their governance (Özcelik 2019:10).

After the Turkish invasion in Northern Syria, the both the PYD and the YPG were afraid that the Arab tribes may abandon the PYD/YPG-led governance. Furthermore, the PYD's refusal to work with different Kurdish parties led to polarization and tension among other political parties and Arab tribes (Middle East Centre 2016:6). As such, the PYD/YPG have tried fixing their relations with some Arab tribes as well as being more active in the Kurdish unity talks. This can be seen by the YPG and now, the SDF having released some of the ISIS-linked prisoners on the request of the Arab leaders as a concession for ensuring the VNSA's sustainability and good neighborly relations. Furthermore, the PYD is believed to be doing financially better compared to other Kurdish parties. For instance, custom duties and protection money for the military protection of the oil fields in Rumailan provide high income for the party (Savelsberg 2014:99). Such high income and provision of services have heavily contributed to the VNSA's sustainability, generated loyalty among its governed people and increased its autonomy from the Syrian regime.

Relations with the regime

While some of the Syrian opposition sees the PYD as being a proxy of the Syrian regime, it is also argued that the PYD's relationship with President al-Assad should be looked as a survival strategy that has been adapted to the civil war conditions (Sary 2016:2). Moreover, it has also been argued that the Kurdish forces had taken advantage of the Damascus bombing that killed several regime's high officials in July 2012 (Gary 2016:9). After that, a small incident followed between the Kurds and the regime forces before the Syrian troops withdrew to territories in Qamishli and the provincial capital of Al-Hasakah as the regime's attention was focused on fighting with the Free Syrian Army instead (van Wilgenburg 2016 cited in Gary 2016:9). Ögür and Baykal (2018:62) have argued that the Syrian regime may be benefitting from the Kurdish-Arab and Kurdish-Turkish tensions as it sees the PYD's political project as being of a temporary nature.

It is believed that at the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the PYD opposed foreign intervention and advocated for the regime change instead (Middle East Centre 2016:8). However, foreign intervention and superpower involvement in Syria ended up being the key to the PYD/YPG's success that has contributed to its sustainability while at the same time, the relationship with the Syrian regime was convenient as the regime was operating in Northern Syria with parallel institutions that gave salaries, shared oil, agriculture revenues as well as operated the Qamishli airport (Middle East Centre 2016:8).

In return for the *de-facto* autonomy, the PYD respected Syria's integrity and did not advocate for independence but instead, a "third way" of neutrality. It is questioned whether the reason why President Assad passed a law on decentralization (Decree 107) and gave citizenship to the Syrian Kurds is likely to be a tactical move as it prioritized other threats or rather a strategic move of thinking that the Syrian regime may have to share power in the future (Sary 2016:15). The Syrian regime sees the PYD-led democratic project as of temporary nature, not achievable by law and have rejected the idea of a federal system (Allsopp 2019:84). Nevertheless, it could be said that while the PYD was trying to pursue a somewhat neutral direction, it tried

to distance itself from the Syrian state amid local scepticism towards the VNSA and its links with the state, yet it has remained connected to the regime throughout the years.

The PYD's values and views

Salih Muslim is the most vocal and influential figure within the *Autonomous Administration* led by the PYD and was acting as a spokesperson for communicating with the international community within the PYD during the early years of the Syrian civil war. After his time was over as a spokesperson, he continued heading foreign relations for the PYD-led *Autonomous Administration* (Al-Monitor 07.02.2020). As the Syrian regime was previously restricting Kurdish parties at the time, Salih Muslim was exiled in Qandil in Kurdistan-Iraq until 2011, when he returned to Syria (Kaya and Lowe 2017:279). Savelsberg (2014:96) argues that until 2011, the PYD was a political party that had the most people with the longest sentences in prison but since then, the balance of local politics has changed, resulting in the PYD-Syrian regime's strategic alliance.

Allegedly, the Turkish government had previously asked the PYD and Salih Muslim to cooperate with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), give up its desire for autonomy and distance itself from the PKK, whereas the PYD had asked the Turkish government not to stop humanitarian and military aid reaching the Kurdish region amid the fight against ISIS (Basaran 2017:108). However, these talks proved to be unsuccessful as Turkey considers the PYD/YPG to be a threat to its national security and be part of the terrorist organization, the PKK.

There is ambiguity in the literature about the specific events that led to the Syrian regime forces withdrawal from Northern Syria and to what extent was this relationship conflictual. O'Leary (2017:6) argues that the regime forces withdrew to weaken the opposition that the USA supported at the time. As such, the USA support to the YPG in the fight against ISIS indirectly supported the Syrian regime's survival as the PYD/YPG are known to be "neutral" towards the regime (O'Leary 2017:6). Salih Muslim, the previous co-leader of the PYD, indicated in 2014 that the Kurds

were looking forward to the regime change, knowing this would be difficult and that the Kurds had been “...fighting against Al-Assad’s regime and struggling against them since 2004 when the Qamishli riots happened” (Salih Muslim 2014:2).

On the other hand, the PYD seemed to believe that the Arab-led Syrian opposition would not be a good choice for the future of Syria and the Kurds considered them to be religious and not trustable (Muslim 2014:2). Salih Muslim has portrayed the PYD as not have had many choices of what to do for the future of Syria at the time, stating that “...If we go to the other side of the regime, they are killing us, since 1963 to now. They are enemies to the Kurds and especially our party, which was established in 2003. Until ten years we are struggling against the regime. We were tortured in the boardrooms of the intelligence services and security services...” (Muslim 2014:3).

Both the PYD and the YPG have constantly stressed the importance of self-defense and democracy as a justification for their actions. The PYD’s internal bylaws emphasize gender equality, freedom of expression as well as prohibitions against torture (Acun and Keskin 2016:14 cited in Özcelik 2019:2). Yet, the PYD-led Kurds are known to be exaggerating information shared in their speeches and in the social media. For instance, according to the PYD, it was them who “threw the Syrian regime out in July 2012 and were left with no other choice but to help the people” and ...”establish some kind of administration, at least to rule our people, to not leave them hungry” as the “revolution in Syria was an opportunity” for the Syrian Kurds and the PYD “to protect” themselves (Muslim 2014:3). However, as the Syrian regime was operating parallel institutions in Northern Syria at the time, the PYD-led political transition and taking control of the area was made easier for the VNSA.

The PYD has emphasized that the *Autonomous Administration* was designed not only for the Kurds but for all of Syria, including minorities. The PYD has stressed that it consulted with other minorities, like the Syriacs and Arabs of how to best defend the region and its “people” (Muslim 2014:3). The PYD emphasizes that it was the “people” who wanted such solutions and that the PYD only served to overview the process: “The people who came together, they decided to make three cantons. They said there was a social contract among those people, a kind of constitution for

the people, for all the components...They decided to have three official languages: Kurdish, Syriac and Arabic” (Muslim 2014:4). The PYD-led administration has its own election law that is meant to reserve a quota of 10 percent for Kurds, 10 percent for Arabs, 10 percent for Syriacs, 5 percent to other minorities as well as have 40 percent of quota for women in different institutions (Muslim 2014:4). In reality, such practices are questionable, considering opposition parties’ continuous accusations of the PYD’s authoritarian governing style and other controversial practices like using child soldiers and forced conscription.

The PYD stresses the aspect of democracy, and this is believed to be the main aspect in getting support and recognition from the international community. Generally, women in Kurdish societies have enjoyed relatively more freedom and this is an issue that the PYD likes to emphasize in its internal and foreign relations as they play a role in the DAA and the *Autonomous Administration*. Moreover, hundreds of women have also fought in both the PKK and the YPG militant groups against ISIS as well as served in the ranks of the *Asayesh*, known as the PYD internal police forces (Gunter 2014:30). This can also be seen from the women faction of the military group – the YPJ, who played a role in the battle of Kobane between September 2014-January 2015.

The ambiguous relationship with the PKK

The relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime dates back to the 1980s when President Hafez al-Assad gave sanctuary to the PKK in Syria, which is considered to be a terrorist organization by both the EU and the USA (Middle East Centre 2016:8). The PKK was established in 1978 with Marxist-Leninist separatist views and it has conducted attacks against Turkey as well as the Kurds since 1984. The PYD itself was established by the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in 2003 - a body in which the PKK also belongs to (Özcelik 2019:5). However, the PYD and the YPG have not been considered as a terrorist organization by the West as the PKK has. Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya in 1999 and put in prison in Turkey with the help of the CIA. However, the USA is now the biggest advocate for the PKK-linked YPG and later, the SDF in the fight against ISIS while Turkey is deeply

against this. Furthermore, it is argued that the support that the PKK received from the Syrian regime previously and the PKK's mobilization and recruitment strategies lay ground to the PKK-PYD relationship today (Kaya and Lowe 2017:276).

Tezcür and Yildiz (2019:3) argue that the PYD's success compared to other political parties lie in its human resources, organizational skills and ideological cohesion - all due to its links with the PKK. The PYD has built networks among families, relatives and friends of the PKK militants over the years, and this has given them significant base in mobilizing fighters after 2011 (Tezcür and Yildiz 2019:3). Furthermore, this fighting experience has proven to be crucial for the YPG and later, the SDF's fight against ISIS and ensuring military support from the world's biggest superpower.

Allsopp (2019:61) argues that the PKK's presence was most influential in Afrin and Kobane where the PYD gained a "natural" legitimacy. However, The PYD was never a bottom-up organization but developed as a top-down political institution with a hierarchical structure and a cult of Abdullah Öcalan as the PKK's leader (Özcelik 2019:7). Furthermore, links with the PKK have created tensions with Masoud Barzani's KDP party in Iraqi Kurdistan although this was overlooked as the PKK helped the Iraqi Kurdistan during the ISIS siege against Yezidis in which the local Peshmerga forces withdrew. Nevertheless, tensions between the PKK and the KDP have recently increased as the PKK is believed to operate in disputed Kirkuk territories in Northern Iraq with the support of Iranian Shia militias.

Despite this, the PYD has tried to emphasize that the PKK has no influence on the PYD/YPG in terms of military operations but has only had influence on its organizational structure and viewpoints regarding democratic autonomy (Kaya and Lowe 2017:276). Therefore, the PYD has tried to focus on the Syrian Kurdish politics and downplay its links with the PKK in order to secure international support and legitimacy (Kaya and Lowe 2017:276). According to Salih Muslim, the PKK and the PYD respect each other but are separate in terms of their activities and decision-making (Kaya and Lowe 2017:277). While the PYD has allegedly retained organizational independence from the PKK, it has similarities in political governance and follow a hostile position against Turkey as many of its members had previously

served within the PKK's structure (Ghady 2016:9). Alar Khalil, a member of TEV-DEM said in 2017 that the Kurdish issue of the PKK in Turkey "...is not our struggle, and we have said publicly and will say again that our territory and resources are not going to be used by the PKK or any other groups fighting in Turkey..." (cited in Özcelik 2019:8).

It is argued that since 2016, Northern Syria is witnessing its first attempt to put the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism into practice (Middle East Centre 2016:5). Democratic confederalism suggests the protection of existing borders and creation of autonomous structures, involving cultural elements within the borders of the state but at the same time, not threatening the territorial integrity of nation-states (Ögür and Baykal 2018:53). As such, both the PKK and the PYD believe in "democracy of many people" in which different minorities and people coexist under the same country while trying to emphasize that none of these VNSAs are looking for separation from Syria (Middle East Centre 2016:9). Therefore, by being somewhat open to operate within the state borders, this has increased their autonomy, yet, it also shows that the VNSA cannot be sustainable without these territorial concessions from the Syrian regime.

It is believed that thousands of Syrian Kurds joined the PKK in the late 1980s-1990s (Teszür and Yildiz 2019:4). Thus, the PYD's and the YPG's success is owed to the PKK and it is believed that without the PKK's fighting experience, the PYD/YPG would not have been as effective as gaining power as well not been as successful in the fight against ISIS (Teszür and Yildiz 2019:4). For instance, tactical benefits between the two groups include leadership structure, organizational ideology and an existing style of governing (Özcelik 2019:6). Furthermore, links with the PKK have provided the PYD/YPG with trained combatants, ranging from the region to outside as well as with international volunteers fighting in the ranks of the YPG. Therefore, the PKK's fighters and higher rank militants make up the core of the YPG militia (Özcelik 2019:6). Despite international community being aware of the PYD/YPG's links with the PKK as several high USA officials have publicly reiterated this, international support to the YPG and now, the SDF in the fight against ISIS continue.

The “Rojava” Experiment

The so called *Rojava* experiment came to the spotlight after the Syrian regime withdrew from Northern Syria in July 2012, leading the PYD to take control of different Kurdish populated areas. On 11 November 2013, the PYD declared forming of an interim government while the three cantons in Northern Syria were announced as having “democratic autonomy” (Özcelik 2019:6). As the PYD was encouraged by military victories of the YPG and the decreasing local support for the KNC parties, the PYD-led TEV-DEM replaced its governance system from an interim administration that was agreed with the KNC to democratic confederalism, which the PYD relates to as “democratic self-administration project” (Sary 2013:11). The three cantons are governed by different executive, judicial and legislative councils (Özcelik 2019:6). Each canton has its own constitution, government, parliament and courts - all related to the charter of the “democratic autonomy” of *Rojava* (Khalaf 2016:11). According to Abdullah Öcalan, democratic confederalism relates to the failure of capitalism, the nation-state system while emphasizing bottom-up governance system (Sary 2013:11). However, the PYD and the YPG cooperate with the world’s biggest superpower and an advocator for capitalism – the USA.

By April 2014, the PYD controlled most towns in the province of al-Hasakah with the exception of Qamishli and Hasakah town itself that are considered to be strategically important cities, as well as had control over Afrin and Kobane (Savelsberg 2014:98). In mixed population cities like Qamishli, government institutions operated in parallel with the PYD’s organizational structures (Savelsberg 2014:98). On 17 March 2016, the PYD unilaterally declared the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in three different cantons - Afrin and Kobane in Northern Aleppo province and Jazira in al-Hasakah (Özcelik 2019:1).

In July 2016, the existing charter was updated to the “Federal Democratic Rojava Social Contract”, emphasizing multi-ethnic recognition, gender rights and democratic governance (Sary 2016:11). This contract is seen as a constitution of Rojava, matching the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, possibly in order to ensure international support (Sary 2016:11). The *Social Contract* also stresses decentralization to limit religious, ethnic and regional conflicts in Syria,

while emphasizing full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system (Sary 2016:17). Such practices were also put into action as the YPG started to capture more territory from ISIS. For instance, in June 2015, after the YPG had recaptured Tel-Abyad from ISIS, an Arab president was elected to the co-presidency of a male and female (Sary 2016:17). This shows the adaptable and flexible nature of the PYD and how this has also been seen in the YPG's activities.

Although the local politics under the PYD-rule is organized into different provincial, regional and neighborhood councils in which the PYD tries to emphasize its democratic and consultative nature of governing, Sary (2016:2) argues that the PYD-led TEV-DEM operates insufficiently as it is dependent on the Syrian regime. Therefore, the PYD had previously less autonomy during the initial years of its operations while the VNSA has been gradually building it up over the years.

The PYD has tried to advocate for decentralization and downplay the attention on Kurdish ethnicity with regard to its political project - it still refers to Kurds as an ethnic group but this has been adopted to the democratic autonomy project (Allsopp 2019:77). Although the PYD's governing outline is complex and portrays the level of democratic structure, the theory and practice differ as both the PYD and the YPG have a wide range of human rights accusations as well as a record of taking political prisoners. Moreover, since November 2014, the PYD-led administration has enforced military conscription on military-aged men of all ethnicities within its governance but the cantons can decide on the military conscription age by themselves (Kurdistan24, 04.02.2020)

After gaining full control of *Rojava*, the PYD tried to actively work on its decentralization project. For instance, the government buildings were taken over by the local administration and some were converted into the YPG and *Asayish* police institutions (Sary 2016:12). However, the opposition has accused the PYD of simply replacing posters of President al-Assad with the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's as well as practicing authoritarianism towards the opposition (Sary 2016:12).

Growing representation of the YPG

Although the YPG came into the spotlight during the Kobane siege, its history dates back to the establishment of clandestine self-defense units and the Qamishli riots on March 12, 2004 when a violent conflict broke out between football fans which resulted in killing of 70 people (Knapp 2019:389). As this evolved into further repression of Kurds in Syria, it led to a formation of an armed, self-defense unit of the People's Self Defense Units (YXG) before the YPG/YPJ that operated in secret with other similar councils (Knapp 2019:389). Such self-defense units were also established in Afrin, Qamishli and Aleppo and by 2007, took their first military activity against anti-Kurdish attacks in Raqqa (Knapp 2019:391).

Initially, these hidden self-defense units were operating separate from the PYD and the YPG officially joined the PYD as its military wing in 2012 (Knapp 2019:392). However, the previously known self-defense units were already organized and trained before the Syrian uprising and were quick to adapt to the changing conflict environment. This also gave the PYD advantage over the KNC whose members wanted to stay committed to non-violence (Phillips 2016:133).

As the Syrian regime was focused on fighting the FSA, PYD and PKK militants were quick to fill the vacuum as many of them had previously fought for the PKK's military wing, the HPG, and used their experience to transform the YPG into a more organized force (Strategic Comments 2017:5). By 29 July 2012, the YPG claimed to have "liberated" Kobane, Afrin and eight other towns (Phillips 2016:134). These developments made the KRG's Massoud Brazani, who was supporting the KNC, to broker the Erbil Agreement in July 2012 with the goal of governing the areas that the PYD/YPG had taken control of (Phillips 2016:134). However, the Erbil Agreement was never implemented and the PYD continued taking control of checkpoints, establishing local councils, providing security, food and educational support to the locals which won the "hearts and minds" of thousands of residents who had previously been living under the ISIS' rule. Nevertheless, the YPG and the FSA

forces clashed several times throughout 2012 in Aleppo and in 2013 with al-Nusra in Ras al-Ayn as well as with rival parties (Phillips 2016:134).

The PYD's military wing, the YPG, indicated in 2012 that the VNSA had about 3,000 fighters while the women's wing, the YPJ, had about 700 members (Barfi 09.10.2015). By 2015, the YPG stated that it had about 23,650 and the YPJ about 19,350 fighters in their ranks (Barfi 09.10.2015). Together with these militants, about 1,500 troops additional fighters came from the Sanadid Forces from the Shammar tribe, several hundred from the Syriac Christians and about 300 more foreign fighters who joined the ranks of the YPG amid the Kobane siege and the fight against ISIS (Barfi 09.10.2015). According to Savelsberg (2019:361), 50 percent of the YPG fighters originate from Turkey, while not all of the YPG members follow the PYD's policies (2019:361). However, the YPG and the PYD both offer certain privileges such as jobs, electricity and food supplies and many people join the YPG for financial reasons (Savelsberg 2019:361).

Just like the PYD, the YPG has focused on institutionalizing its military forces in the region (Crisis Group 2014). The YPG has different military academies that offer training, including Abdullah Öcalan's ideology, as well as receive salary while serving in these academies (Crisis Group 2014:14). However, not all recruits believe in Abdullah Öcalan's standpoints. The PYD/YPG's strategy has been focused on establishing councils in different areas even before taking control of them. For instance, the YPG entered Tell Tamr in 2014 and set up councils before it took control of roads on the outskirts of the town (Crisis Group 2014:13). This enabled the PYD to appoint likeminded leaders and put councils in charge of distributing resources to the local population before it took control of the territory.

Nevertheless, the YPG's forced military conscription has caused resentment and fleeing abroad by potential recruits (Savelsberg 2019:361). All males between ages 18-30 are required to complete a six-month military service as per the Autonomous Administration's Duty of Self-Defence law (Allsopp 2018:119). In theory, exceptions have been allowed for people whose family members were killed in the PKK while in practice, some males have avoided the conscription by having good relations with the PYD/YPG officials (Allsopp 2019:119). According to the laws in the three PYD-

governed cantons, conscripts should only serve in their local areas and not be involved in the front lines, while this does not work in practice as conscripts have been sent outside of Kurdish majority areas such as Raqqa and Manbij (Allsopp 2019:119).

Although both the PYD and the YPG say that they are independent in their decisions, it is widely known that many of its previous and current PKK fighters make up the YPG's commanding positions. Before the USA airstrikes and the *peshmerga* fighters reached Kobane in 2014, the YPG had been supported by about 400 PKK fighters from Turkey (Savelsberg 2019:360). As the YPG had around 50,000 fighters at the time, it is larger than the PKK's 8,000-member armed wing, despite the YPG and the SDF trying to keep their exact numbers in secret (Middle East Centre 2016:7).

The victory over Kobane heavily contributed to the 'regeneration' aspect of 'representation' with regards to the ARI framework as the victory over Kobane attracted new members to both the YPG and its women affiliated YPJ as well as attracted hundreds of international volunteers to the YPG's ranks while helping to establish the VNSA's legitimacy both locally and internationally. However, financial reasons for new members to join the groups have been the main aspects contributing to the 'regeneration' factor of the ARI – both for the YPG and now, for the SDF. However, the victory over Kobane has indeed helped to increase legitimacy and recognition for both the YPG and its female branch, the YPJ.

Views from the expert-interviews

Regarding the question whether the PYD-led *Rojava project* could be sustainable and whether the oil fields that the Kurds control could play a role in this, the interviewees generally argued that oil does not play much role in the sustainability of the PYD/YPG and now the SDF. Moreover, none of the participants mentioned the recent oil deals with the USA and the SDF with regards to oil resources that the PYD/YPG and now the SDF controls, further elaborated in the next chapters. For instance, interviewee 2 argued that “we are talking about a progressive region here,

with egalitarian contest, aiming for national and political emancipation which lasted until the USA's support came" (interviewee 2).

Surprisingly, even Kurdish activists who were interviewed for this research, were not hopeful for the sustainability of the 'Autonomous Administration'. For instance, a Syrian human rights activist stressed that the so-called *Rojava project* has been characterized with opportunistic tendencies and there are tensions between the PYD and KRG leadership, who supports the Syrian opposition parties. Also, Russia does not care of the subject matter and for them, it does not matter whether there would be a confederation or one single party governing the area. At first, the Syrian Kurds were misled by the USA - they also lost an opportunity to have a better deal with President al-Assad, adding that the Kurds should forget the autonomous area due to Turkey's resistance as well as Iran and negotiate how to end the conflict instead. According to the Syrian human rights activist, oil is just a weapon that actually goes to Iran (interviewee 3).

Another interviewee argued that the Israel-Palestine conflict is a chronical issue, related to getting to the nature of Syria's problem. The 2011 Arab Spring turned into a complex issue. Now, we are also dealing with Russian involvement, which is "always seen as occupier" - this is a baggage for Turkey. There are Russian, Iranian, Turkish elements in Syria. There are more than 60 different military groups in Syria, including Syrian National Army cooperation. In 2012, the Northern Syria area was seen as "the Afghanistan of Turkey". Meanwhile, the YPG is "winning legitimacy". YPG cooperated with the regime and Russia has been using this as a tool by letting them cooperate. "Russia does not care about the YPG". This has made the problem more complicated (interviewee 4). PYD is not self-sustainable because of being a land-locked country - they depend on neighbours. Iraqi Kurds own oil wells. They depend on oil - in Deir el Zoir in 2017, they got valuable oil. However, oil and gas are not important - they sell it to the regime (interviewee 5). Rojava is not something that other actors would like to have - there are strong hostilities against it. In the long run, Syria is not a major interest for the USA - there is a lot of uncertainty there (interviewee 7).

The YPG is not PKK but they have the “same mentality.” However, YPG is diplomatically weak - they are doing their best, but “not enough - you cannot compete with Turkey”. This is not a symmetrical competition. However, sympathy that the YPG has received has been “phenomenal”. Women and gender issues have played a big role in this. Sympathy around the YPG has already been generated and this is not going to go away. The PYD/YPG will keep their status quo but will not have Northern Iraq style model of governing. Nevertheless, Turkey will try to “destabilize it”. Arab tribes have been advised by the Saudis to work with the YPG and the SDF. Also, relations with Arab tribes are tactical for the YPG and the SDF. The YPG and the SDF are now the main security providers in the region and they have gained respect of the minorities. The Kurds have not displaced minorities like al-Assad did. However, as long as the USA will not withdraw from Syria completely, the PYD/YPG will be sustainable (interviewee 9).

It was also argued that the “struggle of *Rojava*” has been a “huge boost” to PYD/YPG’s nationhood. They fought against “evil forces”, as evil as Nazism and fascism. Because there was “genocide against the Yezidis,” Kurds intervened in Sinjar and they were the only force who pushed the ISIS back. This has given a sense of pride to the Kurds. What the Syrian Kurds do, makes sense - they try to establish equality and focus on gender. They are not imposing their own ideology, except in schools. Kurds have sacrificed a lot and as such, the USA soldiers’ and the Kurds’ “friendship” has developed. Oil is used as an income, but not only for the SDF. It is also a main point of income for the regime and Iran. SDF is protecting oil from Iran. However, oil has a secondary importance. USA can sacrifice Kurds - big powers always do that. USA has a choice who to partner with, Kurds do not (interviewee 10). Another participant argued that the YPG is a “reliable and organized force” on the ground. They have leverage over the Assad regime and Russia but there is “no clear future of this project”. In Europe, PYD/YPG opened some bureaus in the European capitals but in Prague, they had to close it two years later due to Turkey’s pressure. In Brussels and Paris, they also opened offices (interviewee 11). Interviewee 12 argued that the *Rojava* project is not sustainable. Autonomy would be reasonable but who

would guarantee this. European public opinion is supportive of the Kurds in Syria (interviewee 12).

It was also stated that the *Rojava* project has been under pressure from Turkey's "aggressiveness". "We do also not know what Syria does in the future – the *Rojava* project is an experiment that promoted diversity, pluralism, equality, ecology". These ideas are promoted also in Europe - it is a "key to future of the Middle East". The *Rojava* model is inclusive - it is the only way out" (interviewee 13). A source close to the USA Defense Department argued that we do not yet know if it is sustainable or not. There needs to be a final political settlement. It also depends on reactions of Turkey - it is a landlocked area (interviewee 14). Another source close to the USA government argued that the VNSA's sustainability depends on how much the USA is willing to remain on the ground. Kurdish question should be solved by involving Assad and Turkey. The USA can act as a guarantor and act similar to the Iraqi Kurdistan model - without that, *Rojava* will not be sustainable (interviewee 15).

According to interviewee 16, this project in Northeast Syria has overcome many obstacles, including the USA's withdrawal decisions but there has been no action from the world. The USA realized that they have to come back to Syria not because of oil but because of *Daesh*. The USA was afraid that the Kurds would make a deal with Russia and Iranians and lose leverage - this would be a disaster. "SDF is the only reliable ally in the Middle East, apart from Israel - Iraqi Kurds are not so reliable (interviewee 16). "There is a "huge determination" from the PYD/YPG and SDF/SDC and forces to make this project sustainable - "when Turkey invaded Afrin, people escaped. There is no life under occupation" (interviewee 16). There is either a deal with Assad or no autonomy. However, this will be up to Russia, not Assad - Russia and Kurds are "enemies" (interviewee 16). Another interviewee answered that he was "not sure" whether it is sustainable. YPG has a weakness - there is a "resentment" against administration of the YPG. YPG has a PKK leadership - it is "dehumanizing" on a societal level. It is a non-state actor - it is difficult to get a "structural" support (interviewee 17).

Another interviewee pointed out that the *Rojava* project "is not sustainable, YPG has no major support. SDF was created within two days and they came up with a new

name” (interviewee 18). It is a multi-ethnic force. However, it is not sustainable. USA military was “fascinated” because of their motivation and experience. The USA would like to see some special status because of other Kurdish areas like Northern Iraq. They promote human rights and pluralism. The YPG had military assistance and teaching from USA. They also taught public relations, trained and advised them. The YPG promoted feminism and environmentalism but it is not a long-term project, it is a landlocked region - they do not have a long-term revenue. The USA worries that they make money and then this goes to the PKK. This would mean that the USA is indirectly giving support to a terrorist organization - no one asks this, except the Congress. There is no long-term strategy for the USA at all (interviewee 18).

Another participant questioned that “who does not like the force that fights ISIS and has women fighters?” This is all propaganda. The USA lacks knowledge of Syrian Kurds and think that all Kurds are like Iraqi Kurds (interviewee 19). Overall, with regard to sustainability, many interviewees emphasized that the area that the PYD/YPG are controlling, is a landlocked area and there would be no sustainability without the USA’s support. However, the participants did not mention the fact that the VNSA still operates on the territory of Syria and the al-Assad’s regime, which is a crucial aspect that is also not covered within the ARI framework, further elaborated in the analysis.

CHAPTER IV

TURNING POINT OF THE YPG's AUTONOMY, REPRESENTATION, AND INFLUENCE – THE KOBANE SIEGE AND INCREASING SUPERPOWER-VNSA COOPERATION

Introduction

It could be said that if it was not for the People's Protection Units' victories against the ISIS, the PYD and their "Autonomous Administration" project would not have been as 'successful'. Although many Syrian Kurds had previously fought in the ranks of the PKK and with the Kurds in Iraq, there was no history of armed Kurdish insurgency in Syria until the civil war started in 2011 (Middle East Centre 2016:7). Following the Syrian regime's controversial withdrawal from Northern Syria, that was characterized by barely having any clashes with the PYD/YPG, the VNSA was quick to fill the vacuum by establishing its governance. Furthermore, it also secured international acknowledgement and sympathy amid the siege on Kobane in September 2014. However, it was not until the Kobane siege in which the YPG got wider military and political support from the international and local actors alike. The most significant of this was the evolving cooperation with the world's biggest superpower, the USA, and how this "temporary and tactical" cooperation, as often referred to by the USA officials, has been ongoing for almost seven years.

This chapter focuses on the ARI framework's aspects of influence, namely, „sustainability“ and how the VNSA has been motivated, flexible and adaptable through the course of the Syrian civil war and fight against ISIS. This is seen by ways of how the YPG handled the siege of Kobane and survived as well as how the YPG turned the victory over ISIS in Kobane to a symbolic birth of a nation-movement. Despite ISIS being a regional enemy, it has largely served as a pretext for the

continuity of the YPG's sustainability after the Kobane siege while at the same time, heavily contributing to the recognition and legitimacy aspects of the VNSA.

“Influence“ and the ability to apply it on the international arena is a criteria that has been asserted to (V)NSAs while addressing their actorhood (Aydinli 2015:435). As discussed throughout the next chapters, a VNSA can be considered to be influential if it shows sustainable capacity and composes a transformative and compelling challenge to states and the traditional state-system (Aydinli 2015:435). According to Aydinli (2015:436), the “influence” aspect of the ARI can further be divided into sustainability and impact.

A successful sustainability has aspects of being based on a deterrent-free motivation and secondly, having sufficient flexibility and adaptability (Aydinli 2015:436). For instance, in order for the VNSA to be sustainable, the present and future members of the group must be motivated and be confident that the VNSA would continue to motivate them even under circumstances when other states oppose them (Aydinli 2015:436). Despite Turkey's opposition, membership of the YPG and later, the SDF have kept the motivation of their members high, especially after seeing the success of the YPG during the Kobane siege. However, this motivation is largely based on financial benefits and services.

The second feature of sustainability is the VNSA being flexible and adaptable (Aydinli 2015:436). Moreover, a VNSA has better chances to survive if it is able and willing to make significant changes, ranging from strategies, tactics to organizational principles and practices. For instance, this could be seen by the YPG's ability to adapt to changing conflict environment and being open to transforming its principles of Kurdishness and work together with Arab tribes and minorities, especially after the Kobane siege as it swiftly transformed into the SDF, further elaborated in the next chapter. At the same time, the YPG was adaptable and flexible as it wanted to secure more international and regional recognition, acknowledgement and legitimacy as seen from the start of its cooperation with the USA from the level of sympathy it received on an international level. As such, with the case of Kobane, the YPG proved themselves in the eyes of international community.

The superpower's reluctance of getting militarily involved in Syria – “train and equip program”

Phillips (2016:23) argues that there were three factors that affected the USA's approach to the Middle East: the 2008 financial crisis which eventually led to cuts in the USA's military spending as well as the USA was facing public opposition with regard to sending troops to the Middle East. Moreover, President Barack Obama was elected as President in 2009 and although he continued President Bush's counter-terrorism policies in his first term, President Obama wanted to cut the USA's engagement in the Middle East and focus on Asia instead (Phillips 2016:23).

However, with the rise of ISIS and USA citizens in the Middle East being affected from ISIS' atrocities, President Obama was pressured to change the USA's course.

What further affected the USA's foreign policy in the Middle East was the fact that President Obama's administration was sensitive to opinion polls and criticism from the State Department and other institutions (Phillips 2016:26). While this was initially welcomed with regard to Syria, several Members of the Congress started to put pressure on the Obama administration to take action as the civil war and President Bashar al-Assad's atrocities towards Syrian people increased. Although several states waited for President Obama to react faster, the USA's action was rather soft at the time and came late without a clear strategy. However, although the USA's approach was to see Syria having an inclusive governing style, including both the opposition and the Kurds, the USA did not support an autonomous Kurdish and tried to distance themselves from giving the PYD any political support (US Dep. of State 30.07.2012).

Although several Western states were reluctant to intervene in Syria and directly arm the rebels due to the fact that it can end up in the wrong hands, the USA nevertheless initiated the idea of the “train and equip” program. In July 2012, the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came up with a plan with the then CIA director David Petraeus in order to vet, train and equip moderate Syrian rebels who could be trusted with weapons and following the USA's interests in fighting on the ground. Although such program had not brought expected results in Afghanistan and Iraq

previously, it was considered as the “least bad option,” according to Hillary Clinton, who presented the plan to President Obama in August 2012 (Phillips 2016:143).

Initial strategy in Syria for the President Obama’s administration was focusing on the “train and equip” program as far as working with the local groups and NSAs could go. In September 2013, President Obama requested for an authorization of force against President al-Assad from the Congress and for 500 million dollars to fund this new program and train the Free Syrian Army (Brookings 09.07.2014). With this request, it was the first time that the military, not the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), would take the lead to train Syria’s opposition groups (Brookings 09.07.2014).

Therefore, the “train and equip” program was aimed to help moderate Syrian fighters to defend civilians from ISIS and the Syrian regime as well as stabilize areas under the Syrian opposition’s control (US Dep. of State 29.09.2014). President Obama highlighted throughout the years that the USA’s policy in fighting against ISIS was to support and train local moderate forces and not putting any American troops on the ground. Nevertheless, the superpower’s goals changed over time as the YPG proved to be a more experienced and motivated VNSA fighting on the ground than any other opposition groups.

As President al-Assad’s atrocities against his people grew, President Obama had publicly indicated that the use of chemical weapons in Syria was a “red line” that would trigger the USA to take action in Syria. However, when the Syrian regime used rocket launchers tipped with nerve agent sarin on the opposition held Ghouta in August 2013, killing 1429 people, little action was taken (Phillips 2019:154). The issue was handed over to the United Nations to disarm Syria from mass destruction weapons instead which gave Russia more room to maneuver in Syria’s domestic affairs and a deal was mediated by Russia in order for the Syrian regime to peacefully give up chemical weapons under the UN’s supervision (Phillips 2016:169). (Phillips 2019:169).

However, by October 2014, the White House and the Pentagon admitted that the strategy to pull fighters out of Syria in order to train them with relevant combat skills and then return them back to the country to fight ISIS had failed, mostly because many of these rebel groups had been more focused on fighting the Syrian regime, not ISIS (New York Times 09.10.2015). The CENTCOM confirmed that some of the fighters that were trained and equipped by the USA, had given approximately 25 percent of the equipment to the al-Nusra Front in exchange for having secure transit in the area (Udall 2015). Therefore, only about 80 USA-trained fighters from the goal of 5,000, had been trained within the program and proven useful in the fight against ISIS (Udall 2015).

The USA administration admitted the failure of a 500-million-dollar program to train thousands of fighters and decided to use this money to provide ammunition and weapons for groups that are already engaged in fighting against ISIS on the ground (New York Times 09.10.2015). As a new plan, the USA was looking to identify rebel leaders from “capable, indigenous forces” in Syria who would commit to fighting ISIS and receive instructions on human rights, law of armed conflict, communications and training on how to call for the USA airstrikes (New York Times 09.10.2015). As such, this group proved to be the YPG-led Syrian Kurdish fighters who eventually played an enormous role in defending Kobane and whose actions are making headlines in fight against ISIS still in 2021, showing the level of impact and sustainability the VNSA. Initially, the USA officials stressed that the provision of equipment to these groups would be limited and grow based on the group’s performance (New York Times 09.10.2015). As it is seen years later, the YPG and later, the SDF proved to be experienced and motivated fighters, with both of these VNSAs’ autonomy, representation and influence growing ever since.

ISIS advances in Iraq

Gunter and Yavuz (2020:81) argue that by 2014, the ongoing war in Syria and sectarian government in Iraq had led to favorable conditions for the ISIS to emerge. As the PYD was consolidating its power in Northern Syria with the aim of linking its governed cantons, relations between the PYD-led administration and the KRG’s

leader Masoud Barzani deteriorated further, especially when the latter ordered a 17-kilometer trench-system between the two entities in March 2014, aimed to prevent Barzani's rival party, the PUK, of sending weapons to the PYD in Syria (Thornton 2015:872). Nevertheless, as ISIS was advancing in the area, both of these actors tried to put its differences aside and took action against ISIS. Mosul in Iraq had fallen to ISIS by June 2014 and months later, ISIS launched battles in different fronts, including close to Erbil in Northern Iraq and the disputed Sinjar area.

ISIS was also advancing towards the Yazidi minority population in Sinjar, forcing thousands of Yazidis to flee to nearby Mount Sinjar who it considered to be devil worshippers (Thornton 2015:865). At the same time, Iraqi army and the KRG's *Peshmerga* forces had little success in defending the area as ISIS was outnumbered with their heavy weapons and the *Peshmerga* militants ended up withdrawing from the Sinjar area early August 2014 as it became clear that authorities in Northern Iraq needed further support (Thornton 2015:873). As ISIS' atrocities intensified, thousands of Yazidis were killed, others captured and forced into slavery.

Yezidi populated Sinjar area was ruled de facto by the KRG. However, there was tension between Yezidis and the KDP in this disputed area as Yezidis did not want to be annexed to the Kurdish areas in Northern Iraq (Crisis Group 20.02.2018). Trust between the Yezidi population towards the *Peshmerga* deteriorated further amid the latter's withdrawal from the area. Therefore, the PKK/YPG fighters were quick to fill the vacuum as it had previously done in Northern Syria, protecting the Yazidi population while eventually being supported by the USA airstrikes.

On 13 August 2014, local Yazidi cells of the Shengal Resistance Units (YBŞ), a newly established fighting force of the PKK, the YPG and Yazidis from both Iraq and Syria, had deployed to Sinjar and helped to evacuate the local Yazidi population from Sinjar to Syria, making the PKK look as a better alternative as the *Peshmerga* had withdrawn (Crisis Group 20.02.2018). Moreover, the YPG and YBŞ established a local political wing, the Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party as well as a Sinjar autonomous council to secure their influence in the region, showing the VNSA's adaptability to change amid changing nature of conflict (Crisis Group 20.02.2018).

Such cooperation with the Yazidi minority after the *Peshmerga* withdrew also helped the PKK to establish a corridor from Iraq to the YPG fighters in Syria in order to transport supplies and weapons. As such, the PKK seized an opportunity to take control over Sinjar by using the disappointment of the Yazidis' with the KDP as they were left alone amid ISIS' atrocities in the region (Raed Al-Hamid 05.07.2017). Eventually, the *Peshmerga* forces together with the PKK and the USA airstrikes recaptured Sinjar in mid-November 2014, doing it simultaneously amid the Kobane battle in northern Syria. This had granted the PKK/YPG forces a "Robin Hood" image as it was flexible and adaptable to operate from Northern Syria to Northern Iraq and help the Yezidi population escape to Syria.

It is argued that it was partly ISIS' atrocities against the Yezidi population that led President Barack Obama to launch airstrikes and take action in Northern Iraq after pressure from the KRG's leader Barzani (Guardian 21.12.2014). President Obama authorized limited airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq in early August 2014 in an attempt to prevent the fall of Erbil for the first time since the last the USA soldier had left Iraq in 2011 (New York Times 07.08.2014).

With little support from neighbors, the KRG's leader Barzani asked help from the PYD in Syria in which experienced fighters from the PKK's armed wing, the HPG and its female units, were sent to fight ISIS in Northern Iraq (Thornton 2015:873). Allegedly, when the USA special forces reached Mount Sinjar to assess the situation, there was no KRG's *Peshmerga* forces left, but rather it was the PKK affiliated fighters who were protecting the Yazidis at the time. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization by both the USA and the EU but the USA. However, the PKK affiliates ended up cooperating and sharing intelligence in Northern Iraq.

Gunter and Yavuz (2020:81) have argued that without the PKK, the Yezidis would have "suffered more" as the Iraqi Kurds proved to act slow, while the USA only supported the area with airstrikes. Therefore, before the Kobane defense, the PKK/YPG commanders had already successfully collaborated with the USA and Iraqi Kurds, although the USA has tried to downplay the situation in Sinjar. Later, other Western states joined, eventually forming a larger Coalition against ISIS in which direct ammunition and weapons went to the KDP in Erbil, not the PKK's militias on

the ground, with the former considered as more legitimate actors and not having direct links with the PKK. However, this policy changed with the YPG's defense of Kobane. As such, the PKK/YPG in Sinjar showed their motivation and experience, which helped to build up the YPG's reputation, recognition, impact, and sustainability from this point onwards.

Turning point in the PYD and the YPG's sustainability and representation - the battle of Kobane

The symbolic town of Kobane, also known as Ayn al-Arab, is situated to the East of the Euphrates River and can be seen as a turning point in the PYD/YPG's autonomy, representation, and influence aspects of the ARI framework. With this battle, the PYD/YPG received high level of attention and sympathy from the West which eventually led to increasing cooperation between the superpower and the VNSA – to a level that included more than sixty countries within the Global Coalition.

Before the ISIS' siege on Kobane, it had been a calm Kurdish town, whose population had increased from 60,000 to 400,000 amid displaced people (Arango 2014). Although November 2013 saw the expansion of the PYD's territorial control and the establishment of three cantons, at the time, the USA State Department officials remained critical over the reports of efforts to declare an independent Kurdish region in Syria, while in July 2012, the USA officials had said that it did not see the *Rojava* project as part of the future plan for Syria (Barfi 2016:9). However, the rise of ISIS and the pressure on the USA to act, made the superpower to modify its position. At the time, the YPG's defense of Kobane came with the image of the YPG militants seen as "heroes", especially while seeing the USA-trained Iraqi army and the *Peshmerga* "crumble" at the beginning of ISIS' advance in Iraq (Financial Times 23.10.2014). This increased the YPG' image as motivated and experienced fighters whose services the USA military appreciated.

Even though the Syrian clandestine self-defense forces were already established before the start of the Syrian uprising, it was 2012 when the YPG was formed and succeeded in defending the Yezidi population in Northern Iraq in August 2014. After

the YPG had captured Kobane from al-Nusra in July 2013, the YPG clashed with several Islamist rebel groups, including ISIS in areas that were known for its oil resources (Phillips 2016:197). As such, before getting more international attention in fall 2014, Kobane had been attacked by ISIS and other jihadists, including some brigades of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) since the summer of 2013 in an attempt to control the border between Syria and Turkey (Aljazeera 27.01.2015). Controlling the border was of strategic interest for all battling groups as for the PYD, it allowed them to connect with the PKK allies who helped them with fighters and weapons while at the same time, allowed ISIS to link up with their fighters as well as gain weapons (Phillips 2016:198). As ISIS was recovering from its battles with the opposition groups, ISIS began a siege on Kobane already in April 2014 (Phillips 2016:197).

Although Kobane was not considered as the region for strategic interest for the USA, it nevertheless proved to be a symbolic battle and a beginning of an informal, yet later turning into a formal relationship between the USA military and the YPG-dominated SDF. With the siege of Kobane, the YPG-led Kurds showed their motivation and willingness to defeat ISIS with securing further areas, while gaining more territory throughout the years. The defense of Kobane together with its empathetic image portrayed in the Western media helped to transform the YPG to the international spotlight while the victory gave the VNSA international acknowledgement, heavily contributing to its representation and recruitment success.

With the success of the defense of Kobane and the ability to keep securing its power in newly “liberated” Arab-areas from ISIS, the YPG fighters started to re-evaluate their potential and turn the victory over ISIS into a more legitimate national movement as the PYD started to go forward with its federalism goals. Having received sympathy, weapons and international acknowledgement, this further boosted the YPG’s morale. Although the Kobane town itself is only seven square kilometers wide and not of an immediate strategic interest on a regional level, the YPG’s ability to mobilize Kurds, the women’s armed group, the YPJ, and attract international fighters for the cause was widely shared on social media and got international attention.

ISIS saw Kurds as an enemy and in their way of controlling an important border between Syria and Turkey that was also of ISIS' interest. Overall, the YPG has controlled the area of Kobane since 2012, when the Syrian regime forces left Northern Syria, practically without any major conflict between the two sides as President Assad's forces were focusing on fighting the opposition in other areas of Syria. This has made the PYD/YPG's rivals vary of the PYD's "third way" and its neutral attitude towards the regime, while accusing the PYD/YPG of being in an alliance with President al-Assad as by 2021, the pro-regime forces and the SDF have clashed in several occasions. Moreover, getting control of oil resources in Syria has been important for different actors in the region, as it is a major source of income for VNSAs and the Syrian regime alike. Therefore, from Kobane in the West, past Sinjar and toward Erbil in the East, there lie important corridors of oil pipelines and refineries, important for different actors' sustainability (Grant 2018). Also, under ISIS' control, the town of Kobane would have been a strategic location to transport and recruit more foreign fighters.

The battle of Kobane intensified in fall 2014 when on 16 September 2014, ISIS' forces took control of a key bridge over the Euphrates river which led ISIS close to about 10 kilometers from the town, resulting in thousands of refugees moving towards the Turkish border amid intensified clashes between the two VNSAs until the siege ended in late January 2015 (Grant 2018). The fight against ISIS still holds a symbolic meaning and contributed to increasing nationalism among the Syrian Kurds. However, this would have not been possible without the support of the USA-led military airstrikes that has developed into a tactical military partnership over the course of seven years while the USA had little interest in the area before, had it not been domestic pressure for President Obama to take action amid ISIS' killing of Western journalists and American citizens.

The YPG's growing impact and harnessing of the superpower to act in Kobane

At first, the USA was reluctant to get involved in Syria, fearing similar consequences of NATO's 2011 Libya intervention and 2003 Iraq war's turmoil.

President Obama was determined not to lose more lives of American soldiers and not putting boots on the ground after failed policies of his predecessors in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, as ISIS was advancing and the world was watching “live” on social media how Kobane was being destroyed as the YPG militants were outnumbered compared to ISIS, the USA was eventually pressured to act. Moreover, the Western media, including the New York Times, created a sympathetic image of the YPG/YPJ fighters with headlines such as “Scenes of Devastation in Kobani” and “Why Kobani must be saved”, stressing the need for the world to act and stop ISIS attacking Kurds as well as Westerners (The New York Times 09.01.2015).

As the pressure for the administration to act was increasing, the USA first supported the YPG’s efforts to fight ISIS by conducting airstrikes amid the Kobane siege on 27 September 2014 (Thornton 2015:875). By that time, the USA had already established ties with the PKK as well as the YPG commanders during their encounters in Sinjar in which the PKK played a role in helping the Yezidi community to escape from ISIS. Eventually, the USA’s actions to counter ISIS led the superpower to establish a military mission in Iraq and Syria and more broadly, the Global Coalition against ISIS.

However, it seemed that the USA administration, including the then-Secretary of State John Kerry, was initially hesitant whether Kobane could be saved amid ISIS’ expansion in the region. In October 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry said that saving Kobane, while tragedy, was not part of the USA’s strategy for the coalition against ISIS, while emphasizing that the USA’s priority should be Iraq instead (Aljazeera 13.10.2014). Moreover, intelligence agencies in the USA were rather pessimistic about acting in Syria without a clear strategy, while President Obama eventually admitted that they had “underestimated what had been taking place in Syria,” adding that defending Kobane would take a direct commitment from the USA to defeating ISIS in Syria (Grant 2018). As the USA had previously been focusing on Iraq, Syria was an area that they had been unprepared for as well as had little knowledge of the groups involved, including the PYD/YPG.

Previously, the Secretary of State John Kerry had stated that Kobane did not define the strategy for the International Coalition with respect to ISIS, stating that while it was a “tragedy” what was happening in Kobane, the USA had said from the beginning

that its focus was on Iraq and rebuilding its army instead (Aljazeera 13.10.2014). Furthermore, John Kerry had continuously admitted that Kobane was not a strategic military objective for the USA (DW 08.10.2014a). At the time, the USA was rather emphasizing cooperation with Iraq, both due to lack of knowledge of the dynamics in Syria as well as trying to not to upset its NATO ally, Turkey.

However, this changed with the YPG's convincing capabilities to harness the superpower to take action – mostly, due to proving the experience and motivation of the VNSA, which was appealing to both states and international organizations like the United Nations. At the same time, the superpower and the UN both showed appreciation of the YPG's services by acknowledging them on a world level and eventually providing military support while the UN made several agreements with the VNSA with regard to recruitment of child soldiers as well as urging states to take back ISIS' affiliated families back to their countries.

The United Nations had acknowledged the situation and atrocities in Kobani as the United Nations' envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura reiterated at the time that Kobane should be defended: “The world, all of us, will regret deeply if ISIS is able to take over a city which has defended itself with courage but is close to not being able to do so. We need to act now” (DW 08.10.2014b). However, none of the state actors and the UN mentioned the PYD/YPG by their organizational names in the beginning, but rather referring to them as the “defenders of Kobane,” which helped to gain more legitimacy for the VNSA.

At the time, the YPG was also pressuring the international community to send more weapons and ammunition to the region. Idriss Nassan, deputy foreign minister of the self-proclaimed Kobani autonomous canton stressed that “there should be strikes at night and during the day and weapons should be given to People's Protection Units that could be considered part of the international coalition to fight terrorism” (DW 08.10.2014b). KRG's Masoud Barzani also stressed the need to help the YPG in Kobane as the two rival groups had previously cooperated together in Northern Iraq against ISIS.

Eventually, Turkey, the USA and the KRG officials held talks to act against ISIS in Kobane and to allow the KRG's *peshmerga* fighters to Syria via Turkey's territory although these talks were initially unsuccessful (Thornton 2015:877). Turkey's own

Kurds had played a role in pressuring the government to act in Syria and let fighters pass its borders as they started to organize pro-Kobane protests in which over 30 people were killed and 360 injured (DW 10.10.2014). This shows the significance of the Kobane battle amid growing Kurdish nationalism and the impact that the PYD/YPG had in the region in lobbying both states and international organizations to support their cause.

This came at the time when USA was pressuring Turkey to take a larger role in the fight against ISIS as participants in the anti-ISIS Coalition was increasing. However, despite the USA's airstrikes and the YPG's fight on the ground, ISIS fighters took control over districts in the East and South of Kobane in October 2014, hoisting ISIS' flag in the area (BBC 25.06.2020). This triggered further action from the USA, increasing airstrikes, airdropping ammunition and weapons directly to the YPG. Despite this, ISIS still controlled around 60 percent of the town by early November 2014. The decision for the USA to help with airstrikes came with the pressure to deliver on developing a trained, moderate opposition in Syria that had relevant military skills to defend the territory, especially with the on the ground fighting that is difficult to manage with airstrikes (Grant 2018).

Despite Secretary of State John Kerry's pessimism about the strategic value of Kobane, Kurdish fighters eventually started to push back ISIS and the USA-YPG cooperation intensified, showing the harnessing capabilities of the YPG to convince a superpower to support the VNSA not only morally but militarily. In mid-October 2014, the State Department admitted that they had been sharing intelligence with the YPG (Barfi 2016:9). On 20 October, the USA airdropped weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the YPG as it was acknowledging their success in the fight against ISIS (BBC 25.06.2015). Moreover, at the end of October 2014, the first contingent of the KRG's *Peshmerga* forces came to support the YPG via Turkish border.

By the end of October, the USA was officially acknowledging the YPG, however, still referring to them as "the defenders of Kobane". During the 29 October 2014 briefing of the State Department, General John Allen who was a Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the ISIL at the time, stated that "the defenders of Kobane have held on for a long time. The coalition has been providing

air support regularly around Kobane each day”...”We’re going to continue to support defenders of Kobane” (US Dept. of State 29.10.2014).

By January 2015, the YPG had regained 80 per cent of Kobane and by January 2015, ISIS was driven out from Kobane, ending a four-month battle (BBC 25.06.2015). By end of January 2015, it was believed that around 1600 people had died, including 1196 ISIS affiliated fighters while over a hundred thousand had been displaced (BBC 25.06.2015). Although the fight against ISIS was far from over, Kobane had served as a significant turning point that helped to build up the PYD/YPG’s sustainability and representation as it portrayed a major success that contributed to new members and recruits to join the VNSA. By doing so, the PYD/YPG “proved” themselves as a VNSA and as a case for autonomy and influence for both to the international community, including the world’s biggest superpower as well as to people liberated from ISIS’ governance in Northern Syria.

However, ISIS’ attacks continued in the region, which eventually led to the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the USA prolonged its stay in Syria that president Obama had initially tried to avoid. Also, the anti-ISIS coalition was increasing but overall, governments were reluctant to commit their troops on the ground, being aware that airstrikes alone would not produce expected results, without cooperating with local forces, i.e. the YPG which eventually transformed into a YPG-dominated SDF.

Turkey

Turkey joined the anti-ISIS coalition in October 2014 when ISIS had already taken over checkpoints and major strategic structures in Kobane, making it clear from the start what its views were regarding the USA arming the YPG fighters as it considers the YPG to be the same terrorist organization as the PKK (Grant 2018). Amid the Kobane siege, Turkey initially closed its borders to activists who wanted to join the fight against ISIS while trying to limit weapons crossing the border (O’Driscoll 2015:5).

Turkey’s authorities were seemingly worried that the growing mobilization of the Syrian Kurds may lead to similar mobilization within Turkey, seeing this as

threat to its national security. As Turkey was against the USA airdropping weapons and ammunition to the YPG, it proposed a buffer zone to deal with the refugees coming from Syria instead. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had announced during the Kobane siege that “it would be wrong for the United States, with whom we are friends and allies in NATO, to talk openly and to expect us to say yes to such a support to a terrorist organization”, stressing that some weapons had ended up in the hands of ISIS instead (The New York Times 22.10.2014). President Erdogan stressed that he had difficulty understanding why Kobane was “so strategic” for the USA as according to Turkish authorities, there were “no civilians there, just around 2,000 fighters” (The New York Times 22.10.2014). Moreover, Yasin Aktay, the previous vice chairman of Turkey’s ruling AKP, said that there was “no tragedy in Kobane as cried out by the terrorist PKK” but a “war between two terrorist groups” instead (Gunes and Lowe 2015:8).

Furthermore, there was a regular flow of people to Syria, joining the YPG as activists and helping to rebuild areas liberated from ISIS as well as flow of foreign fighters going into Syria. For instance, Kurdish youth activists of the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF), in Suruc town of Turkey were preparing to go to Kobane to help rebuild the city, when a suspected ISIS suicide bomber attacked the gathering, leaving 30 people dead in July 2015 (Aljazeera 20.07.2015).

During the early days of the Kobane battle, President Erdogan had said several times that Kobane was about to fall and that dropping air support would not help the situation while encouraging the West to participate in a ground operation instead (DW 07.10.2014). The USA had been reluctant to get involved in Syria with ground troops as it put more emphasis on Iraq. What helped the anti-ISIS coalition to progress was the fact that Turkey eventually allowed around 200 *Peshmergas* to use its territory and go to Syria via Turkey while this number increased to about 450 by mid-January 2015 (The New York Times 23.10.2014). However, by that time, about 60-80 percent of Kobane had already been destroyed and it was argued that sending 200 *Peshmergas* to the area compared to about 1000 ISIS militants was not enough but rather had a supportive and a symbolic role (The New York Times 23.10.2014).

Turkey also agreed to let the USA and the Coalition forces use its Incirlik military airbase after months of negotiations for operations against ISIS and agreed to train the Syrian moderate forces on Turkey's territory (Aljazeera 13.10.2014). The YPG and Turkey did have a moment of cooperation in February 2015, when the YPG militants helped Turkey to relocate the Suleyman Shah tomb closer to the Turkish border amid ISIS' advances in the region (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:84). This clearly shows the impact and compulsion capabilities that the YPG had as a local actor as it cooperated with Turkey, what it now considers as an enemy, in order to relocate the tomb.

The battle of Kobane according to the YPG

After about 134 days of fighting, the battle of Kobane eventually led to the liberation from ISIS, turning out to be rather symbolic in which the VNSA's victory was heavily broadcasted and published in its social media channels and media outlets. As the YPG had shown its motivation, flexibility, and quick adaptiveness to changing nature of conflict, it took advantage of the empathy that the Western media had given. Although the opposition FSA militants, different volunteer youth groups and heavy weapons from the Northern Iraqi *Peshmergas* contributed to the defeat of ISIS in Kobane, the YPG and its women military group, the YPJ, played a big role in protecting Kobane and were admired by the Western media for their courage and values, showing the appreciation of the YPG and the YPJ's services (Civiroglu, 2015). It is argued that about 40 percent of Kurdish fighters were women, while ISIS lost about 25 percent of its forces (Phillips 2019:157).

According to the YPG Central Command, "the resistance shown by YPG and YPJ highlighted to the international powers that the whole world was paying attention," stressing the importance of "the heroic resistance by YPG and YPJ in Kobane" that was critical in finding support from the international community (YPG Rojava, 26.01.2017c). The YPG portrayed its role during the Kobane siege as a type of trademark that they see as emancipation from struggle. Furthermore, according to the YPG's statements, their fighters killed ISIS militants from 27 different countries

in which ISIS lost about 3710 fighters throughout the battle of Kobane (Civiroglu, 2015a). However, such numbers are subject to exaggeration while involving extensive propaganda elements. Moreover, as the YPG knew the area well, it was able to adapt, reorganize and quickly withdraw from the nearby villages, showing the VNSA's motivation, flexibility and adaptability further (Civiroglu, 2015a).

Although the YPG is generally not very outspoken when it comes to its links with the PKK, the YPG and the PYD-related media outlets are vocal when trying to get their message across to the wider public in order to receive more acknowledgement and legitimacy. However, the YPG does not fully hide its links with the PKK. The YPG has continuously cited and shared the PKK related images in their social media posts. For instance, the VNSA cited a pro-PKK propaganda article by the Yeni Özgür Politika on their website on the anniversary of the Kobane battle, praising the “democratic ideology” that defeated ISIS while stressing that ISIS cannot be defeated with “technical war-power only” (YPG Rojava 26.01.2017a).

Furthermore, it states that the “Rojava Revolutionaries and the Freedom Movement led by the PKK defeated ISIS with their ideologies... Therefore, only those with freedom fighters can defeat ISIS... If it were not for Rojava Revolutionaries and the PKK, ISIS would have invaded Syria, Iraq and South Kurdistan (YPG Rojava 26.01.2017a). Even though the USA has advised the YPG to distance itself from the PKK, the group is still openly advocating for the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan's views and singing anthems like “Long Live Leader Apo” during celebrations for the liberation of Kobane or other related occasions, based on the YPG's social media outlets.

The YPG's propaganda elements in the social media after the battle of Kobane

The YPG considers the siege of Kobane as a “story of how to achieve victory” in which “neither planes nor tanks were the decisive factor; it was the human factor dedicated to victory...” (YPG Rojava 26.01.2017b). The VNSA has emphasized its efforts and sacrifice it has done to the whole world by fighting ISIS and terrorism in the

region. It constantly stresses human values, equality, and democratic ideology in its statements. Therefore, the YPG has adopted views according to the Western counterterrorism discourse by emphasizing that terrorism cannot be defeated with military means only. Further stressing the human factor, the YPG puts a lot of emphasis to “martyred” fighters and writes personal stories on its social media channels.

The YPG has been trying to ensure throughout its media channels that the defeat of ISIS in Kobane benefitted the whole world, not just the Syrian Kurds. During the anniversary of the Kobane “liberation,” the YPG’ Central Command emphasized that “as much of a victory Kobane was for Kurds, it was just as much a victory for the whole world”, thanking the USA and the international coalition for their support during the Kobane siege as it was the victory for the “whole humanity” (YPG Rojava 26.01.2017c).

The PYD-led Kurds felt a new beginning after their successful role played in the Kobane battle. After the city was declared free from ISIS in late January 2015, images spread on social media of cheerful militants dancing to Kurdish songs while the victory was also celebrated in the region as well as in Europe where the PKK has lobbied since the 1990s. Thus, the “liberation” of Kobane became a symbol of resistance and nationalist aspirations for the Syrian Kurds (Aljazeera 27.01.2015). The sense of nationalism was widely seen in Kobane as the city was known for its support towards the YPG militants which made it somewhat easier to mobilize Kurds in Kobane for the fight against ISIS. Furthermore, there was a campaign launched in Kurdish related social media, calling the city of Kobane to be built up as an open-air museum, an idea that the PYD administration and previous co-chair Salih Muslim had initially supported, calling for the international community to rebuild the city with donations and medical help (Aljazeera 27.01.2015). Therefore, the PYD/YPG has used media attention for its own benefit as well as in its recruitment strategies.

However, despite jubilant celebrations and renewed sense of Kurdish nationalism, Kobane was still largely destroyed and needed to be rebuilt. Although the PYD and the YPG had played a coordinating role in the Kobane battle, the power and acknowledgement they had received regionally and internationally gave them confidence, albeit with growing local resentment towards one-party rule. Many locals who returned to the city, initially received little financial help from the PYD authorities

and relied on diaspora abroad or their own finances. Although the coalition did provide funds to the areas that were recaptured from ISIS after Kobane, this focus was mostly on infrastructure and on water networks, not personal property (France 24, 2018).

The YPG's growing recognition after the battle of Kobane

After the ISIS' defeat in Kobane, the USA announced that it would begin to train and arm the Syrian forces as the combining Kurdish ground forces with the Coalition's airpower had proven to be success (Grant 2018). The superpower was also publicly acknowledging and congratulating the "defenders of Kobane" and their role in the Global Coalition and the newly established global fight against ISIS. However, previously the USA State Department had expressed in press briefings that Kobane had no strategic value. By the end of the Kobane battle, more than 700 airstrikes from the USA-led anti-ISIS coalition were launched in Syria, arguably more than in Iraq (Arango 2015). Although Kobane's strategic value for the USA interest was debated both domestically in the USA as well as by international powers, some American officials said that Kobane came to the spotlight "only because it became important" to ISIS (Arango 2015).

By October 2015, the USA's strategy on train and equip program was further adjusted. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy at the time said that the USA wanted to work with groups on the ground who were already fighting ISIS, while providing these groups with necessary equipment in combination with the USA's airstrikes as the USA had already been working with some of these groups before and "know who they are" (White House 09.10.2015). Eventually, this group was the YPG although taken under a bigger umbrella organization, the SDF. Therefore, the defense of Kobane was just the beginning of years-long cooperation against ISIS.

Gunes and Lowe (2015:13) argue that what made the USA see Kobane as a strategically important town was the fact that ISIS had invested in fighters, equipment and propaganda into capturing Kobane and this was important for the USA and the West to show that ISIS could be pushed back. Thus, the Kobane battle ended up being strategic for the YPG and the USA alike. Gunes and Lowe (2015:7) have also pointed out that although the Syrian Kurds lacked symbols for nationalist mobilization such as

the Iraqi and Iranian Kurds had during the Halabja genocide and the Mahabad Republic, the Syrian Kurds now had Kobane to relate to.

Overall, as opposed to states, VNSAs must constantly prove themselves and their influence is based on action. The PYD-led “Autonomous Administration” had to be proven as a case, which the successful fight against ISIS during the Kobane battle did as VNSAs tend to build up autonomy and influence by practice. Therefore, this chapter aimed to show how the YPG proved its influence through defending Kobane while eventually, securing its sustainability as well as representation up to this day. The victory in Kobane gave an enormous boost to the YPG’s ability to build recognition and establishing legitimacy among its potential recruits.

Interview results of the centrality of the Kobane battle in the PYD/YPG’s actorness

The interviews on the importance of the Kobane battle showed that although many interviewees saw the Kobane siege as the triggering point of cooperation between the YPG and the USA, pro-Kurdish interviewees generally saw this cooperation having started much earlier. According to the interviewee 1, the starting point of this relationship goes further than Kobane - Kobane is just “one chapter of a long story”. The story for Iraqi Kurds went easier - they had already proved themselves, but the Syrian Kurds are yet to prove themselves (interviewee 1). It was also pointed out that Kobane could be the center of this cooperation from the Kurdish perspective, not for the USA (interviewee 2). Another interviewee added that the USA and the YPG were already cooperating before Kobane. The issue was about controlling borders and ISIS, not Kobane - this was a hidden interest (interviewee 3).

According to the interviewee 4, Kobane was a breaking point, a turning point for this relationship. It is significant because the USA is the “most powerful nation on earth”. Regarding this issue, Turkey has also made some mistakes. However, there are some groups in the Congress that would defend the USA-Turkey relationship. Turkey’s military operations after the Kobane siege complicated things further. “It was a mistake of Turkey to go into Syria. People think that there are threats coming from the Northern Syria but are there?” (interviewee 4). According to the interviewee 6, the Kobane battle was central but things started earlier. Kurds wanted recognition - the issue goes further

than 1940s - Kurds were expelled from Syria and had no citizenship status. It all resurfaced during the Arab Spring when al-Assad wanted support and gave citizenships to Kurds - this encouraged Kurds. The issue started to increase during the Kobane siege. The PYD had many human rights violations, i.e. the PYD denied the return of Turkmen people, Arabs and Kurds to the area. The PYD also cracked down on political prisoners and opposition as it emerged as the strongest party - it took child soldiers. Using the Kurdish card has always been important for states. Trump does not know much about the issue. The USA wanted to repeat what it did in Northern Iraq (interviewee 6). Another interviewee argued that the PYD and YPG are “interchanging” - they survived only because of Kobane battle. Therefore, Kobane is the centre of events (interviewee 7).

Another interviewee argued that what happened in Kobane was a “massacre”. Kurds were “delivering” - they were good partners in Kobane for the USA (interviewee 12). “Yes, Kobane is the centre of this cooperation. Then, the relationship gradually increased. The USA initially wanted to have Turkey as partner against ISIS, but Turkey did not initially join fight against ISIS. The USA had a bigger regional agenda - they need to have a local ally. This means that they can leave Syria any time” (interviewee 13). 70 percent of USA support took place in Kobane as it was considered a success. Positive lessons were learned in Kobane by having boots on the ground. Later, this relationship evolved to a “partnership degree” (interviewee 14). However, another interviewee argued that Kobane was not the centre of cooperation between the YPG and the USA – the USA intervened but this was more like a “humanitarian intervention”, with limited coordination in September 2014. In early 2015, there was no cooperation between the YPG and USA - this came later with the bigger platform, the SDF. Cooperation then moved to another level, like done in Manbij in 2016. In Kobane, the USA did not provide weapons to Kurds but in Manbij they did and special forces went to Northern Syria. Then, cooperation moved from Manbij to Raqqa. Overall, the SDF is “not the PKK” - there is no intention to attack Turkey (interviewee 16). Interviewee 21 argued that Kobane was a centralization of an idea to rely on Kurds, being a demand-supply relationship.

CHAPTER V

INFLUENCE OF THE YPG: SUSTAINABILITY AND IMPACT AMID THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIS

Introduction

The fight against ISIS is seen as the center of the YPG-USA cooperation and although it is often referred to as “tactical and temporary” by the USA officials, this VNSA-superpower relationship has been ongoing for more than six years, despite President Trump’s continuous calls to withdraw troops from Syria. One of the biggest aspects of flexibility and adaptability to the changing nature of conflict was the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with the initiative and backing of the USA to legalize and formalize its fight against ISIS and cooperation with VNSA, the YPG, on the ground. The SDF was established to include Arabs and other minorities as well as to balance Turkey’s fears of the USA openly cooperating with the YPG. Most importantly – the YPG’s cooperation with other VNSAs such as the SDF, including Arab tribes as well as minority militias under the SDF umbrella, are critical to analyzing the YPG’s influence, as it is clearly linked to the ARI framework’s ‘influence’ aspect in terms of its impact and transformative capacity.

This chapter is related to the emergence of ISIS and how it directly contributed to and increased the YPG’s sustainability and influence, both domestically and internationally. It also shows how the YPG was able to quickly transform itself into something that could fight against ISIS. This can be seen with the YPG’s flexibility and adaptability to quickly transform itself to the SDF. At the same time, the VNSA’s experience and motivation to fight against ISIS further helped to increase its cooperation with the USA and the Global Coalition, while contributing to its sustainability as it expanded territorially. By 2017, the YPG-dominated SDF had got hold of several Arab-

populated cities, including ISIS's capital Raqqa, boosting the newly transformed SDF's moral to continue its territorial successes further, increasing its autonomy, representation and influence.

Furthermore, the SDF kept increasing its legitimacy among its potential members and constituents as the autonomous administration and the YPG and later, the SDF kept providing security, financial rewards and showed its success in fighting by advancing territorially. This chapter will therefore mostly focus on the transformed military umbrella organization, the SDF as it eventually took over the official status of providing security to the PYD-governed areas. Over time, the PYD has also kept a lower profile as it tries to show that it is an inclusive political organization and has cosmetically transformed its political powers to the SDF's political wing, the SDC just as the YPG has emphasized that all new recruits to the VNSA would now be included to the SDF, not the YPG. However, as stated above, such changes have rather been cosmetic, helping to contribute to the VNSA's overall sustainability.

The following chapter is linked to the „compulsion aspects“ and „transformative capacity“ of the ARI framework's 'impact' aspect, relating to influence of the YPG and later, the SDF. As such, the “transformative capacity” shows how the VNSA was able to quickly transform itself into something that could fight against the biggest threat in the Middle East at the time – ISIS. Although it is argued that the aspect of “transformative capacity” can relate to changes in states' policies and practices, i.e. immigration policies or security measures as well as to changes in a state's authority, but also, a VNSA creating an autonomous region, dividing a country or overthrowing a government (Aydinli 2015:438).

However, this can also relate to the transformative capacity of the VNSA itself, i.e. the YPG's ability to transform itself into the SDF, a feature which Aydinli (2015, 2016) has put less emphasis on and has rather focused on states and their actions with regard to NSAs. Moreover, it is argued that influence of non-violent groups increases when other violent groups start to emerge, or with the possibility that non-violent groups becoming violent instead (Aydinli 2015:438). As such, the YPG and now, the SDF's influence have grown as ISIS is seen as being a more dangerous actor, despite Turkey often referring to ISIS and the PKK-linked YPG as being the same level of threat.

YPG's impact - the YPG's abilities to harness the superpower into further cooperation

Allsopp (2019:187) argues that the USA had “dual strategies” in Syria, as highlighted by its position towards the PYD/YPG. First, the USA was backing the Syrian opposition against President al-Assad while the second strategy was prioritized after 2014 Kobane siege and the fight against ISIS (Allsopp 2019:187). At the time, ISIS was declared as an immediate threat to the USA, prompting the superpower to take action as ISIS began to target Western journalists in the region (Allsopp 2019:187).

According to Robert Ford, former USA ambassador to Syria, the USA had no contacts with the PYD until 2014, but secret talks with the PYD European officials and the USA had begun in 2012, without specifically discussing military cooperation (Allsopp 2019:188). Furthermore, Ambassador Ford has highlighted that the USA's intelligence services had almost no information about the Syrian Kurds during the early years of the Syrian civil war, while the PYD/YPG-USA cooperation has been seen as a “tactical alliance against a common enemy” (Allsopp 2019:188).

As the YPG-USA cooperation grew after the successful defense of Kobane, so did the PYD/YPG's international acknowledgement as they continued to gain more territory from ISIS, especially in the Arab-dominated areas. The YPG's transformation to the SDF helped to increase relations with the Arab tribes, with the rise of ISIS shaping the USA's policy and actions in Syria. However, this seems to depend on and change from one official to another, some being more vocal or pro-YPG and the SDF than others, showing the impact and the lobbying ability that the VNSA has done towards the superpower.

Aydinli (2015:439) has argued that if a powerful state begins to act differently because of certain actions of a (V)NSA, it can be a sign of an influential actor at the global level with a great potential for global actorness. This can be said the same with regards to the YPG and how the USA played a role in encouraging the YPG to transform and adapt itself into a wider SDF military umbrella organization. However, after this, the superpower legalized and openly cooperated with a VNSA, with the VNSA harnessing and making the superpower act based on the VNSA's “needs”, i.e. helping to regain

more territory and power while making it seem like this was only to do with the fight against ISIS. As such, the fight against ISIS has largely benefitted the YPG as it has been able to gain recognition all these years, contributing to the VNSA's sustainability.

The YPG's compulsion capabilities

With regard to a VNSA's compulsion capabilities, this is linked to the aspect that a VNSA's actions may be very influential which makes a state unable to ignore it and thus, need to react by eventually giving recognition to the VNSA (Aydinli 2015:437). Although Aydinli (2015:437) argues that this is not generally done in a legal sense, in the case of the YPG-dominated SDF, this proved not to be the case as the superpower officially gave the SDF military support in legal terms done through the USA institutions. Moreover, this has also been legalized and published in the USA's defense fiscal year budgets. However, by doing so, the superpower has indeed given up some of its own power as it has been supporting a VNSA on the ground who thus knows more about the area and can share intelligence – putting the superpower into a place in which a VNSA is taking care of the USA forces' security on the ground.

The military and somewhat diplomatic cooperation between the world's biggest superpower and the PKK-linked violent non-state actor increased between the years 2015-2017 in which defeating ISIS became a slogan and main focus for the USA-led international military coalition. The YPG and later, the SDF's fight against ISIS have helped the PYD-led Kurds to establish itself within its local constituencies, with the VNSA serving as the provider of security and services to the local population while it has gained further acknowledgement and recognition internationally (Yesiltas and Kardas 2018). As such, the SDF is now continuously being praised and acknowledged by an international military mission *Inherent Resolve*, while meeting different USA top officials and Members of the Congress throughout the years, while being a major recognition and impact proving factor in the YPG's influence and more so, to its impact.

Before 2013, the YPG focused on building a more defensive strategy and increasing its infrastructural capability by moving towards combat mode as it started having military clashes with different radical groups within the Syrian opposition as well

as ISIS, getting support from local Kurds and international powers alike (Zabad 2017:226). After ISIS besieged Kobane in September 2014, the YPG forces, with the support from the USA airstrikes, recaptured Kobane by late January 2015, after which the USA-YPG cooperation intensified to more legitimate levels. In June 2015, the YPG launched a new military campaign with the USA to take Tal Abyad from ISIS, allowing the PYD-led Kurds to connect their enclaves further (Zabad 2017:227). By doing so, the VNSA tried to convince the superpower that it is a valuable and a reliable partner, leading the USA indirectly supporting the VNSA's political ambitions while emphasizing the fight against ISIS in public statements. Had there not been continuous military cooperation between the YPG-USA at the time, the PYD and its political project would also not have been seen as sustainable as it is today.

The YPG and the newly transformed SDF convinced the USA into the relationship with the VNSA by convincing the need to cooperate in different areas as the VNSA was sharing intelligence to the superpower regarding ISIS on the ground. Therefore, ISIS became as an excuse that has helped to keep the superpower in this relationship for almost seven years. The military cooperation was also successful in Manbij in 2016 and in Raqqa in which the city was recaptured from ISIS in 2017. However, this was done with local criticism after the YPG started to territorially advance to the Arab dominated areas. The USA's approach towards the YPG and the SDF has been ambivalent throughout the years and without a clear strategy, despite almost seven years of military cooperation. Throughout the years, it rather seemed that the YPG and the SDF were valuable partners to the USA on the ground, rather than vice versa. However, cooperation with the superpower has also heavily contributed to the VNSAs sustainability and impact to this day.

Although the *Inherent Resolve* mission against ISIS was led by the USA, it also meant that the YPG-dominated SDF was officially cooperating with more than 60 countries for a common mission against ISIS, by acting as the main combat force on the ground (Stein 2017:2). Throughout the period, the YPG proved its effectiveness and motivation in defense of Kobane and therefore, an "operational relationship was born" out of a "tactical necessity" (Stein 2017:2). In reality, the USA had no other options as

the “train and equip” program had previously failed and the VNSA had proven their “Autonomous Administration” as a proven case of its influence.

During the initial years of the YPG-dominated SDF-USA cooperation, the USA was restricted to directly arm the VNSA and was cautious of sacrificing its relations with Turkey but by May 2017, President Trump’s administration had decided to directly arm the SDF (Stein 2017:2). Furthermore, Stein (2017:2) argues that as the USA was directly focusing on fighting ISIS, issues such as national security objectives, strategy for Syria and bilateral relations with Turkey who was against YPG-USA cooperation, were made less important. Therefore, the superpower was indirectly contributing to the VNSA’s sustainability as all its attention had been concentrated towards fight against ISIS, with the YPG and later, the SDF being its only credible partners on the ground.

Moreover, the USA’s maneuvering between its state and non-state partners has led the YPG do the same by using the ISIS threat as its legitimacy provider both locally and internationally. The USA did not seem to care of the Syrian Kurds before the emergence of ISIS, nor did it support the PYD-led political cause (Gunter 2019:168). While during the Obama’s administration, the focus was on “degrading and destroying” ISIS, the Trump administration changed this rhetoric to “demolishing and destroying” ISIS instead (Feisal al-Istrabadi 2018:189). However, the YPG-dominated SDF were still influencing superpower’s actions as it had first-hand knowledge to intelligence on the ground.

The rise of ISIS

It is often argued that the USA actions in Iraq helped to set the conditions for ISIS to emerge by eliminating Saddam Hussein and the Baathist party from power as well as dismantling the Iraqi army, resulting thousands of people being jobless and triggered to radicalization who would have likely been responsible for future Iraq’s infrastructure as well as who were initially expecting a pension from the government (Gunter 2019:179). Therefore, deprived from the future and economic capabilities, ISIS was appealing for many previous soldiers at the time who had professional army experience and were in need for a job. Moreover, somewhat flexible policies had previously allowed many ISIS’s top leaders to escape from the USA detention centers in

Iraq, including ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Gunter 2019:179). Since the USA's lack of strategy with regard to Iraq, and what is currently seen in Syria, many radical ISIS affiliates were able to radicalize people in USA-governed detention centers and thus, contribute to the initial grouping of ISIS.

ISIS' emergence was a game changer for the USA to act in Syria and this became as the main security interest for the superpower (Ergun 2018:166). Nevertheless, ISIS took the world by surprise with their brutality. Almost all initial leader positions in the group were made up with high-ranking former Iraqi officers contributing with their military expertise and access to smuggling networks while receiving income from ISIS (Gunter 2019:178). Moreover, ISIS' victory in Mosul in June 2014 was a major setback for the USA in the region and showed what the lack of a grand strategy towards the Middle East can do. Also, the fact that ISIS had got hold of the USA weapons in the region was an embarrassment for the USA's military as it had been present in the region, albeit unsuccessfully for decades.

When ISIS struck the KRG in Northern Iraq early August 2014, the *Peshmerga* forces were in minority and without allies (Gunter 2019:180). The KRG was not independent at the time, and all the USA's aid had gone through the capital Baghdad that was seen as a burden as the USA has generally preferred state to state cooperation, not a VNSA cooperation. Only after a direct request for the USA's support by the KRG's President Massoud Brazani for an immediate aid against ISIS, the VNSA was stopped from advancing with the support of the USA airstrikes (Gunter 2019:180). At the same time, President Obama's administration had been hesitant taking action in Kobane by continuously indicating that it would not commit to any troops on the ground.

ISIS' advances in Syria

With regards to Syria, the USA had been somewhat unfamiliar with the country and had not much interests there. It has been argued that the Obama administration's hesitant statements to take action in the region ended up encouraging ISIS as it saw that its enemies are not committed and were disunited whether to militarily commit to the

region (Gunter 2019:180). The growth as well as the experience of ISIS took many by surprise, including other terrorist groups. In February 2014, Al Qaeda had denied ISIS as it neglected its brutal tactics and interference in Syria (Humud et al. 2016:6). By June 2014, ISIS had declared a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. By 2015, the conflict in Syria had further escalated - Syrian opposition forces had captured Idlib in Northwestern Syria, ISIS had seized territory in Homs province; and the YPG-led Kurds had expanded their control over territory along the Turkish border, causing Turkey to react and take military action (Humud et al. 2016:6). At the same time, the VNSA's cooperation with the superpower in the fight against ISIS was increasing as it had compelled the USA to take action and support the YPG-dominated SDF in what later, and to this day, is regarded as "counter-terrorism" operations.

In May 2015, after it was clear that the USA would increase its cooperation with the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS, the USA played 'military diplomacy' on both sides - making separate deals with Turkey, while increasing its cooperation with the YPG, by suggesting and contributing to the creation of the SDF. Before such rather official cooperation between the USA military and the YPG was established, the USA had limited ways to officially support the VNSA, based on its own legislation as it is easier to cooperate with states more than with non-state actors. For instance, at the beginning of the Kobane siege, the USA's military had trained the YPG fighters to spot certain targets by using a Samsung tablet and Google Maps after which the YPG sent these coordinates for the USA to conduct airstrikes (Stein 2017:8).

At the same time, Russia was getting more involved in the Syrian conflict as it signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the USA to establish a safety of flight protocol for aircraft operating in the same airspace, further legitimizing the USA's role in Syria (Humud *et al.* 2016:7). Nevertheless, the creation of the SDF in October 2015 changed the discourse of the USA-Kurdish cooperation in Northern Syria, making it more official, professional, and legitimized.

ISIS as a 'balancing' common enemy among states and VNSAs

Gunter (2019:181) argues that the PKK has played a big role in countering ISIS in the region by saving lives of thousands of Yazidis in Sinjar in August 2014. This also illustrates the changing nature of conflict as the KRG and the PKK came together against a common enemy, although the PKK operated in a territory that is not normally controlled by them. Furthermore, it was not just the KRG *Peshmerga* but the PKK militants from the Qandil Mountain in Northern Iraq and the YPG fighters who helped to secure Erbil and the Yazidis at the time of ISIS' siege (Gunter 2019:181). In September 2014, it was again the PKK/YPG Kurds who successfully fought against ISIS with the support of the USA airstrikes in Syria, further contributing to the VNSAs sustainability and representation in the region (Gunter 2019:181).

According to Gunter (2019:182), reasons why ISIS chose to attack the Syrian Kurds in the first place are because of the territory that the Syrian Kurds controlled; in Iraq, the Kurds are seen as historical enemies of the Baathist party; the Kurds supported the USA in overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003; in June 2014, the Kurds occupied disputed territories around Kirkuk after ISIS' advancement in the region; and the Kurds have not been seen as genuine Muslims as they supported the Yezidis, Christians and other minorities. Humud *et al.* (2016:16) argues that changes in the battlefield dynamics over the years, including the success of ISIS and Russia's military intervention have been accompanied by shifts in the USA's policy and rhetoric regarding the civil war in Syria.

However, although the common enemy brought the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds together for a short period of time, the PKK has been blamed for attacking Iraqi Kurds close to Kirkuk in November 2020 and occupying territories of Iraqi Kurds. This has been condemned by the USA and France, while the State Department has continuously emphasized in its statements that the PKK is a terrorist organization (Kurdistan 24, 08.11.2020). When the KRG announced that it would sign the Sinjar agreement with the central Iraqi government which saw the PKK and Shiite militias leaving the area, the PKK killed a KRG security official in Duhok with attacks intensifying ever since, including PKK's attacks on KRG's pipelines (Kurdistan 24, 08.11.2020). Although other than fighting against the common enemy, rivalries within the Kurdish parties

continue, the emergence of ISIS has still served as an opportunity to consolidate power and influence for the PYD/YPG.

The superpower takes action

Although the USA did not have a clear strategy with regard to Syria, it is argued that it had a fixed-mission based approach towards working with the YPG and later, the SDF as from 2014, the strategy was focused on the fight against ISIS, without developing any policy to reduce risks of long-term political consequences (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:3). It is argued that the decision to support the YPG was based on urgency to have a fast military response amid increasing ISIS' atrocities in the region (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:3). Overall, the USA-led anti-ISIS coalition has provided military support to both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds including weapons, advisors, and air support (Martin and Kozak 2016:1). At the same time, the YPG and the SDF have proven to be effective, experienced and motivating fighting force against ISIS, especially after the failed mission of USA's "train and equip program". This relationship between the USA-YPG and later, the SDF's "tactical and temporary" cooperation, has now been ongoing for more than six years and has given further legitimacy to the YPG as well as enabled the VNSA to recapture territory from ISIS. It has also showed the compelling capacity and harnessing power of the VNSA to keep providing the superpower with reasons to stay in the region and support the VNSA was military and somewhat moral support.

Thus, the rise of ISIS in Syria and in Iraq and its capture of Mosul in 2014, domestic pressure in the USA and beheading of Western journalists eventually triggered the Obama's administration stronger reaction in Syria. According to Barfi (2016:10), the PYD/YPG-led Kurds see ISIS as the primary threat as it witnessed ISIS committing atrocities against non-Sunni Arab minorities like Assyrians and Yazidis, fearing that ISIS could do the same with Kurds in Northeast Syria. Therefore, the fight against ISIS has granted further legitimacy and acknowledgement of Kurdish national movements in the region, including the KRG in Iraq and the PYD/YPG in Syria while opening a way to professionalize their armed forces (Dalay 2018:80). Although Kurds have historically

been located in different countries across the region with differing interests at stake, for the first time in history, Kurds from different parts and the diaspora believed that they faced the same enemy (Dalay 2018:82).

Although the USA was aware of the risks it would take in cooperating with the YPG as well as their links with the PKK, it was seen as the least bad option at the time. As the USA appeared not to have credible partners at the time to fight ISIS, it chose to support the YPG, contribute to its transformation to the SDF and further help capturing territory governed by ISIS, eventually trapping ISIS to the area of Deir ez-Zour. This has given the YPG and the transformed SDF stable and a good source of oil income as well as contributed to their sustainability and autonomy (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:3). Overall, the USA providing direct arms and training to the VNSA has been a major boost of moral for the YPG throughout the years, while directly beginning to arm the Kurdish-dominated SDF since May 2017 (The Washington Institute 08.12.2017). The support of the military coalition forces during and after the Kobane siege was important for the PYD's sustainability and survival. As such, the YPG's ability to keep its regional agency depended on its ability to successfully fight ISIS (Allsopp 2019:192).

The YPG and the SDF's increasing recognition – the *Inherent Resolve* mission and the Global Coalition against ISIS

Already during the USA involvement in Syria, and especially during the defense of Kobane, the USA was looking into ways of formalizing its cooperation with the VNSAs in both Syria and Iraq as the interactions and ways of cooperating for the superpower, were legally limited. On 17 October 2014, the Department of Defense formally established the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to formalize and legitimize its military actions against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq (Inherent Resolve 2020). The initiative of the Global Coalition against ISIS was formed earlier, in September 2014 to tackle ISIS' financing and economic infrastructure; prevent the flow of foreign terrorist fighters across borders; support stabilization and the restoration of essential public services to areas liberated from ISIS as well as countering the terrorist group's propaganda (Global Coalition 2020). While the Inherent Resolve

mission focuses solely on military matters, the Global Coalition is tackling broader aspects of defeating ISIS and contributing to stabilization efforts in areas that have been liberated from ISIS.

CJTF-OIR was established by the United States Army Central Command (ARCENT) and initially, ARCENT was designated as the Joint Forces Land Component Command (JFLCC) for the conduct of operations in Iraq, not in Syria (Inherent Resolve 2020). By 2014, the mission's operations had grown with the rescue of the Yazidi population from the Sinjar Mountain amid ISIS's advance as well as with the recapture of the Mosul, the defense of Baghdad as well as the disputed territory of Kirkuk (Inherent Resolve 2020). Eventually, the Inherent Resolve mission grew to include more than sixty Coalition partners active in missions in Iraq and Syria.

The mission has been vocally broadcasting its “counter-terrorism” successes and the same approach has been widely used by the SDF on its social media. The CJTF-OIR mission has highlighted on its website that in Syria, the Inherent Resolve expanded the train and equip program and worked with Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) troops in multiple regions, helping to secure the “strategic isolation of Raqqa by clearing the city of Manbij on 15 August 2016,” to secure territories taken from ISIS (Inherent Resolve 2020). According to the mission history, the SDF relied on the Coalition air support to transition combat forces across Lake Assad to encircle the Tabqah Dam near Raqqa by beginning the assault on Raqqa in June 2017, “and continue to make steady gains despite heavy resistance” (Inherent Resolve 2020). The International Coalition has been highlighting the role of the SDF in its fight against ISIS, especially in Manbij in 2016 and Raqqa in 2017, among taking hold of other strategic infrastructure assets. At the same time, the YPG and the transformed SDF umbrella organization have proved their capabilities by building up recognition and impact in the fight against ISIS, by being formally involved in the Global Coalition and its military mission.

The Inherent Resolve as a Coalition of more than 60 countries does not mention or acknowledge the YPG in public, despite making up most of the SDF commanding positions. Also, the International Coalition does not give the PYD-led administration with direct financial assistance, although it has emphasized the need for stabilization (Balanche 2018:10). The USA has, however, secured the capabilities of several airports

and increased the capacity of local infrastructure in the Northeast Syria as well as been involved in some local projects, promoting economic sustainability for the areas liberated from ISIS.

Also, despite some disagreements between the Department of State and Department of Defense about destabilization funds in Syria and the level of commitment that the USA should have in rebuilding previously ISIS-held areas, the Coalition has tried to boost the economy of the local population by organizing relevant events. According to the Inherent Resolve mission, such initiatives to increase vetting contracts “are not funding terrorism but instead assist legitimate businesses and provide SDF support” (Inherent Resolve 26.10.2020). They also contribute to the recognition, sustainability, and impact recognition of the YPG and the SDF by making it more appealing for people to join and live under the PYD-governed Autonomous Administration, especially due to financial reasons and better living conditions that contribute to generating loyalty for the VNSA and thus, keeping their potential new members motivated to join.

Overall, the anti-ISIS coalition sees its mission as a success in both Iraq and Syria. According to the previous CJTF-OIR Spokesperson Myles Caggins, the anti-ISIS coalition has liberated 7.7 million people and 110,000 square kilometers of land from ISIS since September 10, 2014 while admitting that when USA did its first airstrike in Syria on September 22, 2014, “the situation looked bleak” (Inherent Resolve 05.09.2020). In his outgoing speech, Col. Caggins praised the SDF for their work fighting against ISIS: “...to much of the world, ISIS looked unstoppable. And they were, until the Syrian Democratic Forces rallied to beat ISIS at Kobani in January 2015. These brave warriors. The women and men of the Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by Coalition air power and special operations forces, proved to the world that ISIS could be beaten” (Inherent Resolve 05.09.2020). With such high recognition on an international level from a world superpower, this has definitely highered the VNSA’s representation and recognition on both local and international level as people look up to the VNSA of something that they can rely on and trust, especially after being “liberated” from ISIS.

Balanche (2018:3) has indicated that the mandate of the International Coalition would stop, once ISIS has been destroyed and that the member countries will cut their

financial contributions and manpower afterwards, as several countries like Denmark in 2016 have already done so. Although the mission's active operations have decreased and more weight has been put on counter-terrorism operations against ISIS, its cells and attacks in the region remain active and are believed to have increased with President Trump's declarations of withdrawing troops.

Formalization of cooperation – outlier in the ARI framework?

Unlike Aydinli's (2015, 2016) ARI framework, the USA was constantly looking ways to legalize and make its cooperation with the YPG and later, the SDF more official as the YPG's transformation to the SDF provided this option. Working together with the Global Coalition is seen to be beneficial for VNSAs as such kind of legal military cooperation opportunities are rare to find for violent non-state actors. Moreover, this led the VNSA to directly cooperate and be recognized by countries in the Global Coalition, enormously increasing the VNSA's independence from states, yet remain connected to the Syrian regime through its "third way" of looking at the conflict dynamics. Such legalized military cooperation also boosted the morale and loyalty of people towards the YPG, and later the SDF who became the official security provider in the PYD-governed region. Such new levels of formal cooperation also contributed to the YPG and the SDF's impact as the superpower changed its course and legalized military cooperation in order to better work with the VNSA, despite previous views of not getting involved in the region, especially in Syria.

In fact, the USA-led Global Coalition heavily contributed to the VNSA's representation, gave them a motivation boost to "liberate" more territory in Syria that was not populated by the Kurds as well as has played a role in the VNSA's sustainability as many new members saw joining the YPG and the SDF as the only hope to make ends meet financially. Moreover, people from the Syrian regime's side have also chosen to work under the PYD-administration as the latter pays much more in terms of salaries. As such, there is no alternative for the VNSA who would outbid them in financial means and services provision, including the Syrian state, making the PYD/YPG and now the SDF one of the most influential violent non-state actors in the region.

Moreover, the SDF has adopted a public diplomacy campaign while trying to comply with the international rules and norms. For instance, as the YPG and the SDF have previously faced accusations by the UN of recruiting child soldiers as well as the Amnesty International, it publicly announced that the SDF had decided to officially ban child recruitment while Mazloum Abdi signed an action plan with the United Nations to prevent the recruitment of children (Rudaw 16.11.2020). The SDF-UN agreement was the first time that an international entity officially recognized and acknowledged the SDF as an organization, thus giving the SDF significant acknowledgement.

However, the UN was quick to point out that the Action Plan did not lend the SDF legitimacy: “The actions of the special representative of children and conflict does not imply any legitimacy, political legitimacy, for any armed groups that she engages with, whether it is the SDF or other armed groups she has engaged with in the past” (Rudaw 02.07.2020). According to the UN statement, the SDF took commitment “to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, to identify and separate boys and girls currently within its ranks and to put in place preventative, protection, and disciplinary measures related to child recruitment and use” (UN News 2019). Therefore, contrary to the ARI framework, VNSAs are able to have legally binding, if not by international law, contracts with the most influential international organizations and benefit from it.

Thus, contrary to Ersel Aydinli’s argument that VNSA-state relationship tends to be illegal, this is the opposite when it comes to the YPG and now, the SDF. Although this may be an exception to the ARI’s framework, it may also be due to the fact that (V)NSAs of today try to act like and operate as state-like structures. For instance, this has been the case with the Islamic State who tried to establish their Caliphate in the region while being consisted of highly educated and profiled members as well as with Taliban, whose influence in the future of Afghanistan is growing with several states in Central Asia unofficially cooperating with the VNSA at their border outskirts. If the Afghan government would collapse, the superpower would again be in a position to somewhat formalize its interaction with the Taliban.

Failure of the “train and equip” program and the VNSA’s motivations to fight

As discussed in previous chapter, the USA-led train and equip program established in 2014 did not produce expected results as with the goal of 5400 vetted Syrians over three years, only a small amount of officers finished the program, while some of them went reportedly sold ISIS weapons that belonged to the USA (Humud et.al.2016:24). In October 2015, the Obama administration announced a shift in the program by focusing on equipping selected vetted fighters in Syria and not training and equipping other units in neighboring countries (Humud et.al.2016:24). The way USA acted was focusing on ISIS by grafting Arab fighters into the YPG and focusing on the initially failed “train and equip” program to create Arab majority units (Stein 2017:3).

In October 2015, President Obama announced that he had sent “dozens” of special operations forces to Syria in order to prepare for taking back territory from ISIS (Stein 2017:1). These special forces in Syria were focusing on counterterrorism and were tasked with identifying local forces to fight ISIS, although the USA was already partnering with the YPG since the Kobane siege (Stein 2017:5). As the adjusted train and equip program fell under the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Syria (CJSOTF) in support of CJTF Operation Inherent Resolve, it had to take its host country, Turkey’s concerns into account (Stein 2017:10). However, those who trained Arab and Turkmen forces in Turkey were the same as those that are responsible for weapons and training to the SAC that later became the SDF (Stein 2017:10). The SDF was trained by the United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) and had more autonomy to conduct missions on the ground, being absent from clear guidance from higher authorities (Stein 2017:10).

There were differences in motivation between the YPG and the Arab majority forces that made working with the Kurdish-led forces easier for the USA. While the YPG fighters were motivated to fight beyond their own villages of origin and were interested in seeking political autonomy, the Arab-majority forces had various motivations, ranging from forming a new government in Syria to cash payments (Stein 2017:10). Thus, they were not ideal for following the USA’s objectives who were seeking fast responses in fight against ISIS.

Moreover, because the YPG had proven fighting experience, adopted internal intelligence system as well as command and control structure, the YPG could screen out ISIS or al-Qaeda linked sympathizers compared to other Arab groups (Stein 2017:10). The USA policy goals included that partner forces, both the train and equip program as well as the SDF, be focused on fighting ISIS rather than eliminating the Syrian regime and thus, the SDF proved to be more efficient in adopting the USA's goals in a short amount of time (Stein 2017:10). Thus, the SDF had proven itself as a flexible, adaptable, and having deterrent-resistant motivation among its members as it was able to make significant changes to its operations and organization. The YPG's strategy in recruiting Arab fighters was to pick the ones that were not heavily advocating for the regime change, but rather focusing on ISIS instead (Stein 2017:12). Stein (2017:1) argues that the dynamics in Syria and the USA cooperating with different local allies has challenged the doctrinal definition of unconventional warfare, which eventually resulted in using the term "train and equip" program.

In Eastern Syria, the USA special forces were providing advice and assistance to a "local, indigenous partner combat force" that the USA had reframed after the first group of trained and equip program had failed (Stein 2017:5). However, such units were too small to successfully fight ISIS and the FSA's priority has always been fighting the Syrian regime not ISIS (Barfi 09.19.2015). As different USA options for finding adequate partners on the ground kept failing, the YPG and later, the SDF's ability for its transformative power and flexibility proved to be the most suitable option for the USA at the time, despite knowing the PYD/YPG's links with the terrorist organization PKK.

The YPG's transformative capacity - the official establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

According to the USA CENTCOM, after the siege of Kobane, the YPG had recaptured about 17,000 square kilometers of land from ISIS (Barfi 2016:2). According to YPG's commanders, by 2015, the YPG controlled a territory of about 30,000 square kilometers by having used "effective combat techniques" and guerilla tactics (Barfi 09.10.2015). However, such tactics had largely been learned from the experience and the

trainings of the PKK. Moreover, the YPG gradually started to establish cooperation with other Arab tribes in the region to fight against ISIS. Already between 2013-2014, the YPG cooperated with the Sanadid Forces as well as with the Syriac Military Council and in September 2014, the YPG had also established the Euphrates Volcano operation with some of the FSA brigades (Barfi 2016:2). By October 2015, around 3000 YPG fighters had been killed in fight against ISIS, including 750 in the battle for Kobane (Barfi 09.10.2015).

Since the YPG started to operate as the military force of the PYD, its mandate was to “protect and defend the security of the Autonomous Regions and its peoples” in the three cantons, both against internal and external threats (Allsopp 2019:118). While this is still the case, an official mandate has now given to the SDF that is also operating outside of the three cantons and mostly in the Arab dominated areas. However, the YPG is commanding most of the SDF’s top positions. The YPG/SDF operate mostly on the borders of the PYD-controlled cantons, while the internal *Asayish* police forces operate inside cities and towns (Allsopp 2019:118). The majority of the YPG commanders were trained by the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, most of the soldiers were recruited from the Syrian Kurdish population and trained in Syria (Allsopp 2019:118).

As the YPG was operating outside of the cities, they had allegedly limited knowledge of the local issues which was dealt by the PYD. The exception was town of Hasakah, where the YPG had its bases as it had territorially advanced (Allsopp 2019:118). The internal *Asayish* forces from Kobane and Hasakah have provided military manpower to the YPG during frontline operations like Manbij in 2016 (Allsopp 2019:118). The YPG and the PYD is known to continuously blur the lines in terms of its institutional set up and in reality, maintaining security and defending the democratic autonomy project overlapped with the two forces but with little differences (Allsopp 2019:118). Thus, the YPG and the PYD are well known to artificially blur its institutional and military framework and the same can be seen with the emergence of the Syrian Democratic Forces. In reality, not much changed, other than give the YPG more power and acknowledgement with regard to their military experience as states started to legitimately cooperate with them under the umbrella of the Global Coalition.

Allsopp (2019:120) argues that with the expansion of the YPG's captured territory and the development of military alliances against ISIS, new alliances with non-Kurdish groups became necessary for the PYD's administration in order to sustain legitimacy as well as military support from the USA. Some Arab and Christian militias operated either in cooperation with the YPG or under its command, while not having a legal status within the Autonomous Administration (Allsopp 2019:121). Overall, the PYD's blurred lines to establish a federal system served its long-term political objectives by expanding to non-Kurdish areas and incorporating non-Kurdish majority areas to maintain control of its governed territories and new resources (Allsopp 2019:123).

The USA's role in establishment of the SDF

The USA has had a major role in the formation of the SDF that was officially formed in October 2015. Before the USA's help with weapons and arms, the YPG relied on light weaponry such as Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns, as most of it had originated from captured ISIS' supplies (Barfi 09.10.2015). As the YPG proved its effectiveness as an experienced fighting force against ISIS, the USA military support to the VNSA increased, as did its positive recognition, and acknowledgement while on the VNSA's side, its sustainability and impact, both regionally and domestically, kept increasing. This was particularly so with the YPG's transformation to the SDF.

In late October 2015, about fifty U.S. Special Forces operatives arrived in the PYD-controlled area to train and equip its fighters (Barfi 2016:2). It is argued that the United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) that were deployed to Northeastern Syria, were looking to establish an Arab-majority militia mixed with the YPG forces in East of the Euphrates to prepare for the eventual capture of Raqqa (Stein 2017:9). However, the basis for this was already established before as the YPG was cooperating with small Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in a joint "Euphrates Volcano" operation in September 2014 (Allsopp 2019:127).

Eventually, this led to the transformation into the SDF in October 2015 – mostly, to calm tensions over the VNSA between Turkey and the USA (Allsopp 2019:191). It is argued that the USA had urged the YPG to form an Arab coalition and change its name

in order to facilitate fight against ISIS in legal terms. Hours after the creation of the SDF, the USA airdropped fifty tons of weapons and had allegedly delivered them through the Syrian land border (Barfi 2016:2). In parallel with the arrival of the special forces, the YPG declared that it had merged with some of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) units into a collective Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) and with this move, the YPG-SAC formed the base of what later became the SDF (Stein 2017:9).

Allegedly, the USA was concerned that a Kurdish-majority force in the region may cause ethnic tensions in Eastern Syria and thus slow down operations against ISIS in which there was a need for more legitimized cooperation (Stein 2017:2). It has been argued that a senior USA Army officer, General Raymond Thomas, had urged and instructed the YPG to change its name to a more suitable one, claiming that within a day, the YPG had declared themselves as the SDF amid Turkey's concerns and the YPG's links with the PKK (Reuters 22.07.2017). Furthermore, Gen. Thomas spoke at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado while indicating that he thought it was "a stroke of brilliance to put democracy in there somewhere," giving the VNSA more credibility (Reuters 22.07.2017). However, Ergun (2018:164) argues that the creation of the SDF was nothing more than a "rebranding" and the YPG continued dominating the group and its commanding positions. In reality, the Arab elements within the SDF were long-standing PKK allies or Kurdish-friendly Arab tribes (Lund 2016 cited in Ergun 2018:165). Moreover, the Arab forces with the SDF constituted less than 20 per cent at its beginning (Ergun 2018:165).

The sudden decision to create the SDF in October 2015 was an attempt to win international legitimacy for the USA's actions in Iraq and especially in Syria amid Turkey's concerns. Ergun (2018:164) has further indicated that the creation of the SDF was also a way of ease international and domestic concerns over the accusation of YPG's ethnic cleansing of Arab populated areas and thus, legitimizing the future USA-YPG operations. Although the SDF is made up primarily of the YPG who has the control of major commanding positions, it also includes Arab forces made up of different tribes, Assyrians and other minorities (Zabad 2017:228). However, the PYD had previously admitted that the Kurds make up the majority of the organization in which 30-40% are non-Kurds (Zabad 2017:228).

Regeneration, adaptability, flexibility, and transformation capabilities of the YPG

Both the USA and the YPG were publicly supporting an ethnically mixed military force that made their cooperation easier (Allsopp 2019:191). This made confronting ISIS in Arab populated towns such as Manbij in May 2016 and Raqqah in 2017 possible (Allsopp 2019:191). Moreover, the USA increased its cooperation with the YPG and established its military bases in PYD/YPG and later, the SDF-controlled areas of Qamishli, Kobane, Ain al-Issa, Hasakah and Tal Abyad (Allsopp 2019:192). Such quick developments and transforming the YPG's branding within a few days-notice clearly shows the YPG's ability to have high transformative capacity as the VNSA's was flexible and adaptable in order to get more international military and possibly political support.

By being able to include Arabs and minorities to the YPG's ranks, the newly transformed SDF regeneration potential was increased as it did not only include the Kurds in its ranks. For instance, as Aydinli (2015:431) has argued, VNSA's regeneration potential is limited if the variety of possible future members are „narrowly described“ As such, by transforming the YPG into the SDF, increased its regeneration capacity by having a greater pool of possible recruits. Moreover, the YPG and now the SDF were able to efficiently build up legitimacy among its members and potential members by successfully fighting ISIS, advancing territorially as well as provide financial rewards and security to its members and people governed, being part of the criteria for 'regeneration' capacity under 'representation' (Aydinli 2015:432).

Aydinli (2015:431) has argued that having a common identity among its members has served as a basis for creating a somewhat unified actor and it can also have an added value of serving to the (V)NSA's regeneration capacity that is needed for its survival as well as to its actorhood. This common identity can also serve as a common enemy, an aspect that Ersel Aydinli has put let emphasis on in the ARI framework. By including minorities to the SDF's ranks, and showing the SDF's ability to defend these groups' religion or ideology as well as continuously provide security and services, it

further increased the legitimacy and loyalty among its people governed as well as current and potential members.

The YPG and the SDF's growing actorness and cooperation with the superpower

According to the previous SDF's spokesperson Talal Silo, who had defected to Turkey in November 2017, the SDF was portrayed to appeal for "all people" (Allsopp 2019:191). As the PYD was continuously blurring the lines with its governing style and further institutionalizing its administration by developing a federal system by drafting a federal social contract, the SDF, rather than the YPG, was made as the central armed force of the PYD-governed administration in 2016 (Allsopp 2019:121). According to the social contract, the SDF's role is to "defend the democratic federal system in Northern Syria and rely on volunteers and conscripts" (Allsopp 2019:121).

Although the YPG keeps dominating the SDF, including commanding high-ranked military positions, the SDF's previous spokesperson Talal Silo has stated that the SDF was formed with six groups which initially excluded the YPG and that the SDF had more than 10,000 fighters during its early years (Barfi 2016:2). Although the exact number of the SDF fighters remains unknown, according to the Global Coalition, the SDF fighters were believed to be around 50,000 during the battle of Raqqa, while Arabs made up about 60 per cent of the force and Kurds 40 per cent (BBC 06.06.2017).

According to the Defense Department press official, the USA officials trained the SDF in communication as well as showed how to share information necessary for conducting airstrikes (Barfi 2016:3). Moreover, Barfi (2016:3) argues that the SDF has been mostly responsible with background positions on the battlefield as it leaves decision-making to the YPG, mostly being in control of airdropping ammunition. As such, the YPG was leading main military operations against ISIS, while this has now been transformed to SDF's counter-terrorism operations instead.

After the establishment of the SDF, the USA began to openly provide military equipment, training and sent military advisors to train the SDF (Ergun 2018:165). As part of advising the SDF, the VNSA seems to have improved its public image and social media messaging to get its successes and message across. Furthermore, the SDF was one

of the main parties to the adjusted “train and equip” program while also getting assistance from the Special Forces (Ergun 2018:165).

Despite President Trump’s changing decisions of withdrawing the USA troops both in December 2018 and October 2019 as elaborated on the next chapter, Trump’s administration increased the USA’s military assistance to the SDF between January and March 2017 and sent additional thousand ground troops to Raqqa in support of the SDF’s on the ground battles with ISIS (Allsopp 2019:192). This increased the agency of local actors and military alliance to the YPG-dominated SDF while on a political level, it helped to increase the PYD’s power locally and regionally, despite the USA not officially supporting their political cause (Allsopp 2019:192). Thus, the VNSA’s autonomy, representation and influence grew with its transformative capacity and fight against ISIS. Furthermore, it could be said that ISIS served as main driver for the VNSA’s success, despite ISIS’ destructive nature.

Financial motivations and loyalty to the VNSA

Haenni and Quesnay (2020:7) argue that the main source of deepening roots of the PYD/YPG is the bureaucratization of local society in which the economic resources and the international aid have made the PYD-led administration develop a system with more than 250,000 employees including about 70,000 soldiers; 30,000 police and 150,000 civil servants. Moreover, about 40,000 teachers living under the Administration are earning up to 200 dollars a month, double the salary that is paid in the Syrian regime-controlled territory (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:7). As such, the SDF soldiers are almost double paid compared to regime soldiers, depending on their rank (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:7). This has contributed to the sustainability of the PYD-led Administration as the Syrian regime has currently no better alternative economically, despite Iran and Russia supporting the regime. Moreover, such higher salaries compared to other VNSAs or the Syrian state itself, helped to keep the VNSA’s representation as there were no other groups who could compete with the salaries in the SDF and the autonomous administration. Thus, the SDF and the PYD/SDC officials were continuously able to attract new members to its ranks as well as generate loyalty as

indicated in the ARI framework. Moreover, this also helped to sustain loyalties within the VNSA as its secular, minority focus as well as openness to Arab tribes and religions, it helped to keep the loyalties strong within the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF.

Thus, the PYD-led model proves to be more sustainable as the salaries of the Autonomous Area as well as its security provided against ISIS are aiming to win the “hearts and minds” of the local population, including non-Kurds. Also, the YPG has tried to lobby its popularity through the SDF by promoting a new generation through the SDF and political administration by giving jobs and other responsibilities independently from the tribal hierarchy (Balanche 2018:9). This shows that the PYD/YPG has been aiming to increase and contribute to its representation and sustainability as it has an ability to think long term and be more flexible, unlike the superpower at the time.

Furthermore, the USA officials have admitted that while training the Arab forces within the SDF, it faced same problems as the “train and equip” mission with fighters rather being motivated by cash rather than focusing only on fighting ISIS (Stein 2017:16). Thus, the YPG eventually took a bigger role in identifying fighters who join the SDF, by using the YPG’s internal intelligence services as a way to map out ISIS and al-Qaeda supporters (Stein 2017:16). In doing so, the YPG could then also influence the political direction of the SDF while using its power over the councils that are selected to govern the SDF-held territories (Stein 2017:16).

It has been indicated by the USA military officials that the Arab majority forces cannot successfully fight against ISIS without the YPG’s logistical support (Stein 2017:17). The USA heavily relies on the YPG in any fighting done on the ground, even if it would increase its weapons and supplies to the SDF as the Arab majority forces have not proven to be as efficient fighters as they are together with the experience of the YPG.

According to Haenni and Quesnay (2020:8), the PYD-led administration has demonstrated its resilience despite geopolitical threats and the low rate of defection among the ranks of the YPG and the SDF military structures, contributing to their sustainability. This is also related to the fact that there is no other alternative in the region, both in terms of governance and salaries amid the ongoing civil war as most defections within the SDF ranks happened during the battle of Tal Abyad and in the

town of Tabqa (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:8). This can be related to some Arab fighters being motivated by cash while the YPG fighters seem to be more motivated to a common cause and territorial connection.

Balanche (2018:7) has argued that the integration of Arabs into the PYD/YPG's political and military system has been a good means to gain acceptance and legitimacy both internationally and locally. However, some groups within the SDF seem to have higher influence than others. For instance, the leader of the Shammar tribe in Hasakah province is known to be a vice president of al-Jazira canton. This makes the Shammar tribe to be treated better in the SDF as it gets to keep its independence, organizational structure as well as receiving modern weapons compared to other tribes within the SDF (Balanche 2018:8). It has been argued that the YPG has deliberately adopted a strategy of choosing second-class families to keep competition among tribes and by seeing this as a way to maintain control over the Arab forces (Balanche 2018:9).

As many opposition fighters in Syria have escaped from the regime's conscription, some Syrians have sought refuge in the SDF held areas. The SDF has also allegedly banned petty daily bribes in its controlled area to boost economic activities (Balanche 2018:12). However, selling and dealing with the oil resources in the SDF-held areas have increased smuggling, especially due to different areas of control in Syria. While not all Kurds or SDF members believe in the cause of the SDF, the security factor from ISIS has played a big role as people are looking for stability and security after being governed by ISIS that can now be seen as having one common ideology, according to the ARI framework.

The Syrian Democratic Council – transformative capacity

The Syrian Kurds are known to keep blurring the boundaries of the administration in order to better fit to changing nature of conflict and keep receiving military assistance from the USA, while cosmetically trying to balance Turkey's concerns. The SDF has a political branch called the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), created shortly after the SDF in December 2015 and contributing to the adaptability, flexibility and transformative capacity of the VNSA. Just like the SDF, the SDC has

Arab co-chairs. However, it is the PYD and the YPG who have the real military and political control of the organization (Balanche 2018:6). Also, the military councils that were developed after the YPG and the SDF took further territory from ISIS, i.e. Manbij and Taqba, send their representatives to the SDC (Balanche 2018:6). The SDC also includes representatives from the TEV DEM, as an umbrella organization of the PYD-controlled areas.

Balanche (2018:6) argues that the integration of different SDF Arab militia groups are subject to widen the Kurdish umbrella group as well as pave the way for establishing a full federation. In December 2015, the SDC was officially given political powers, co-headed by a Kurd and an Arab while including minority group members in their ranks (Allsopp 2019:128). Moreover, the need to reform administrative structures and adopt to its territorial expansion into Arab-populated areas led for the PYD to continue with the non-ethnic federal system (Allsopp 2019:128). By 2017, the PYD had again artificially changed its governance system as they expected recognition from the international community by electing a new executive body, headed by Kurdish and Christian co-heads while drafting new electoral laws and plans to hold new elections (Allsopp 2019:129).

While the PYD has the real governing power in Northeast Syria, it has the ability to dissolve and merge new councils and administrative bodies in order to confuse both the international and local audience, while in reality, all administrative changes are known to be cosmetic. The Autonomous Administration's new strategy seems to be that the SDC, rather than the PYD, is publicly commenting on local affairs. As such, Elham Ahmed, President of the Executive Committee of the SDC has warned the international community that ISIS is regrouping due to the generational change in the ISIS affiliated camps and stressed that the young people growing up in the camps such as al-Hol can help ISIS to get stronger and regroup, putting further pressure on the international community to take back its ISIS affiliated fighters (Rudaw 28.11.2020).

The phenomenon of General Mazloun Abdi Kobani – the VNSA's representation

The most famous YPG commander who is now acting in the ranks of the SDF, is General Mazloun Abdi Kobani, also known as Ferhat Abdi Sahin. General Kobani is a

high-ranking PKK military commander with political experience from Europe, operating between Germany, the Netherlands and Italy (Zaman 25.10.2019). Allegedly, Gen. Kobani had moved to Europe for PKK's political work and to receive medical help for a leg injury but later returned to Syria in 2011 (Zaman 25.10.2019). Gen. Kobani has publicly acknowledged his past with the PKK and stressed that working with the terrorist organization PKK had stayed in the past, being cited in the influential New York Times that, saying that while Turks are focused on the period in the Syrian Kurds' activities before 2011, the Kurds were looking into the future instead (The New York Times 12.06.2019).

General Kobani is the highest commander and public figure who leads the YPG-dominated SDF and directly interacts with the international community, including the top figures of the USA administration and the military. He is also followed on social media by top USA military officials, including the *Inherent Resolve* mission, its spokesmen as well as several high USA officials and politicians who all share the SDF's and Gen. Kobani's *Twitter* posts. Moreover, re-sharing such posts has given the VNSA wider international audience and acknowledgement on a global level.

Gen. Kobani has constantly met with several world leaders and had direct phone calls with President Trump amid Turkey's military operation to Syria in October 2019 as he was personally briefing President Trump about the situation in Northeast Syria (Kurdistan 24, 15.10.2019). After the call, the then USA Vice President Mike Pence commented that the SDF was "a strong ally of the United States" (Kurdistan 24, 15.10.2019). Moreover, President Trump *tweeted* that he enjoyed his "conversation with General @MazlounAbdi. He appreciates what we have done, and I appreciate what the Kurds have done. Perhaps it is time for the Kurds to start heading to the Oil Region!" (Twitter, 24.10.2019, @realDonaldTrump cited in Aljazeera 25.10.2019). This was the case the year after as the USA's private company made an oil deal with the SDF, elaborated in the next chapter. Also, it is notable that a VNSA and its commander were treated as VIPs on a diplomatic level to where many small states, including NATO Allies, do not often reach. Yet, such world level diplomacy was granted to the SDF, making it a highly influential VNSA.

Amid Turkey's military operation to Northeast Syria in October 2019, President Trump declared that he was "fully prepared to swiftly destroy Turkey's economy, if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive path" (Kurdistan 24, 15.10.2019). This shows the compulsion capacity that the VNSA had over the USA, who was willing to change its course of action and use the YPG and the SDF as a bargaining chip regarding its relations with Turkey. At the same time, some of the USA officials had urged Trump to fasten issuing a visa for Mazloun Kobani to travel to the USA and brief the Congress on the situation in Northeast Syria (Aljazeera 25.10.2019). This shows a compelling capacity of a VNSA to try to make the state act differently and react to the SDF's "sacrifices" against fighting ISIS.

A tweet that was published by the SDF's then spokesperson Mustafa Bali on 23 October 2019 referred to Mazloun Kobane's phone call with President Trump in which he thanked Trump for "his tireless efforts" stopping Turkey attacking the SDF and stated that "President Trump promised to maintain partnership with SDF and long-term support at various spheres" (@mustefabali, Twitter 23.10.2019). President Trump replied by publicly acknowledging and thanking General Kobani: "Thank you General Mazloun for your kind words and courage. Please extend my warmest greetings to the Kurdish people. I look forward to seeing you soon" (cited in Amberin Zaman 25.10.2019). This refers to the impact aspect of the ARI as the superpower's highest leader was compelled to answer and react to the VNSA via a *tweet*, changing its normal diplomatic conduct.

Gen. Kobani's image among the USA military

Most USA military officials who had directly worked with Mazloun Kobani, have opposed President Trump's decisions to withdraw the USA troops from the Northeast Syria and agree that General Kobane should be honored for his contribution instead (Zaman 25.10.2019). For instance, Gen. Joseph Votel, the previous head of the USA CENTCOM who oversaw ISIS' last stronghold in Baghouz falling, stressed that Gen. Kobani was a "very trustworthy and effective partner" for the USA, "respected by all who came into contact with him" (cited in Zaman 25.10.2019). This is clearly related to the impact aspect of the VNSA and shows how the high commander of the YPG and the SDF had won "hearts and minds" of high USA military officials. However, high

PYD/YPG and the SDF leaders never managed to secure visas to the USA, including PYD's previous co-leader Salih Muslim and General Kobani. Nevertheless, the YPG and the SDF fighters and commanders were treated by the USA officials with gratitude, similar to state-to-state relations.

General Kobani also wrote opinion pieces to influential USA media outlets such as the Foreign Policy and gave interviews to newspapers such as the New York Times. In his 2019 opinion piece to the Foreign Policy, Mazloun Abdi highlighted that "the SDF has 70,000 soldiers who have fought against jihadi extremism, ethnic hatred, and the oppression of women since 2015", while never firing "a single bullet toward Turkey. U.S. soldiers and officers now know us well and always praise our effectiveness and skill" (The New York Times 13.10.2019). According to Mazloun Kobani, the SDF "always stuck with our ethics and discipline, unlike many other non-state actors. We defeated al Qaeda, we eradicated the Islamic State, and, at the same time, we built a system of good governance based on small government, pluralism, and diversity" (The New York Times 13.10.2019).

As such, the VNSA tried to indicate that the YPG/SDF is one of a kind in the region, keeping Northeast Syria safe and promoting secular values, appealing to the Western world and by appearing in most influential outlets in the USA – again, a level to which many valuable journalists or state leaders have not reached. Moreover, Gen. Mazloun Kobani can be seen as the face of representation of the YPG and later, the SDF as a VNSA, rather than look at representation as only of "common identity," as indicated in the ARI framework (Aydinli 2015:431). Within the SDF, the only „common identity“ seemed to be fighting ISIS, rather than common views of the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan or any other specifically secular or religious beliefs of the SDF members.

Representation - the YPG and the SDF's social media

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, both the PYD and the YPG have tried to work on their public image since social media has been their main channel for the VNSAs to interact with the world and spread their standpoints. For instance, both the YPG and the PYD have renewed its website in English, Arabic and Kurdish,

emphasizing its activities and achievements in the fight against ISIS (Crisis Group 2014:21).

This is similar to the SDF, but the difference seems to be that the SDF received more advanced public diplomacy training from the USA military and tends to keep a lower profile in terms of language. Also, the SDF does not publicly mention the YPG in its public posts on social media, neither on its website while the YPG refers to the SDF posts instead. While the YPG's posts are mostly politically oriented, the SDF's focus is generally on ISIS and its successes of counter-terrorism operations. Also, the SDF puts emphasis on humanitarian aid given within the community, including building schools and infrastructure, while the YPG puts emphasis on its military structures and 'martyrs' who have fallen in fight against ISIS or Turkey.

It is noteworthy that the YPG's media and propaganda news are more vocal towards Turkey while the SDF tries to keep more diplomatically formed statements. This may be related to the fact that the USA military has trained the SDF also in the field of public diplomacy. On the other hand, after the success of defending Kobane and further battles in which the YPG and the SDF gained territory from ISIS, the YPG seemed to be doing well in terms of communicating its message to the international community while not being as successful in communicating with the locals who have often accused the PYD/YPG of authoritarian governing styles. However, providing security and services is often what matters the most to the local population and the fight against ISIS' provided this opportunity, despite accusations of Arabs being forced out from their homes or fleeing from YPG's advancing forces (Strategic Comments 2017:6).

Throughout the years, the SDF has been careful on focusing counter-terrorism related statements and the cooperation with the *Inherent Resolve* military mission while the USA-led coalition has been praising its cooperation with local allies. As of November 2020, the SDF has a separate Twitter account as the "SDF Department of Media and Information", sharing successes of its fight against ISIS. For instance, it has been keen on *retweeting* praises from the Inherent Resolve mission: "The brave men and women of the SDF are dedicated fighters that have sacrificed greatly to defeat and contain Daesh terrorists. The Coalition is proud to partner with the SDF" (SDF Dept. of Media&Information, Twitter 21.11.2020). Also, the *Inherent Resolve* mission posts

weekly successes of how many operations the SDF and the Iraqi Security Forces have concluded against ISIS. However, the Inherent Resolve has highlighted in their *tweets* as if the Coalition is helping the SDF fighting ISIS instead, not the opposite.

The SDF's social media usage to communicate on a world stage

As *Twitter* has become the center stage for many world leaders to comment on daily politics, the SDF leaders such as the top commander Mazloun Kobani has adopted the same strategy as high leaders by congratulating world politicians such as the UK Prime Minister on taking up the new post as well as commenting on world politics or condemning Turkey's actions in the region. For instance, in October 2020, Mazloun Kobani expressed support to the French President Emmanuel Macron amid war of words with President Erdogan, stressing that President Macron "had helped to protect Muslims against the jihadis by playing a big role in the defeat of ISIS and the "protection of human values" (Al-Monitor 26.10.2020).

The SDF has adopted a strategy of sharing its battle successes, capturing of ISIS' cells as well as share meetings with the top USA officials. The SDF uses *Twitter* for its public image campaign and is generally fast in seizing opportunities on social media. For instance, the SDF has also been congratulating different world leaders on their elections. After Joe Biden was elected as the next USA president, Mazloun Kobane extended his "warmest congratulations to @JoeBiden and @KamalaHarris on their historic election victory. We look forward to continued close cooperation with the United States to protect our gains in the fight against Daesh and build a better future for Syrians" (@MazlounAbdi Twitter 08.11.2020). Also, after the October 2020 earthquake in Izmir, Turkey, the SDF commander expressed his condolences and solidarity with Turkish people (@MazlounAbdi Twitter 30.10.2020). This has been done in order to receive positive recognition from state leaders and contribute to the VNSA's representation that does not only include recruiting members but also relate to public image, an argument missed in the ARI framework.

Depending on the context, Mazloun Abdi has tweeted in Kurdish, Arabic, English, French and Russian. Mazloun Abdi has also been quick to seek solidarity with

other world leaders when it comes to condemning Turkey's actions. For instance, following the visit of Swedish Foreign Minister to Turkey, Abdi tweeted that the SDF agreed with Swedish FM comments regarding the "violations committed by Turkey in northeast Syria..." (@MazlounAbdi Twitter 14.10.2020). Turkey has condemned such close contacts of the Swedish officials with the SDF commanders as also the Swedish Defense Minister has had direct video calls with Gen. Kobani - again, referring to the VNSA's impact on a global stage.

When President Trump was having treatment from COVID-19, the SDF was quick to seize the opportunity and wish him a recovery together with other world leaders: "We wish @realDonaldTrump and the First Lady good care and speedy recovery. We are hopeful that they and people who have been affected by Covid-19 around the world are getting the care that they need, that they are going to be on the path to a speedy recovery" (@MazlounAbdi Twitter 03.11.2020). Therefore, the SDF and its top commander Kobani, often say what the international community wants to hear, further helping to legitimize the VNSA.

Thus, Gen. Kobani has been treated diplomatically more active than many small countries, by having personal phone calls with President Trump and being in direct contact with several other Western leaders like President Macron. However, this has caused opposition from Turkey who has accused the USA of treating Mazloun Kobani as a "legitimate political figure" and have stressed that should Kobane take up Trump's invitation to the USA, Turkey would ask for Kobani's extradition (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:90).

Recently, General Abdi has openly acknowledged the sacrifices that thousands of PKK fighters have made in the region since 2011, while accepting that the presence of PKK fighters have been a headache for the SDF (Rudaw 26.11.2020). Mazloun Abdi has stressed that as part of the USA backed Kurdish unity talks, the YPG and the SDF have agreed "to gradually pull out all these non-Syrian cadres from their current positions, and ultimately from Syria" (Rudaw 26.11.2020). However, the SDF does not refer to the PKK as a terrorist organization.

According to Mazloun Abdi, the lack of long-term USA-led Coalition's strategy in fighting ISIS has created a dangerous situation on the ground in which the local

population have started to “tolerate ISIS operatives” (Rudaw 26.11.2020). Therefore, most of the SDF’s public image has to do with ISIS and the sustainability of the SDF is unclear once ISIS has been fully rooted out. This, however, seems unlikely as the new ISIS generation is becoming young adults in the SDF controlled camps. Ironically, ISIS longevity also serves to the sustainability for the YPG/SDF.

The Impact of YPG and the SDF - Differences between the Department of State (DoS) vs Department of Defense (DoD)

In May 2017, the deputy assistant Secretary of State Jonathan Cohen described the relationship with the YPG as the one being “temporary, transactional, and tactical” while emphasizing that the USA did not promise anything to the YPG (The Washington Institute 08.12.2017). Despite this, there have appeared to be wide differences in the approaches of the Department of State and the Department of Defense, with the latter being more pro-SDF, given its direct cooperation with the VNSA on the ground.

For the DoD, Syria is a low priority region compared to China, Russia or North Korea (Brookings 2018). At the same time, there are great differences between the DoD and DoS in terms of whether to give larger support to its local allies in Northeast Syria. It seems that the DoD would like the Department of State to take action with regard to stabilization of Northeast Syria whereas the State Department would like to be involved as little as possible. Moreover, the Department of State and Department of Defense have differences in agreeing how much effort should the USA put into stabilization funds.

In early October 2014, the Pentagon press secretary noted that the USA was not having intelligence cooperation with the YPG, but as it proved its fighting effectiveness on the ground, this cooperation eventually led to further intelligence sharing (Barfi 2016:9). Based on the experience of Kobane, the USA started to see the YPG and the SDF as reliable allies in the fight against ISIS. In 2015, the White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said that the VNSA’s efforts were showing “an indication that when our coalition can back a capable, effective, local fighters on the ground, that we can make important progress against ISIL” (cited in Barfi 2016:9). Thus, in general, the YPG and the SDF have been seen as a success story in the USA high officials’ circles.

During the early years of the Syrian uprising, Washington was more focused on eliminating President al-Assad from power and resupply moderate rebels who were fighting for getting control of new territory and key infrastructure positions. On the other hand, the Department of Defense's emphasis was on fighting ISIS as well as being responsible for finding groups that would eventually be trained within the train and equip program. Barfi (2016:4) argues that the debate between arming the YPG and supporting moderate rebels created tensions between different governmental organizations, with the CENTCOM backing cooperation with the SDF while several other officials did not do so. It is argued that since the start of the USA's involvement in Syria, President Obama's administration seemed to rely more on the opinion of the USA DoD than the DoS (Phillips 2016:76).

The USA's public support to the SDF

Another aspect of the VNSA's high level of influence is seen from its impact, recognition, and level of acknowledgement. Although the USA has never openly supported the political autonomy of the Syrian Kurds, just as it did not support the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum, the most adequate way of showing the USA support to the YPG-dominated SDF has been by high level political and military visits as well as *tweets* by social media. As such, *tweeting* on *Twitter* has become the USA's military's new form of diplomacy, especially when it comes to getting its public image across with regards to military mission and cooperation with the Kurds in Syria and in Iraq. Although it is somewhat unusual for militaries to adopt such strategies, the USA seems to do for both showing its support for the SDF as well as for public diplomacy regarding its anti-ISIS military mission.

In addition to the USA's military support to the SDF, the top USA political and military figures have continuously met with the YPG and the SDF leadership throughout the years, portraying their support to the group (Ergun 2018:165). In 2016, Brett McGurk, the Special Envoy for the anti-ISIS Coalition, who is also known to be very supportive of the YPG the SDF, made two visits to the region in January and September while the USA CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel met with the SDF leaders in May 2016 (Ergun 2018:165). Also, the then Deputy Secretary of State Antony A.

Blinken had a phone call with the PYD's vice-chair Salih Muslim to reiterate their support in fight against ISIS despite the PYD not being able to be present in Geneva (Phillips 2019:107).

Brett McGurk is seen as the main architect of the USA's pro- SDF policy in the region throughout the years. He was appointed by President Obama as a Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS at the US Department of State in 2015 until he resigned in 2018 amid controversial President Trump's policies with regard to ISIS. As a top-level official, Brett McGurk visited Kobane in January 2016 as a first official trip by the USA official in three years (Phillips 2019:107). McGurk shared his trip details and meetings on social media, including meetings with senior YPG leaders and SDF commanders to discuss the battle of Raqqa which was a strategic interest for the USA at the time (Phillips 2019:159). This high profile visit was meant to assure the YPG and the SDF that the USA was still supporting them militarily, despite the fact that the PYD had been excluded from the United Nations' peace talks in Geneva (Phillips 2019:107).

Brett McGurk was the top State Department official who gave a public and international 'voice' to the YPG and the SDF at the time, while overseeing the Global Coalition. McGurk constantly *tweeted* the successes of the SDF on his social media as well as wrote opinion pieces against President Trump's troop withdrawal decisions in well-known USA newspapers such as the New York Times. It could be even argued that without Brett McGurk and his pro-Kurdish views, the SDF would not be as known on an international stage. The visit of McGurk angered Turkey, calling for the dismissal of McGurk and President Erdogan insisting the USA to make a choice: "Are you with us or with this terrorist organization?" (Phillips 2019:107).

The SDF's military battles and territorial gains

For the PYD/YPG and the SDF, sustaining international legitimacy has been done through the fight against ISIS. The VNSA has been trying to gain domestic support and legitimacy through trying to connect the three PYD-controlled territories which has resulted in "necessitated territorial expansion" (Allsopp 2019:120). At the same time,

the PYD/YPG has presented itself as the protector of local population amid ISIS' threats while providing security and services as a source of legitimization locally and relying on its diplomacy and image management campaign internationally (Ergun 2018:156).

As a major success, the YPG forces took Tal Abyad from ISIS in mid-June 2015, a border town that had served as a smuggling route for providing ISIS with foreign fighters and major supplies (Stein 2017:8). This also led to the connection of the Kobane and Jazirah cantons as political success for the PYD/YPG (Allsopp 2019:127). It is argued that taking Tal Abyad from ISIS had a more strategic value compared to Kobane as it served as the main route for ISIS, boosting YPG's optimism in capturing further territory from ISIS (Dalay 2018:79). The battle to liberate Tal Abyad lasted from May 2015 to July 2015 (Phillips 2019:158). Turkey saw this as a red line and a threat to its national security while accusing the YPG of atrocities towards local Arab population (Phillips 2019:158). Also, the Human Rights Watch and the Amnesty International have accused the YPG of ethnic cleansing of Arabs and Turkmen as well as the use of child soldiers amid harsh battles with ISIS (Phillips 2019:158). In early June 2015, ISIS took hold of parts of the Kurdish dominated Hasakah town which the YPG had recaptured from ISIS by August 2015, cutting off main resupply route of ISIS between Raqqa and Mosul, seen as a strategic battlefield success (Plakoudas 2017:106). Furthermore, after the formation of the SDF in October 2015, new Arab-dominated towns were incorporated with the Autonomous Administration project, extending control towards the oil rich Deir al-Zour (Allsopp 2019:127).

In Arab dominated towns like Shahadi, al-Hawl, Tal Brak, Tal Hamees, Tal-Abyad, Raqqa and in Manbij, local Arab tribes were expected and encouraged to form councils and follow the PYD-led governance model (Allsopp 2019:127). By 2016, the SDF was doing well in terms of military success and recapturing territory from ISIS while having the USA's military support in achieving this. Nevertheless, successes in the battlefield did not result in expected legitimacy and authority internationally as the PYD/YPG and later, the SDF had hoped for (Plakoudas 2017:109). At the time, the USA did not support the PYD's political project as it did not want to upset its NATO ally, Turkey. Also, the USA continued to be against the PYD-Syrian regime's cooperation.

However, this changed later due to sudden President Trump's troop withdrawal decisions.

Manbij

One of the most significant battles for the YPG and the SDF was fought in Manbij that was characterized with controversial YPG-led Manbij Military Council. In May 2016, a heavy offensive started in Manbij to retake the area from ISIS in which the USA-led Coalition provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to the SDF on the ground (Humud *et.al.* 2016:8). The SDF's military operation to Manbij was heavily supported by the USA Air and Special Forces, accompanied by the top USA generals such as Joseph Votel who visited the town of Kobane and met with senior PYD/YPG and the SDF leaders for secret negotiations amid the Manbij offensive (Plakoudas 2017:111). Moreover, it is speculated that the USA may have allowed the YPG and the SDF to advance to the West of the Euphrates in exchange for supplying the YPG against ISIS in Raqqa that was crucial for the USA's interest (Plakoudas 2017:111).

The SDF's capture of Manbij caused backlash both from local people as Manbij was dominated by Arabs as well as from Turkey. Although the PYD/YPG had agreed to give control of Manbij to its Arab population, after liberating it from ISIS and withdrawing back to the East of Euphrates, the YPG was keen to stay in the area (Cagaptay 2018:14). This led to the creation of a controversial Manbij Military Council (MMC) who was controlled by Arab leaders loyal to the YPG. The creation of the Manbij Military Council (MMC) was not taken well by all locals and Manbij seems to be an area in which Kurdish rule has resulted in active protests, especially against the mandatory YPG's military conscription (Balanche 2018:9). However, it is argued that in other areas, local population has not been against the PYD/YPG and the SDF's rule as they are still traumatized by ISIS' atrocities, like seen in Raqqa (Balanche 2018:9).

Manbij's importance comes from the fact that it served as one of the remaining connection points for ISIS at the time and was seen as a strategic location that helped to supply ISIS with foreign fighters (Humud *et.al.* 2016:8). The Manbij battle proved to be

one of the hardest in terms of casualties as ISIS was using civilians as human shields while the USA military was accused of striking civilians on the ground (Humud *et.al.* 2016:8). By August 2016, the SDF had captured Manbij from ISIS which resulted in a deal with hundreds of ISIS fighters being permitted to leave the town due to their vehicles being mixed with civilians (Humud *et.al.* 2016:8). The main success in fight against ISIS, including in Manbij, was the YPG and the SDF's fighting experience compared to other Arab groups. In several instances throughout the fight against ISIS, the train and equip forces proved ineffective, especially during attempting to close the Manbij pocket in 2016 when these groups struggled to take towns, even with minimal ISIS presence (Stein 2017:12). Nevertheless, the SDF is believed to have lost about 300 fighters in Manbij battle, with around fighters 1200 injured (Stein 2017:13).

Despite its big casualties, the SDF, with the dominance of the YPG's command structure, was committed to move forward in capturing more territory from ISIS and securing its sustainability. After Manbij, the SDF moved into taking the town of al-Bab from ISIS, creating similar military councils in the town as it had done in Manbij (Stein 2017:13). Clearly, the creation of such military councils was a facade for seemingly more legitimate governance for the YPG and the SDF after re-capturing towns from ISIS. While the failures by the vetted fighters in Manbij contributed to the failure of parallelly organized train and equip program, the success of the SDF prompted Turkey to take action and launching its Operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016 with the aim of clearing ISIS from the Manbij pocket as well as to prevent the YPG and the SDF from moving West from Manbij towards Afrin (Stein 2017:13).

Nevertheless, the Manbij battle encouraged the PYD-administration to further continue with its federalism goals in the region as recapturing non-Kurdish dominated areas provided the basis for institutionalization of "multi-ethnic autonomous federal governance structures" (Allsopp 2019:123). Also, the PYD was quick to start establishing different councils in towns before the SDF actually took hold of it. Although towns such as Manbij and Raqqa were Arab-dominated, it had PYD/YPG-friendly officials running these councils. For instance, the PYD was creating its councils in Al-Bab while it was still under ISIS' control until February 2017 when it was then captured by Turkish-backed groups (Allsopp 2019:124). Nevertheless, by creating such

councils in order to incorporate them to a federal system, the PYD/YPG and SDF seemed to have a more long-term strategy for its goals than the USA, despite having a seven-year presence in the region. It also showed the ability of the VNSA to create and keep loyalty among its governed areas, as it was able to instill its members to governing bodies and thus, keep monitoring the attitudes of its newly attached local constituencies as well as in Raqqa and Manbij.

However, Manbij remained a contested area and had an importance for both the YPG and Turkey. On 05 June 2018 the USA Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that an agreement had been reached in which the YPG would withdraw from Manbij, while USA-Turkey patrols in the area would start (Phillips 2019:165). However, as Manbij remained the centre for great power competition, the Syrian forces entered Manbij after six years in 2018 after a request from the YPG and backing of Russia amid Turkey's threats to enter the town (BBC 28.12.2018). The Manbij battle as well as the Raqqa offensive were supported by Western Special Forces from the United Kingdom, the USA and France (Allsopp 2019:192). Such high-level military shows the VNSA's recognition and explicit legitimacy it received from states.

Raqqa

Raqqa served as having the biggest importance for the USA's interests who had been preparing the SDF to take ISIS' capital for months as the USA was directly arming the SDF for this battle. According to the previous Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Raqqa had been the center of planning and directing terrorist attacks operations in Paris and Berlin (Dept. of Defense 19.05.2017). The USA offense in Raqqa seemed to be more well planned compared to its involvement in defense against Kobane in September 2014. As the USA was deploying its special forces close to the YPG held areas in October 2015, it had indicated that it was part of the effort to prepare local forces to strike Raqqa (Stein 2017:16). Initially, Ankara was pressuring USA to end its military support to the SDF and coordinate with the Turkish military and Turkish-backed groups for the battle instead (Allsopp 2019:177).

Moreover, in March 2017, the USA's military support to the SDF was renewed and suggested that an additional thousand USA soldiers would be deployed to help with the Raqqa offensive, including increase in weapons (Allsopp 2019:177). Although President Trump's actions with regard to withdrawing its troops from Northeast Syria since 2018 have taken many of its Republican Party members, administration's advisors as well as the YPG and the SDF itself by surprise, it was President Trump who issued a letter to congressional committees for taking the Raqqa city from ISIS in 2017 and thus, make it legal to directly arm the YPG (Stein 2017:17).

Depriving ISIS of territory and ousting the VNSA from Raqqa, were the USA's military's top priority at the time (Phillips 2019:160). Months before Raqqa, the *Peshmerga* forces in Northern Iraq had established a successful front in Mosul in which the Raqqa battle derived from lessons learned in terms of urban warfare and ISIS' strategy (Phillips 2019:160). Moreover, around 500 U.S. Special Forces joined the SDF's operation in Raqqa (Phillips 2019:160). The battle for Raqqa officially began in June 2017 after months of planning as well as coming into terms of how the USA should address Turkey's concerns (Stein 2017:20). The Raqqa offensive indicated, the USA's "by-and-through approach" in Syria was connected to the USA's unwillingness to commit into a long-term nation-building mission (Stein 2017:20).

The USA was emphasizing throughout the Raqqa offensive that it would be governed by Arab councils, not the YPG. On March 2017, the USA ground forces commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend stressed that the YPG would not keep its presence in Raqqa after ISIS but leave governing to locals in Raqqa as the Kurds had less than 10 per cent of presence in the area (Allsopp 2019:192). It is believed that around 1000 civilians died in the battle of Raqqa while about 270,000 people fled the area (Phillips 2019:161). ISIS lost 1367 fighters while around 650 YPG and YPJ fighters died in Raqqa battle (Phillips 2019:161).

According to Allsopp (2019:121), the conditions that were based on the USA's military support to the SDF required that in non-Kurdish majority areas, the role of local Arab forces should be increased, including in Raqqa. It was hoped that the Sunni groups within the YPG would enhance the effectiveness of post-conflict situation and would be easier for Turkey to accept (Stein 2017:3). Since the Raqqa offensive, the USA defense

officials indicated that the USA would remain militarily engaged in Syria while Trump's administration statements continued to call for troop withdrawal from Syria (The Washington Institute 08.12.2017). At the time, the YPG was in a position to comply with these conditions in order to receive international legitimacy, acknowledgement and by acting as a somewhat proxy actor of the USA after 2015 in return for military aid from a superpower. Despite the YPG not preferring for to be called as a proxy of the USA, after its transformation into the SDF, the VNSA could have not sustained itself or increase its impact without USA's military and moral support.



CHAPTER VI

THE YPG’S HEIGHTENED LEVEL OF INFLUENCE – DESTROYING TRUST BETWEEN THE TWO NATO ALLIES

Introduction

According to Küçük (2017:199), there are few cases in international relations where non-state actors and their activities have resulted in foreign policy crisis. However, the PYD/YPG and the SDF seems to have had such impact on the two NATO allies’, Turkey-USA, relations. According to international law, “sovereign states with certain population within a defined territory and an independent government have the right to have international relations with one another” (Küçük 2017:204). Although not regulated by international law, the YPG has adopted similar structure in its relations with the USA, showing enormous compulsion capacity and convincing abilities in terms of ruining a good alliance between Turkey and the superpower and by destroying trust between them. This again, relates to the ‘impact’ aspect of the ARI framework and the way the YPG used its compulsion capacity to try and convince the USA to have a second ‘legal partner’.

Ergun (2018:165) claims that the USA is now dependent on the SDF’s help and protection of their troops on the ground and that even if the USA had been more lenient to Turkey’s interests earlier, it did not really have other alternatives but to support the YPG and the SDF forces on the ground, especially with the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the region. For instance, the USA’s efforts to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces had previously failed because the Free Syrian Army fractions were more interested in fighting the Syrian regime rather than ISIS. Therefore, the YPG proved to be the only reliable option at the time, given its experience and motivation.

While the YPG and the SDF proved to be effective, experienced, and motivated forces in the fight against ISIS, the USA's airpower and military expertise was essential for the success of the SDF, especially in liberating Mosul from ISIS in July 2017 and Raqqa in October 2017 (Phillips 2020:193). These victories led ISIS to gradually lose its territory while giving more acknowledgement, territory, and legitimacy to the SDF. By February 2019, President Trump declared that ISIS had been "100 percent defeated" (ABC News 2019). At the same time, the SDF's Gen. Kobani also indicated that the SDF was preparing to declare victory over ISIS within a week, coordinated with the USA military (ABC News 2019). However, such positive remarks later changed together with President Trump's continuous troop withdrawal decisions.

When Donald Trump became president in 2016, it was clear that he was unfamiliar with the civil war background in Syria as he had confused the Kurds with the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps in an interview (Gunter 2017:78). Moreover, Trump seemed to value state to state and personal relations, in particular, rather than the USA's reputation. However, the USA's military, working together with its Kurdish allies in Syria, seem to value its Kurdish partners, having lobbied in the Pentagon and the State Department for a coordinated and clear policy that would not include "betraying" its local allies but offering some guarantees instead, should the USA leave the region permanently.

For the USA administrations and the military alike, the presence of ISIS has been both a 'weapon' and an excuse to either get involved in Syria or try to withdraw troops, as seen from previous president Trump's decisions. For instance, while President Obama got involved in Syria during the Kobane siege in September 2014 and the USA established the Global Coalition against ISIS later that year, President Trump eventually used ISIS as a reason to withdraw from Syria, while having declared several times that ISIS has been defeated. Gunter (2017:70) indicated at the start of Trump's Presidential term that Trump may be more "favorably disposed" towards Turkey than President Barack Obama was. Although this may be true with regard to Trump-Erdogan's personal phone diplomacy and Trump's sudden green-lighting of Turkey's military operation in Syria in October 2019, Trump's administration has also issued economic sanctions to Turkey amid the imprisonment of American pastor Brunson as well as Congress

sanctions for Turkey for buying S-400 missile systems from Russia. According to Phillips (2019:209), President Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw troops from Syria reversed years of the USA policy as it ignored advice from the Pentagon, State Department as well as the Congress and other superpower's allies.

This chapter is mainly related to the YPG's and the SDF's relations with the USA and is linkable to the 'impact' aspect of influence, in particular 'compulsion' of the ARI framework. The YPG, as it is now dominating the SDF, was able to ruin a good alliance between Turkey and the USA and destroy trust between them. However, the USA never aimed to drop its NATO ally and rather wanted to balance relations both with Turkey as well as with the YPG-dominated SDF. Nevertheless, this can be seen as a diplomatic success for the VNSA, and all of this compulsion power has kept the USA supporting the VNSA over the years.

In terms on influence, it often refers to the use of it on the international arena (Aydinli 2015:435). As such, all (V)NSAs are able to have influence on the international arena through (V)NSAs' activities. However, assessing and measuring the actual "influence," is a difficult task (Aydinli 2015:435). For the YPG and the SDF, the influence they have had on an international environment and on a superpower, in particular, has been enormous. This is especially seen by the sustainability of the YPG and later, the SDF-USA cooperation and the amount of attention that the PYD/YPG has had within the different USA institutions as well as from the high-level relationships they have created.

Assessing VNSA's actorhood through influence

As for the ARI framework, an aspect of influence, 'impact', can be divided into two aspects: 1) the level to which the VNSA's impact is compelling and 2) the level to which the VNSA's impact is transformative. Compelling applies to states being forced to react to a non-state actor whose actions can be influential to a level that states are unable to ignore it (Aydinli 2015:437). However, by doing that, states also create recognition to the VNSA, albeit not legally, by giving up some of their own power as states (Aydinli 2015:437). Moreover, states can give recognition to violent non-state actors explicitly or implicitly. As such, if the (V)NSA's position is not challenged by

states, the (V)NSA can be seen as having implicit legitimacy in certain areas and thus, seen as having *de facto* recognition (Aydinli 2015:237).

However, if states openly acknowledge that the (V)NSA is seen as better managing or “able to set policy rules and guidelines” in certain areas, states can give explicit legitimacy and recognition to the (V)NSA, i.e. *de jure* recognition (Hall and Biersteker 2002:6 cited in Aydinli 2015:437). For instance, this could be related to the SDF’s direct management of ISIS affiliated refugee camps such as the al-Hol, where many Western states either give financial support or have been present in Northern Syria to have direct talks with the SDF for repatriating citizens. Also, the SDF is now an official partner for the USA-led *Inherent Resolve* military mission, as the Coalition has recognized that the YPG-dominated SDF is better managing the fight against ISIS, fighting on the ground. Nevertheless, both of these types of recognition mean that the state would be giving away its recognition and power to the (V)NSA (Taylor 1997 cited in Aydinli 2015: 437). This has been evident in terms of the SDF’s role in the fight against ISIS as the superpower and its allies in the Coalition are dependent on the SDF’s intelligence, services, and protection on the ground.

Although Aydinli (2015:437) argues that neither of the options mentioned above is relevant for NSAs which would be better off adopting a method of creating disturbance to a level in which states could not stay indifferent to the (V)NSAs, the PYD/YPG and the SDF never created such disturbance to states, i.e. to Syria and the USA. Moreover, both of these states, as well as Russia, reacted to a level which the YPG’s impact was compelling, but in a rather positive and cooperative matter in the fight against ISIS and in the case of the Syrian regime, let the regime focus on other threats and areas instead. Thus, other than Turkey’s reaction to the YPG and the SDF operating close to its borders, both the USA’s and the Syrian regime’s approach towards the VNSA resulted, in a “positive recognition” and the VNSA did not create disturbance like for instance, jihadists do when they commit terrorist attacks. However, in terms of Turkey’s approach to the PYD/YPG, this has resulted in “negative recognition” as the former was compelled to act and thus, recognize the VNSA despite being against it.

As mentioned in previous chapters, another aspect of “impact”, linked to the VNSAs influence, is the fact that it needs to have transformative capacity. This can

relate to changes in states' policies and practices, i.e. immigration policies or security measures as well as to changes in a state's authority, for instance, a VNSA creating an autonomous region, dividing a country or overthrowing a government (Aydinli 2015:438). The PYD managed to act autonomously after the Syrian regime pulled out its forces and concentrated fighting the Syrian Arab opposition instead, eventually leaving the PYD to start building up its autonomy, representation, and influence in Northern Syria. Moreover, in terms of the YPG having transformative capacity, it could be related to the USA militarily committing to Syria and cooperating with the YPG during the Kobane siege as well as relate to President Trump's administration changing the course of its troop withdrawal and statements on media, trying to reassure to the Syrian Kurds, i.e. the YPG and the SDF that the USA was not betraying them, further elaborated below.

A VNSA with the most transformative influence is seen as the one that portrays "credible threatening capacity" that would lead to "transformations in the primary tenets of the state-centric system" (Hall and Biersteker 2002: Steinberg 2004 cited in Aydinli 2015:439). For instance, it could have the potential to "affect the organizing principle of the state-centric system, sovereignty, or major alignment patterns, or international legal regime understandings or the distribution of capabilities within the state system" (Aydinli 2015:439). Despite the YPG not holding such threatening capacity as mentioned above, it has portrayed transformative capacity in terms of changing the USA high official's discourse towards not abandoning the Syrian Kurds with President Trump's continuous withdrawal decisions as well as the Syrian regime letting the PYD/YPG and the SDF to operate in Northeast Syria and previously controlled ISIS' areas as well as being able to operate autonomously in Syria by changing state's system.

Growing Turkey's disapproval of the YPG-USA relations

Turkey started to get cautious about the YPG's motives since the VNSA took control of Tal Abyad from ISIS in June 2015, connecting its two cantons East of the Euphrates River (Cagaptay 2016:14). For Turkey, the YPG moving towards Afrin and crossing the West of the Euphrates River was a red line that eventually allowed the PYD-led Kurds to control almost 400-mile-long territory close to Turkish border

(Cagaptay 2016:14). However, as the YPG continued to re-take territory from ISIS and declared occasional victories over ISIS both in Jarablus and other areas, Turkey got further alarmed by YPG and later, the SDF's military and political gains (Crisis Group 2019).

Turkey's first military operation into Syria was launched in August 2016 and the "Operation Euphrates Shield" was planned under the pretext of the fight against ISIS but was at the same time aimed to ensure that the territorially advancing YPG would not be able to control continuous area from Kobane to Afrin that was seen as threatening Turkey's national security (Miley and Yildiz 2019:62). During the early stages of the operation, Turkey had captured Jarablus after the SDF had seized the Arab-dominated Manbij on the West of the Euphrates which led Turkey to demand that the YPG withdraw to the East of Euphrates, which was later reiterated by the USA's Vice President Joe Biden amid deteriorating USA-Turkey relations (Miley and Yildiz 2019:62). However, the YPG had refused to do so at the time but was again convinced to do so by the USA in 2018 amid another diplomatic crisis with Turkey.

This shows the "stubbornness" of the VNSA by not following the rules that the superpower had set. It also shows that the USA's proxy was not playing by its patron's rules and showed its political stance as the issue was to do with VNSA's political and territorial interests rather than the superpower's aim to fight against ISIS. Thus, the YPG and the SDF were still independent when it came to its own political interests. Moreover, it shows the YPG's compulsion capacity and impact as the VNSA wants to be treated as an equal partner and have a say when it comes to its own interest, in order not to jeopardize them amid changing conflict nature and interests of big powers.

On 22 December 2017, the head of the USA Central Command, General Joseph Votel announced that the USA was developing a training program for local Kurdish and Arab border guards, close to Turkey's border to clear the area and fight against ISIS, which took regional powers and especially Turkey, by a surprise (Miley and Yildiz 2019:66). President Erdogan reacted angrily and accused the USA of establishing a "terror army" close to Turkey's border and indicating that Turkey's duty was to "strangle it before it's even born" (cited in Miley and Yildiz 2019:67). Later on, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson tried to assure Turkey that there had been a

misunderstanding and that the plan to train such border force had not been well communicated to its ally. Moreover, the sudden denial of the border force by the USA's Administration, despite the military officials having said otherwise, came two days before Turkey started its military operation into Afrin in January 2018 (Miley and Yildiz 2019:67). Such differences in official statements between the Department of Defense and the State Department indicates that the USA's Syrian policy was not well coordinated and agreed upon between the different USA institutions, by showing different discourses towards the USA's long-term ally Turkey and its VNSA ally, the SDF.

“Operation Olive Branch”

The “Operation Olive Branch” to Afrin started on 20 January 2018, given a green light by Russia as it was controlling the airspace over Afrin at the time, leading the SDF to accuse both Russia and the USA not living up to its promises and protecting the Syrian Kurds against Turkey's military operation as the SDF had hoped for. Miley and Yildiz (2019:67) argue that before the military operation, Afrin had largely remained untouched by the civil war, being under the control of the PYD-led administration since 2012. Moreover, this military operation led the YPG-dominated SDF losing territory to Turkey-backed forces and partly losing its hopes for a political settlement with a continuous territory.

Although Turkey's “Operation Olive Branch” received international condemnation, the USA and Russia largely stepped aside, leading the SDF to temporary suspend its anti-ISIS operations as it had been fighting on the ground with the support of the USA Special Forces in other areas in Syria as well as move its fighters to defend the largely Kurdish-populated Afrin. The USA's official view on Turkey's operation in Afrin was that it respected Turkey's right to secure its borders while hoping that the military operation would end quickly with Turkey limiting civilian victims (Hurriyet Daily News 01.03.2018).

Over time, the YPG got more confident with the acknowledgement from the international community in its fight against ISIS. The YPG's social media and news channels have been provocative and condemning towards Turkey's military operations,

especially with the Afrin operation in January 2018. However, the YPG had already shown its views and propaganda towards the inaction of the international community, as the PYD/YPG were expecting more political and military support given their sacrifices fighting ISIS. For instance, in 2016, the PYD-led joint leadership in Afrin Canton stated that “we urgently call upon the international community to declare their position towards Turkey’s increased violence, and to press on the Turkish state to stop its incursion into Syrian soil. If the International Coalition’s stance is not to be determined, we will have the right to consider it being a part of the assaults” (YPG Rojava 16.09.2016). The discourse and the level of confidence the YPG allowed itself when addressing international community shows its influence on an international arena, considering itself to be legitimately part of it. Moreover, such discourse towards international state actors worked as the USA adopted a discourse of not betraying its non-state allies later on, as seen from continuous President Trump’s troop withdrawal decisions.

Trump’s statements that ISIS had been defeated 100 percent already in 2018 did not make the USA’s military mission easier, who saw different security constraints by working on the ground. According to the SDF’s commander Mohammed Mustafa Ali, the Syrian Kurds believed that they had been “abandoned and betrayed. We were useful to fight against ISIS, but the Americans are now turning their backs on us” (NBC News 30.03.2018). Moreover, according to the SDF’s General Mazloun Kobani, the USA’s inaction was “an insult to the resistance” that the SDF had shown in fight against ISIS (NBC News 30.03.2018).

YPG’s compulsion capacity to convince the USA to have a „second legal partner“

According to Turkey’s governing AKP’s spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, there are three main issues that remain unresolved in Turkish-USA relations: “The S-400 issue and the implementation of CAATSA sanctions in connection with it and removing Turkey from the F-35 program. Secondly, the support the US has given to the PYD/YPG since the Obama era. Third, the FETO structure still continues its activities against Turkey freely in the US” (Anadolu Agency 2021). The USA’s support to the YPG and the SDF has indeed been an issue ever since the YPG started to take control over more territory close to Turkey’s borders with the aim of connecting cantons which was seen as

a security threat to Turkey, despite the fact that the PYD's previous co-chair Salih Muslim had been invited for talks in Turkey several times and that in 2015, Turkish military and the YPG actually worked together in transferring the Suleyman Shah's tomb, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman empire Osman I, to a more secure place amid ISIS' attacks (BBC 2015).

Initially, Turkey-USA relations started to deteriorate after the failed coup in July 2016, when the USA refused to extradite Fetullah Gülen to Turkish authorities, who is believed to be behind the attempted coup attempt in Turkey. This led Turkey look for allies elsewhere and go forward with making a second purchase of S-400 missile systems from Russia as the USA did not agree to deliver F-35s to Turkey. Amid tensions between the two allies, President Erdogan stressed that Turkey may have to turn to other allies if the USA does not end supporting the YPG (New York Times 2018). Although this happened, it was taken as a political rhetoric at the time.

Since 2018, Turkey-USA relations have been illustrated by both diplomatic clashes while at times, with diplomatic understanding and military cooperation, albeit with the YPG used as a bargaining chip for the two NATO allies until President Trump's and President Erdogan's personal phone diplomacy and the former's unilateral decisions withdraw troops in 2018 and 2019. As such, the two allies' relationship can be characterized by a "rollercoaster" with the YPG issue largely controlling, directly or indirectly, to which direction the relationship has been going. Nevertheless, personal relations between the two leaders as well as the YPG and the SDF's relations with the USA military personnel have played a big role in this.

Although the year 2018 was known for disagreements which led to economic sanctions towards Turkey, it was also a year in which the two NATO allies reached military agreements and cooperation in Syria with regard to the YPG, with the USA trying to please both Turkey and its non-state ally, the YPG-dominated SDF. For instance, in March 2018, a senior USA official stressed in an interview with Turkish Hurriyet Daily News (01.02.2018) that the USA was being careful in order not to use the word "ally" towards its military cooperation with the YPG in order not to upset Turkey: "Our ally is Turkey"... "We have a long-term, enduring, historic alliance and partnership with Turkey and that is not going to change". Moreover, the State Department officials

tried to ensure that the USA prioritized state to state relations and values its partnership with its NATO ally. For instance, in March 2018, the USA official in Turkey had emphasized that “the U.S. has made it clear from the beginning that our military cooperation with the YPG was a temporary, tactical arrangement aimed entirely at combating DAESH. We have made it clear that once DAESH was defeated we would have no plans for an enduring military relationship with the YPG and certainly no plans for an enduring political relationship with the Democratic Union Party” (Hurriyet Daily News 01.03.2018). Although by 2021, the USA has not offered political support to the Syrian Kurds the way it has supported the Iraqi Kurds and the KRG, the USA has been easing its views with regard to currently, officially supporting and mediating the Kurdish unity talks in Syria as well as offering guarantees in the form of the controversial Delta Crescent oil company’s deal with the SDF, discussed further below.

Furthermore, the USA-Turkey relationship started to improve as President Trump and Turkey’s President Erdogan established “telephone-diplomacy” over the years, increasing between 2018 and 2019. This was surprising due to the fact that President Trump himself had encouraged the USA to arm the YPG directly a year before, in 2017. By March 2018, his discourse had changed by ordering to withdraw about 2,000 troops from Syria as well as demanding that the State Department suspend more than 200-million-dollar civilian infrastructure and stabilization recovery funds for mostly Kurdish populated Eastern Syria (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). However, this was later suspended due to domestic criticism that President Trump regarded as being more important than the international condemnation for his often, miscalculated actions.

YPG as a bargaining chip between the two allies

By the end of May 2018, the YPG was increasingly used as a bargaining chip in the Turkey-USA relations as both allies had agreed on the YPG’s withdrawal from Manbij. By June 2018, Turkey and the USA had reached a deal which saw the SDF withdrawing from Manbij, part of the Manbij “roadmap” and be replaced with a separate and coordinated USA-Turkey joint patrols (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). Turkey and the USA initiated their first joint patrols in Manbij by September 2018, close to where the USA’s Special Forces bases were located (Phillips 2020:187). Joint patrols were also

implemented near Tel Abyad in September 2019, by which the SDF forces had withdrawn from around 9 miles from the Turkey-Syria border as well as removed their defensive posts (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). However, this did not satisfy Turkey, blaming the process being too slow and not what it was expected, leading President Erdogan to declare that “it is clear that our ally is trying to create a safe zone for the terrorist organization, not for us” (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). Also, the Syrian regime was not happy with other powers operating in Syria, declaring USA-Turkey joint patrols as “aggression” (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). From the perspective of the Syrian regime, it saw joint Turkey-USA patrols as an invasion to Syria.

Turkey wanted such model to also be used in Raqqa, Kobane and other areas that were controlled by the YPG and later, the SDF. The report from the Crisis Group (2018:6) argues that both the Manbij Roadmap as well as Trump’s promises to pull out troops had “generated goodwill” in the two NATO allies’ relations as President Erdogan had agreed to delay its third military intervention into Syria (Crisis Group 2018:6). However, this did not fully ease tensions between the two NATO allies as the USA House of Representatives had gone forward with plans to stop the sale of Patriot missiles and fighter jets to Turkey unless the latter decided not to buy S-400 missile systems from Russia (Miley and Yildiz 2019:70).

In October 2018, the presidential spokesperson İbrahim Kalın showed Turkey’s frustration commenting that “the U.S.’s military presence in Syria is no longer about Daesh, because they have already said Daesh was defeated on a large scale. Later, they started supporting the YPG. This has started threatening our national security” (Hurriyet 04.10.2018). This again indicates the level of influence that the YPG has had in the two NATO allies’ relations on a foreign policy level, giving further acknowledgement to the group internationally by constantly being on the media amid diplomatic and military tension between Turkey and the USA.

Over time, statements from the State Department officials, the Pentagon and the Congress started to further differ as the superpower was trying to please both Turkey and the SDF as the latter has lost thousands of lives by fighting on the ground and spearing the lives of the USA soldiers in fight against ISIS. At times, the USA’s military have been concerned in not leaving the SDF without any guarantees, should the USA be

leaving the area as well as not betray their allies amid diplomatic games and interests of regional powers. Thus, the Pentagon has been much more vocal and supportive towards the SDF as the VNSA seem to have won the “hearts and minds” of the USA soldiers and military personnel compared to the State Department who have been less directly involved and less accommodating with the VNSA. Thus, the YPG has had an ability to shape foreign policy of states and play a role in state-to-state relations, even as big as between a world’s superpower and a regional power with the second biggest military in NATO.

Nevertheless, as the USA tried to accommodate its NATO ally, in November 2018, the USA military had announced setting up observation posts in Syria close to the Turkey-Syria border in order to provide Turkey with military intelligence of any terrorist elements moving towards Turkey, without increasing any USA troops in the region (Vergun 2018). This was a second initiative of increasing USA-Turkey cooperation aside from joint patrols that started operating in September 2018.

By the end of 2018, Turkey-USA relations had deteriorated to the point in which President Erdoğan announced in December 2018 that Turkey would “start the operation in east of the Euphrates in a few days to save it from the separatist terrorist organization”, clarifying that Turkey's aim was not to target the USA soldiers, “but rather the members of the terror group” (Hurriyet 13.12.2018). This was done to put more pressure on the USA to end its support to the YPG. However, Turkey did not go through with the next operation at the time and President Trump’s announcement of the USA’s troop withdrawal seemed to have calmed Turkey for the time being. However, despite Turkey giving “negative recognition” to the YPG, according to the ARI framework, big powers were still directly or indirectly giving increasing international attention to the VNSA, which kept acknowledging and legitimizing the PYD/YPG and the SDF, although it was not a goal for Turkey.

President Trump’s first troop withdrawal decision and the infamous phone-diplomacy

Although President Trump had been supporting the issue of directly arming the SDF during the 2017 fight against ISIS in Raqqa, President Trump slowly started to

divert from his support from the USA's local ally and prioritize state to state relations instead, proving that its NATO ally had more at stake. Already in March 2018, President Trump had indicated his willingness to soon withdraw troops from Syria, appealing for his domestic electorate, as well as suspend funds in civilian infrastructure and stabilization recovery that was intended mostly for the PYD-administrated Northern Syria (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:85).

However, President Trump did not take action at the time amid military's pressure for ongoing fight against ISIS and criticism from Trump's international and domestic allies. This was the first indication that President Trump valued personal relations when it came to his decision of whether the USA troops should stay in Syria or not. For instance, French President Emmanuel Macron had personally played a role in convincing Trump not to take miscalculated decisions and commit to Syria "for the long term" (BBC 16.04.2018). This proved to be successful as the two leaders had good personal relations. At the time, the UK, the USA, and France conducted joint-airstrikes against the Syrian regime's strategic locations in response to accusations of a chemical weapons attack towards civilians and thus, France had its own interests for the USA to stay in Syria a stabilize the situation both with regard to Syria and keeping good relations with the YPG and the SDF as they are managing ISIS-affiliated refugee camps that France prefers not to deal within its own borders (BBC 16.04.2018).

President Trump's initial March 2018 indication that the USA would "soon" be withdrawing from Syria led the VNSA to seek consultations with the Syrian regime by July and August 2018, showing their ability to be adaptable and flexible amid changing nature of conflict (Crisis Group 2018:4). However, these talks proved to be unsuccessful as the Syrian regime wanted to see the SDF within the Syrian regime's structure while the SDF wanted to see a change in the Syrian constitution regarding the minorities' rights and Syria being more decentralization, which the al-Assad's regime did not agree with (Crisis Group 2018:5). Over time, the Syrian regime got more confident in its position with the backing of Russia and Iran, not being open to concessions with the Autonomous Administration, despite the SDF controlling about 50 percent of Syria's oil income. At the time, the USA had discouraged the SDF not to make deals with the Syrian regime and assured the SDF that it was staying in Syria (Crisis Group 2018:5).

Despite occasional the USA-Turkey military cooperation, this was not as Turkey would have liked as the USA was still cooperating with the YPG-dominated SDF in fight against ISIS. Before the infamous December 2019 President Trump's decision to again withdraw its troops, on 14 December 2018, President Erdogan and Trump had a phone call on a similar matter, resulting in widespread condemnation that took many USA local and international allies by surprise. Days earlier, President Erdogan had announced that Turkey would intervene in Syria "within days" (Crisis Group 2018:3).

During the phone call, Turkey's president had emphasized that ISIS had been largely defeated, which was the USA's primary reason for being in Syria, President Erdogan offered to take over and finish the fight against ISIS to which Trump unilaterally agreed to, without coordinating with his advisors and following the speaking points (Phillips 2020:188). At the same time, President Trump had also frozen the possibility to send more troops to Syria, as requested by the USA commanders, and instead of offering to cut ties with the YPG, President Trump offered Turkey that the USA would withdraw from Syria (Coskun and Wroughton 2018). Nevertheless, pressure from the USA officials as well as international condemnation eventually led President Trump to halt his decision of withdrawal in order to not betray its Kurdish allies and remain in Syria as part of a strategy to put pressure on Iran (Crisis Group 2018:3). However, it is argued that the Iranian argument was unrealistic as a presence of a couple thousand USA troops could not make a real difference and curb Iranian influence in the region (Crisis Group 2018:4).

As the phone call resulted in President Trump announcing that the USA would immediately withdraw its troops from Northern Syria, this eventually led Secretary of Defense James Mattis and special presidential envoy to Syria, Brett McGurk, to resign (Phillips 2020:209). With regard to ISIS, although the Presidential envoy to Syria, Brett McGurk had acknowledged earlier that ISIS had been cornered and controlled only about one percent of territory at the time, he heavily opposed President Trump's uncoordinated decision of a troop withdrawal that was considered as not well thought amid fears that ISIS may re-emerge (Phillips 2020:188).

These concerns have proven to be true by 2021 as ISIS sleeper cells are still active in the region and continue its attacks. Despite the unrest and casualties from the

SDF's side, the re-emergence of ISIS has positively ensured the YPG and the SDF that the USA's OIR military mission will continue to operate on the ground and support the VNSA with airstrikes. Thus, giving the YPG and the SDF further legitimacy as the OIR mission constantly shares the SDF's successes on its *Twitter* account.

Defense Secretary Mattis tried to persuade President Trump to reverse the decision or postpone its implementation in order to limit the effects that the YPG and the SDF would face (Phillips 2020:188). However, at the time, the White House confused the public more by saying that USA would "re-engage" in the fight against ISIS when necessary, with President Trump *tweeting* that other countries should contribute and take the lead in Syria instead of the USA and it was now time to "bring our youth back home where they belong", rather focusing on domestic audience and consolidating his electoral support (Phillips 2020:189). Following persuasion and advice from his officials, President Trump backed off from his initial 2018 plan to immediately withdraw troops and keep a residual force of 400 troops (Phillips 2019:209). However, the troop withdrawal was again reiterated by Trump on his *Twitter* account on 06 October 2019 after a phone call with President Erdogan (Phillips 2019:209).

President Trump faced criticism over the sudden troop pullout decision from home and abroad. Trump's long-time supporter, Senator Lindsey Graham, vocally criticized Trump's decision both in 2018 and 2019, saying that it was a „mistake" that would put ISIS, Iran, the Syrian regime and Russia to a better position and increase their influence (Phillips 2020:189). Graham also stressed that the USA troop withdrawal would make it harder for the USA to recruit "future partners willing to fight extremism" as well as be a sign of USA's weakness in containing Iran in the region (Phillips 2020:189). Also, President Macron was personally persuading Trump to keep its presence in Syria and avoid ISIS' re-emergence, stressing the importance of allies in Syria as well as emphasizing the role that the SDF has played in fight against ISIS. President Macron encouraged Trump "not to forget" what the international community owes to the SDF (BBC 23.12.2018). Not surprisingly, Russia had welcomed the USA's withdrawal decision and its "illegal" presence in Syria, as indicated by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (Phillips 2020:189).

The YPG and the SDF's compelling ability to lead high USA officials to resign

President Donald Trump has been known for dismissing his advisers' recommendations and talking points regarding its Syria policy as well as firing his aids who have disagreed with the President. During the Trump administration, the Turkey-USA relations have been characterized by the two presidents' personal phone-diplomacy, leaving the traditional diplomatic channels, protocols and often advice from advisers, aside. Although the Secretary of Defense Gen. James Mattis, did not specifically resign to protest President Trump's withdrawal decision from Syria, however, this was linked to a wider set of Trump's policies and decisions that Mattis had not agreed with (Phillips 2020:191). Mattis was aware that withdrawing troops from Syria would threaten the security of the USA troops elsewhere in the region, as well as threaten the USA's allies in the anti-ISIS coalition who would feel betrayed by President Trump's decision (Goldberg 2019). Two days after the Secretary of Defense Gen. James Mattis had resigned, Brett McGurk also resigned - this time, directly to protest President Trump's withdrawal decision from Syria (Phillips 2020:192).

Brett McGurk has been known as being favorable towards Iraqi and Syrian Kurds while criticizing Turkey's policy towards Syria. Moreover, Turkish pro-government columnists have portrayed McGurk as the "chief architect" of the USA's relationship with the YPG, yet, regarding Iraq, McGurk had strongly opposed the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence claims (Zaman 21.01.2021). McGurk had served as the USA envoy to the Global Coalition since 2015 under both former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump but resigned in protest when Trump ordered the USA troops to withdraw from Syria in December 2018 (Al-Monitor 01.02.2021). Zaman (21.01.2021) argues that during the first years of the campaign against ISIS, McGurk spent more time in Turkey than any other country in the region and had negotiated the agreement for Turkey allowing the coalition carry out airstrikes against ISIS as well as persuade Turkey to let the *Peshmerga* forces cross Turkey's borders to help the YPG in Kobane during the ISIS' siege.

McGurk's resignation came when he had been briefing its allies on a Middle Eastern tour about the USA's commitment in Syria in December 2018, fight against ISIS and countering Iran while he was informed about the two presidents' phone call

regarding the USA's new aim of a "full" and "rapid" withdrawal from Syria (Phillips 2020:192). Amid Trump's infamous social media diplomacy and *tweets*, McGurk had said in the e-mail to his colleagues that Trump's unilateral 2018 troop withdrawal decision had left the USA's "coalition partners confused, and our fighting partners bewildered" (cited in Phillips 2020:192). According to Phillips (2020:192), without the USA's leadership and McGurk's commitment to the Global Coalition, other states were expected to replace, not complement, the USA's presence. This left the USA's traditional state and non-state allies questioning the superpower's goals and motives in the region even further. Nevertheless, the YPG sustained itself despite changing discourse from the superpower as it tried to look allies elsewhere by increasing its ties with the Syrian regime. This, again, showed the ability to maneuver and adapt to changing conflict circumstances for the VNSA while showing the VNSA's compulsion ability to lead several top officials to resign in protest of the USA's policies in Syria.

Diverging views between institutions and officials - praises from the USA military

As the USA has been giving mixed messages over its Syria policy and relations with Turkey, this has differed from official to official. For instance, while Brett McGurk was known to be critical towards Turkey, the USA's views became more accommodating when his successor James Jeffrey took over. Amid Trump's 2018 withdrawal decision, Brett McGurk had warned that the SDF could not be replaced as the provider of stability while stressing that Turkey had not been a reliable partner in the fight against ISIS (Reuters 17.02.2019). This shows the compulsion capacity of the YPG and the SDF that it dominates as some of the officials in the USA administration would have rather worked with the YPG and the SDF as a partner. Unlike McGurk, James Jeffrey expressed that the USA was willing to consider a safe zone inside Syria on the Turkish border that would include a limited number of Turkish forces and would be free of the YPG fighters, openly admitting that the YPG is the "PKK's offshoot" (Al-Monitor 19.04.2019).

The SDF leaders have indicated that under Brett McGurk, the SDF was told to deal with Damascus while under the next envoy James Jeffrey, the SDF has been told not to do so (Rudaw 30.03.2019). As such, the Syrian envoy Brett McGurk was known

to have a more pro-Kurdish approach while within the same administration, Trump's previous National Security Adviser General Michael Flynn had admitted working for the interests of Turkey (Gunter 2017:80). Moreover, the State Department has continuously indicated that the USA military cooperation with the YPG, and later, the SDF was aimed to be "temporary, transactional, and tactical" while the military has taken a more pro-SDF approach by trying to give certain assurances to the VNSA amid their contribution to fight against ISIS and believing that the SDF remains the most effective ally in the region (Miley and Yildiz 2019:68). Some of the USA commanders had previously indicated that there has been a lack of guidance from the White House, which has not focused on critical issues in Syria amid different decisions and views between institutions, putting the military into a bad light amid the latter's work and promises to the SDF (NBC News 30.03.2018).

According to Gen. Jonathan Braga, the operations director of *Operation Inherent Resolve*, the Syrian Kurds proved themselves that it was the partnership that the USA military had wished for but never had, indicating that the world owes the SDF a "debt of gratitude" as the SDF was the first to "stand up against ISIS" (NBC News 30.03.2018). According to Maj. Gen. James Jarrard, the commander of the USA Special Operations, the SDF have proven themselves to be "ferocious fighters and excellent leaders and pretty amazing tacticians" (Hunt 2018). Moreover, Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of the CENTCOM, has praised the SDF in high-level meetings, saying that the SDF has been "the most effective force on the ground in Syria against ISIS" (Hunt 2018). According to previous acting assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield, the USA policy has been to assure that "those who partnered with us, died for us in the fight against ISIS are not threatened" (Al-Monitor 19.04.2019).

Although such commitment has been tested after continuous President Trump's troop withdrawal decisions, the USA military has been favorable towards the YPG and later, SDF throughout the years, especially after the failure of the train and equip program. It could be even said that the SDF and its top commander Mazloun Kobane have been in more favorable terms with regard to acknowledgement, legitimacy and recognition compared to many other small states who have got little international

coverage or never had personal phone calls with President Trump like Mazloun Kobane did in October 2019.

President Trump's October 2019 reiteration of troop withdrawal from Syria

President Donald Trump has been known for his mixed messages on one hand, supporting both Turkey and the SDF while on the other, making negative statements towards both, depending on his interests. However, at the start of his presidential term, Trump expressed hope that he would be able to work with both Turkey and the SDF. For instance, after Turkey's failed coup attempt in July 2016, Trump indicated that he had been a "big fan of the Kurdish forces," while hoping that the USA could have a "potentially very successful relations with Turkey. And it would be really wonderful if we could put them somehow both together" (Gunter 2017:78). However, five years later, this has been impossible to achieve, other than giving endless promises to both Turkey and the SDF, a VNSA that is seen as a second legal partner for the USA.

President Trump's uncoordinated and sudden withdrawal decisions left his advisers and allies surprised, especially as the USA had been following an opposite path of increasing Syria's allocations in its fiscal year budgets and by having directly armed the SDF in 2017 in preparation for the battle of Raqqa. For instance, in 2019, the USA Government allocated a 15.3-billion-dollar fund for Department of Defense in order to conduct anti-ISIS operations in Iraq and Syria, indicating that the USA's presence in Syria would continue despite Trump's 2018 withdrawal statements that were later postponed (Miley and Yildiz 2019:68). However, by August 2019, President Trump had lowered troops in Iraq to 5,200 and this number was around 1,000 in Syria, despite ISIS' increasing attacks in the region (Phillips 2020:193).

President Trump praised that the USA had done a "great job" in fighting ISIS and that the USA had got hold of "100 percent of the caliphate" while "rapidly pulling out of Syria," emphasizing that other countries in the Global Coalition and in the region should take the lead and fight ISIS instead (Phillips 2020:193). However, even after ISIS was largely defeated, the superpower's relationship with the SDF continues, showing some type of path dependence. This means that although the YPG, and later the SDF started cooperation with the USA that was solely based on the fight against ISIS, after President

Trump declared ISIS to be defeated, this ‘path’ of fight against ISIS became the reason to proceed the cooperation as the USA military had established an effective cooperation with the VNSA and leaving this cooperation would be regarded as a “betrayal” of its local ally.

The October 2019 phone call between the two presidents

According to Phillips (2020:207), Trump had again been unprepared for the October 2019 phone call with President Erdogan that was initially supposed to discuss the USA-Turkey trade deal and Turkey’s purchase for S-400 missile system from Russia that both NATO and the USA saw as a security concern. After the issues on the agenda were discussed, President Erdogan changed the subject to Syria, emphasizing that the safe-zone mechanism established in September 2019 was being conducted too slow (Phillips 2020:207). President Erdogan’s goal was to establish a safe-zone along 480 km of Turkish border that would reach 30 km into Syria to which up to two million Syrian refugees could eventually be settled (Reuters 01.10.2019).

For the USA, agreeing to the ‘safe zone’ was a way to protect the SDF, while addressing Turkish concerns as President Trump had already promised in 2018 to withdraw about 2,000 USA troops from Syria (Reuters 01.10.2019). Turkey followed its discourse that had been reiterated by its top officials that if Turkey could not find a common ground with the USA, it would have to “clear out the terrorist organization” themselves (Reuters 01.10.2019). Although Turkey insisted that the safe zone would protect them from “terrorists”, authors like Phillips argue that in reality, the SDF had not attacked Turkey at the time (2020:208). However, the YPG had bombed Turkey’s border amid counterattacks during the Afrin 2018 Turkey’s incursion and before, which they regard as self-defense.

As stated by an advisor who listened to the December 2019 phone call by the two leaders, President Trump had been a strong believer that Turkey could contain ISIS while protecting Eastern Syria from the Syrian regime (Phillips 2020:208). Convinced that Turkey would do that, President Trump promised President Erdogan to dismantle American observation posts and withdraw its troops (Phillips 2020:208). The exact number of the USA soldiers that Trump wanted to pull out from Syria remains unclear due to security reasons. However, according to Gunter (2020:79), Trump decided to

withdraw around 1,000 soldiers who were serving as advisers and “protectors” of the SDF.

Mixed messages coming from President Trump regarding domestic and foreign policy did not seem to surprise its allies towards the end of his term. However, Trump’s reasoning was believed to be miscalculated, and was seemingly meant to be appealing to his domestic public rather than reassuring the USA’s commitment to its international state and non-state partners. According to Trump, the Kurds and Turkey had “hated each other for many, many years” and it was time for the USA to “bring our soldiers home” (cited in Phillips 2020:208), despite his hope for working both with Turkey and the USA’s Kurdish allies back in 2016. As President Trump saw it, it was time for other actors in Syria, including the Kurds, Turkey, and Europe to “figure the situation” out and save the USA taxpayers’ money (Phillips 2020:208).

Although with constant President Trump’s withdrawal decisions, the SDF’s compulsion capacity may have been temporarily questioned, in long term, this did not affect the VNSA in a negative way as the USA high military and political officials had stood up for the SDF against the possibility of the USA ‘betraying’ its allies who had sacrificed their lives working on the ground against ISIS. Instead, with Trump’s actions, the VNSA further increased its compelling capacity by urging the USA military and high officials to react and the VNSA was able to portray itself as a “victim” of “injustice” instead.

The “historic betrayal” – the YPG almost losing its sustainability and impact

Just a day after Trump-Erdogan’s personal phone call in December 2019, the USA troops began to withdraw on 07 October 2019 from two SDF-controlled towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, paving the way for Turkish troops to enter, which left the Syrian Kurds refer to it as “a historic betrayal” (Al-Monitor 07.10.2019). Phillips (2020:211) argues that President Erdogan was quick to act before Trump got pressured to step back from his initial agreement to withdraw the USA’s troops from Northeast Syria. Three days after President Trump and Erdogan’s phone diplomacy, Turkey announced the Operation Peace Spring on 09 October 2019 which was to “prevent the creation of a terror corridor”, according to President Erdogan (Crisis Group 2019:2).

With the October 2019 military operation, Turkey's goal was to clear the YPG fighters from a strip of about 32 km wide and 440 km long, with the objectives of reaching border security, "neutralizing terrorists" and set up a "safe zone" for Syrian (Crisis Group 2019:2).

At the start of the operation, Turkey focused on the stretch of 140 km between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn - areas from which the YPG had earlier allegedly removed its main bases and fighters as part of the previous USA-Turkey agreement (Crisis Group 2019). As Turkey was advancing in Northeast Syria, the USA announced on 13 October 2019 that it would withdraw its troops from Northeastern Syria, leading to redeploy its troops away from front lines, that stood around 1000 at the time (Crisis Group 2019:3). Reportedly, President Trump ordered a contingent of around 50 troops to be pulled back from the border area amid a belief that a Turkish incursion was imminent (Starr and Browne 2019). Before that, as a confidence building measure with Turkey, the USA had convinced the YPG to destroy their defensive fortifications along the Turkish border and withdraw its fighters from the area (Starr and Browne 2019).

At first, President Trump defended his sudden decision of troop withdrawal, but emphasized that the USA did not support Turkey's military operation and made it clear that it was a "bad idea" (CNN 10.10.2019). However, Trump later increased his condemning discourse towards Turkey's military operation amid domestic and international criticism that was regarded as the USA betraying its allies who had lost more than thousands of soldiers in fight against ISIS as well as gave a bad message to the USA's future allies. Nevertheless, it shows the level of impact that the YPG and the SDF had on an international arena as the VNSA directly played a role in deteriorating relations between the two biggest powers in NATO.

In October 2019, President Trump claimed that the USA had no soldiers left in Syria and that the USA had won in the fight against ISIS (Dale *et.al.*2019). However, it was believed that at the time, the USA had about 1,000 soldiers in Syria, while they were pulled out from observation posts within Turkey's military operation area (Dale *et.al.*2019). Nevertheless, the same week that Trump ordered troop withdrawal from Syria, he declared that the USA would send about 2,000 troops to Saudi Arabia, confusing his withdrawal strategy and aims in Syria further (Phillips 2020:209).

According to Gunter and Yavuz (2020:88), President Trump's "green-lightning of Turkey's incursion into Syria" shows Turkey's geo-strategical importance to the USA's interests. It also shows that the USA still puts importance on state-to-state relations compared to VNSAs such as the YPG and the SDF despite fighting a common enemy. However, this changes from official to official and was especially acknowledged when Trump indicated in his speech, seemingly unaware of the situation on the ground and the growing USA military-YPG cooperation that the Kurds did not help the USA with the battle of Normandy in World War II (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:88).

Syria condemned Turkey's new military operation and saw it as an aggression, although some officials blamed the Syrian Kurds' over-dependence on the United States as the reason for Turkey's military operation (CNN 10.10.2019). However, Russia took a more modest position and stepped aside amid Turkey's operation as it did during Turkey's operation to Afrin in 2018. Nevertheless, Russian President Putin had asked President Erdogan to "carefully weigh the situation" and not to "harm the overall efforts to resolve" the crisis in Syria (CNN 10.10.2019). This shows that the decisions taken regarding Syria depended on personal relations and informal diplomatic channels rather than messages being conveyed through conventional diplomatic matters. In favorable countries such as Syria, Russia tends to emphasize the importance of unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while Russian standards are not the same in countries like Ukraine over annexation of the Crimea, for instance.

President Trump's changing discourse and sanctions

The events that followed as President Trump was put under pressure from his domestic constituents and Republican party members, eventually made President Trump to adjust his discourse and fix his statements already made about the troop withdrawal. This shows how seriously some of the USA's Congress members and high political and military officials took its VNSA ally working on the ground in Syria by referring to the explicit recognition and legitimacy that the superpower had given to the YPG and later, the SDF. The events that followed Trump's reversal discourse and threatening Turkey with more sanctions clearly shows the compelling and transformative capacity of the YPG and the SDF as a superpower reacted and was ready to change its policies for its

Kurdish allies in Syria – the level of attention that many small states are unable to reach when communicating with the USA.

Thus, on 06 October 2019, President Trump sent an unprecedented letter to President Erdogan that was widely criticized and made fun of, with Trump encouraging Erdogan to “work out a good deal” and stressing Erdogan not to be “a tough guy” and a “fool”...“Let’s work out a good deal! You don’t want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don’t want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy - and I will. I’ve already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson” (BBC 17.10.2019).

Moreover, Trump acknowledged the SDF’s role by saying that Mazloun Kobani was willing to negotiate with President Erdogan as well as make concessions “that they would never have made in the past”, enclosing a copy of Gen. Kobani’s letter (BBC 17.10.2019). The letter ended informally with Trump saying that “I’ll call you later”, violating all diplomatic protocols that angered President Erdogan (Phillips 2020:215). Therefore, President Erdogan handed the copy of the letter back to Trump when they later met in the White House on 14 November 2019, mocking Trump’s informally written initiative (Phillips 2020:215). Allegedly, President Erdogan had thrown the letter into the bin and started the military operation to Syria on the same day (BBC 17.10.2019).

As such, an official as high as the USA President had acknowledged and mentioned the SDF’s commander Mazloun Kobani as a legitimate partner for Turkey to address by aiming to change political and military behavior of NATO’s second biggest military towards a VNSA that Turkey considers as a terrorist organization linked to the PKK. Therefore, the YPG proved itself to be an influential VNSA with a high impact and high level of sustainability, despite the USA’s withdrawal from the area. The PYD/YPG and later, the SDF proved the ability to convince the superpower to have a second legal ally and pave the way for further VNSA’s legitimization on a global level. At the same time, the YPG proved to be sustainable despite ‘betrayal’ of a superpower and showed its flexibility and adaptation to step into talks with the Syrian regime and Russia instead.

Amid criticism of President Trump's decision to stand aside of Turkey's new military operation by also from its fellow Republican Congress members, Trump tried to ease the tension by reversing his decision and pressure Turkey to stop its military mission by threatening with further economic sanctions (Crisis Group 27.11.2019). Days after President Trump had announced the withdrawal of the USA troops from Syria, Trump was the one wanting to impose sanctions on Turkish government agencies and officials as a response to Turkey's military offensive into Syria - operation that Trump had himself given a green light to (Rappeport and Crowley 2019).

The sanctions were put on Turkey's Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, including the minister of defense, minister of energy and natural resources, as well as the minister of interior (Rappeport and Crowley 2019). However, it was argued that not only were the sanctions late to change Turkey's military operation's outcome but that the steel tariffs on Turkey would be risen to 50 percent from 25 percent which did not change much as the USA had previously imposed similar 50 percent steel tariff in 2018 amid Turkey's reluctance to release pastor Brunson after which the sanctions had been dropped (Rappeport and Crowley 2019).

Moreover, the USA Justice Department put charges against Turkish Halkbank for violating the USA sanctions and illegally transferring gold and cash to Iran (Phillips 2020:211). The USA Treasury stated that Trump's threat of sanctions were meant to persuade Turkey from actions that included "the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, targeting of civilian infrastructure, targeting of ethnic or religious minorities" (Starr and Browne 2019). This further confused what Trump's administration's goals and official position was as the decisions regarding the USA troop withdrawal and threatening Turkey if it intervened in Syria, were changing daily, often without the knowledge of the President's advisors or the USA troops that were present in Northeast Syria.

On 17 October 2019, the USA high officials, headed by Vice President Mike Pence visited President Erdogan in Ankara to persuade Turkey to stop its military operation for 120 hours to allow the YPG fighters to leave the area together with their heavy weapons (Crisis Group 2019:4). During the meeting, Mike Pence stressed that President Trump had communicated to President Erdogan that the USA administration wanted Turkey to stop its military "invasion, implement an immediate ceasefire and to

begin to negotiate with Kurdish forces in Syria to bring an end to the violence” (Phillips 2020:211). As such, the YPG again showed its impact as it was the direct reason that led the two biggest NATO countries to a negotiating table.

However, despite Trump administration calls that came too late after President Trump’s ‘damage’ had already been done, Turkey did not completely stop its military operation, other than for 120 hours in which the USA-Turkey agreed with the ceasefire. According to Phillips (2020:215), this agreement showed the USA’s “capitulation” and softness to Turkey’s demands and was a setback both for the USA as well as the Syrian Kurds. Turkey promised to end the operation if the YPG would fully withdraw while the USA promised not to impose any further sanctions to Turkey (Crisis Group 2019:4). After the meeting that was considered as successful, President Trump lifted sanctions on Turkey. However, several Members of the USA Congress and Trump’s party members alike, pressed ahead with the sanctions, including retaliation for Turkey going forward with buying S-400 missiles from Russia (Phillips 2020:216).

Nevertheless, the indirect ‘winner’ of this meeting was the PYD/YPG and the SDF who gained further acknowledgement and recognition from both powers. At this point, it did not matter much whether this recognition was positive or negative as the VNSA had reached to a level that many small states have not in its communication with the superpower. However, the YPG and the SDF were demonstrably vocal and made it clear how it saw the USA’s withdrawal, elaborated further below. However, the YPG and the SDF were diplomatic in order not to alienate the USA as it could not keep its autonomy without the superpower’s military and moral support.

Russia-Turkey agreement

Two hours before the 120 hours Turkey-USA brokered ceasefire ended, the situation amid the USA’s withdrawal took a turn when President Erdogan and President Putin reached an agreement of their own in Sochi (Crisis Group 2019:4). Furthermore, Turkey-Russia ceasefire agreement allowed Russian military police and President al-Assad’s border guards to remove the YPG fighters and their weapons from a zone that extended 30 km South from the Turkish-Syrian border within 150 hours (Crisis Group 2019:4).

However, the deal did not mention the SDF specifically, but only referred to the YPG. As such, it was unclear what would happen with the military and civil councils that operated under the SDF and its broader political wing, the SDC, nor did the agreement mention the future role of the SDF's internal security forces (Crisis Group 2019:5). Therefore, hiding under the umbrella of the SDF has proven to be beneficial for the YPG as well as its ability to maneuver between superpowers and think ahead in longer terms, compared to states – again, showing its adaptability and flexibility under the wider ARI's aspect of sustainability. The YPG and the SDF benefitted from the fact that it served as a bargaining chip between Turkey and the USA.

Interview results

According to whether President Trump's and President Erdogan's personal relations play a role in shaping the USA's withdrawal decisions and policies in Syria, most interviewees agreed that personal relations play a big role in this as both leaders are strong and charismatic. It was also pointed out that President Trump did not have much knowledge over what was happening in Syria and with regard to the Syrian Kurds. According to interviewee 1, President Trump has not been following traditional foreign policy of the USA. Personal relations play a big role, which has been driving the USA's foreign policy. President Erdogan has been smart and combined these two. Trump distanced himself from experts and has not been aware of foreign policy goals but rather stuck to personal relations (interviewee 1). Another interviewee argued that the relationship between Trump and Erdogan are of personal matter, not between the administrations. It is a narrow area of engagement. As such, Turkey-USA have no relations, but it is a personal relationship of Trump and Erdogan. "We lost all our allies in the USA as institutions - we lost Pentagon long ago"... "When the USA invaded Iraq, we gave them some wrong signals". This led to disillusionment on the USA and Pentagon's side. "In the early days of the Iraq invasion, the USA soldiers were frustrated by Turkey's response". CENTCOM had a big role in the Iraq issue. Thus, issues between the USA-Turkey relations did not start from the YPG-USA but the roots lie in the Iraqi operation (interviewee 4).

Trump has relations with leaders, not with countries. Trump prefers authoritarian leaders - Egyptian Sisi is his “favourite dictator”. Trump loves Putin and has criticized all NATO allies (interviewee 5). It was further stressed that personal relations play a role - President Trump likes leaders like President Erdogan. Trump wants to look like a “tough guy” - American environment does not allow to do this at home. Interviewee 11 argued that the USA sees Kurds as important elements. CIA was cooperating with Syrian opposition groups before but after 2014, the USA started to cooperate with Kurds as a different policy. Now, CIA, MFA and Pentagon cooperate together on this. Trump has been more emotional with Erdogan as he really intended to pull American troops out from Syria. There was pressure domestically, so he had to change his decision (interviewee 11). Another interviewee stressed that personal relations play a role, there may be something going on in private. Trump is also involved in Northern Korea, not just personal relations with Turkish leaders (interviewee 12).

Interviewee 13 criticized Trump, saying that does not know what he is talking about - “he does not have brains” (interviewee 13). Another interviewee agreed that Trump lacks depth in terms of knowledge (interviewee 14). The USA needs some relations with the SDF to fight ISIS. Turkey is a NATO ally, and this is a strategic relationship. The USA has chosen Turkey over the SDF. Turkey matters to the USA (interviewee 17). Obama agreed to arm the Kurds - this was done with no consultations with Turkey. There were promises made to Turkey that were impossible to meet. These promises should not have been made. Erdogan and Trump are similar - both are strong-headed, nationalistic, strong leaders (interviewee 19).

Furthermore, whether the USA ever had a “strategy” with regard to the Kurds in Northern Syria, interview participants were generally sceptical. It was argued that the USA’s ‘strategy’ in Syria is ambiguous - its starting and ending point is not clear. However, its end point is related to ISIS - if ISIS is destroyed, this could be end of the USA’s involvement. Another issue for the USA is to contain Iran and act towards lowering its influence in the region. YPG-USA is a short-term project compared to Iraqi Kurds (interviewee 1). “We made mistakes but would not expect the USA to make mistakes” (interviewee 4). Things now evolve around personal relationship between the two presidents - people look at what they think and think that this is the relationship

between Turkey-USA, we do not have this institutional relationship anymore. The decision-making process between Turkey-USA is not the one we know of. One phone call between Trump and Erdogan changed the course of things in Syria – the USA's sudden withdrawal. It was a big surprise for some officials. There is an “unacceptable emotionality” to this whole decision-making process. Military relations are also affected by this. Issue for Turkey is the PKK, there is no differentiation - PKK=YPG. However, Turkey needs to find a solution for this, otherwise there would never enjoy real peace within Turkey economically and socially - Turkey needs to find a solution (interviewee 4).

Another interviewee argued that there was no ground strategy for Syria, as the USA did not want to keep the issue in its orbit. However, there were multiple interests at stake, mainly the USA-Turkey relations and how to sustain it. The USA also did not want dramatic change in its policies (interviewee 7). The USA policy in Syria is stuck because of Turkey's attitude. Turkey was more flexible before and had contacts with PYD in 2014 but now they aim to destroy the Kurdish autonomy project. The USA wants to limit Iran in Syria; put pressure against Assad's government; balance Russia in Syria. Main winner of this war is Russia if Kurds are left alone (interviewee 11).

Another interviewee argued that there was no grand strategy. The USA was hesitant to go to Syria in the first place. If the USA would fight or not fight in Syria, they would always be accused either way (interviewee 12). The USA allowed the YPG to control the SDF and the USA says that they only support the SDF in fight against ISIS. However, Kobane was one of the pivotal points and this contributed to the “PR” for the PKK in terms of recruitment and framed the discourse against ISIS. It allowed the YPG to have a “sexy narrative” frame and be its propaganda outlet (interviewee 15).

Trump's policy in the USA is to counter Iranian influence, secure enduring defeat of ISIS and balance Russia. Trump has also said that their presence is not only about oil. If Biden would win, he would have a similar type of policy like Obama did - have a small presence in the region and prevent resurgence of ISIS (interviewee 17). There are differences within EUCOM and CENTCOM. CENTCOM does not care about Turkey. Trump just wants ISIS deported. Trump is unaware of the Kurdish problem. There was no policy in mind for Americans. There was no Kurdish strategic vision of

the YPG in their mind. YPG was fighting “pretty good” in Kobane. But the USA had nothing in mind, except the train and equip program. Cooperation with the YPG increased after Tel Abyat and Ras al Ayin but there were differences between the CENTCOM/Pentagon vs. State Department. The YPG gained “upper hand” as it gained new territory from ISIS. It was the issue of the YPG vs cadres of high and upper-mid level of PKK militants. PKK is dominated in the PYD (interviewee 20).

The adaptability of the PYD/YPG and the SDF - negotiations with the Syrian regime

The YPG quickly adopted to the changing conflict dynamics and looked for other allies due to the USA’s departure by coming to an agreement with Russia and the Syrian regime. Amid the USA’s troop withdrawal, a delegation from the YPG travelled to Russian airbase in Latakia and agreed with the Syrian regime that the latter would send its regime soldiers to the Turkey-Syrian border and defend the area from Turkey’s military operation (Crisis Group 27.11.2019). According to the Crisis Group report (2019:7), President al-Assad sent over 100 vehicles and 1,300 soldiers to border posts around Kobane and to other fronts where YPG was fighting Turkish-backed Syrian militias. The deal between the SDF and the Syrian regime was administered and brokered by Russia, giving both parties more power over the affairs amid the increasing crisis in Northeast Syria. However, some segments of the Syrian regime blamed the SDF and its relationship with the USA to be behind the instability in Northeast Syria, leading Turkey to react.

What both parties expected from this cooperation was unclear. For instance, the SDF wanted the Syrian regime’s soldiers to take up guarding positions on the Turkey-Syria border while the SDF continued to provide internal security and have control over local governments but the Syrian regime allegedly wanted the SDF to integrate into a Fifth Division which was a Russian-led military structure that had already some of Arab fighters (Phillips 2020:215). Moreover, as the Russian and regime forces moved to the PYD-governed areas, Phillips (2020:215) claimed that this was the end of the YPG and the SDF-USA relationship and where the USA left, Russian flag was hoisted instead.

The Syrian Kurds were angry at the USA's withdrawal and reportedly hit leaving military vehicles with rotten vegetables, unprecedented turn of events since the start of the YPG-USA cooperation since September 2014 over the Kobane siege.

Just like the USA has addressed the YPG-USA cooperation as the one of military focused, tactical, temporary and transactional; the YPG also addressed its cooperation with the Syrian regime as one being characterized by military means only and not focusing on deeper political differences (Crisis Group 27.11.2019). Crisis Group (2019:6) sees the YPG's role as a setback amid October 2019 events as it lost control over a 30 km border area from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn while being forced to withdraw to mostly Arab areas where the USA troops were present. Thus, throughout the period, the YPG received mixed messages from the Department of State and from the Department of Defense. By quickly being able to manage and while having somewhat neutral relations with the Syrian regime, the YPG was able to retain from total loss of territory and military defeat that it had been building up throughout the years. Despite the changing dynamics of the conflict and the VNSA losing its territory, the YPG and the SDF were still able to sustain its autonomy and recognition.

The Syrian regime has had mixed messages towards the PYD's Autonomous Administration throughout the years, depending on the regime's position and interests. For instance, at times, the Syrian regime has called the YPG and the SDF as terrorists while when it came to Turkey's military operations, it quickly accepted the PYD/YPG's offer and moved some of its forces to Syria-Turkey border that was previously administered by the YPG, although these changes were only seen as being cosmetic and did not affect military or political circumstances.

President Al-Assad has been hoping to have more control of the PYD-administered area once again and return state institutions while the PYD would like to reach an agreement with preserving its autonomous structures as well as keep its security forces in the area (Crisis Group 2019). For instance, al-Assad did not see the deployment of Syrian forces to the PYD-administered area as only military cooperation but for them, it was an indication of the presence of the Syrian state (Crisis Group 2019). Despite such negotiations, the PYD-governed areas, especially near Qamishli, have recently seen increased clashes and violence between the pro-regime forces and the SDF. This may

indicate that with the support of Iran and Russia, the Syrian regime is feeling confident to advance towards areas that the regime partly withdrew from in July 2012.

Sustainability – YPG and the SDF's adaptation to changing conflict dynamics

From the perspective of the YPG and the SDF, the Kurds were worried about the USA's sudden abandonment despite their ongoing fight against ISIS. At the time, General Mazloum Kobani had told in a meeting with the Deputy Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, William Roebuck, that he had been holding himself back “for two days from going to the press and saying that America abandoned us and that I would like you to get out of our areas now so that I can invite Russian and regime planes to take over this airspace. Either you stop this bombing on our people now or move aside so we can let in the Russians” (Starr and Browne 2019). Such strong statements from the YPG-dominated SDF shows the seriousness of Kurdish concerns and the immediate ability to change allies and maneuver between superpowers amid a crisis situation, showing that the SDF was able to react and adapt much more quickly than the superpower. This, again, indicates the sustainability and flexibility of the VNSA.

Eventually, Turkey was able to create a safe zone it was looking for, being 20 miles deep and 75 miles along Turkey-Syria border, between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:86). Gunter and Yavuz (2020:86) argue that this resulted in significant gains for Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime while the SDF lost important territory. Eventually, it led the YPG and the SDF to rely on the Syrian regime and Russia as the USA forces started to withdraw. This deeply angered the Syrian Kurds, leading the SDF officials to comment that “the United States asked us to dismantle our fortifications, block our tunnels, withdraw our heavy weapons and our forces as part of a safe zone agreement, and we did this because we were told it was the only way to keep the Turks out”...“Now they are being invited by America to come in,” calling for a general mobilization of all Kurds in Syria and be ready to defend their “homeland” (Al-Monitor 07.10.2019).

The YPG-dominated SDF showed the ability to pressure the world superpower to take action on the premises of defending the VNSA that seemingly worked. This is

phenomenal for a VNSA to do so as there are several small countries who try to contact the USA administration, let alone have direct talks with the administration and pressure them to take clear action or be upfront about their final decisions. The YPG's has also had ability within the Turkey-USA-YPG triangle to make the two NATO allies disagree over the USA's support to the YPG as well as put pressure on Turkey through sanctions - also an ability that many states have been unable to do through diplomatic means but this is done through 'shortcuts' when it comes to YPG, and later, SDF-USA relations while being in direct contact with top political and military leaders.

After President Trump's decision to withdraw the USA troops from Syria in October 2019, Mazloun Kobani openly showed his frustration and turned towards the Syrian regime to protect the Autonomous Administration's areas from Turkey's attacks and "its Syrian proxy mercenaries' potential genocide" (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:89). Furthermore, the SDF gave permission for al-Assad's forces to enter Manbij and Kobane to deter Turkish forces (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:89). However, this was largely demonstrative.

Despite disappointment at the time, and the SDF's invitation for Russia and Syrian regime's troops to enter Northeast Syria and be deployed along the Turkey-Syrian border, the SDF never decided to give up on cooperating with the USA military and secret deals continued behind the scenes, including the controversial oil deal with a seemingly private USA company. As such, although the Syrian Kurds had labelled the USA's withdrawal as "historic betrayal", they know that the Syrian Kurds would have less sustainability and acknowledgement without some level of support and cooperation with the world's superpower. Nevertheless, Trump's withdrawal decisions eventually led the USA Special Forces to hand over important territory to the Syrian regime and Russia and reduced the USA's visibility on ISIS' financial activities, according to the USA Treasury Department (Al-Monitor 01.02.2021). Therefore, the USA's sudden departure did more damage to their reputation both home and abroad while at the same time, encouraging ISIS' sleeper-cell activities.

President Trump spoke with the SDF's General Mazloun Kobani on the phone on 15 October 2019 in which Trump indicated that a small amount of the USA troops would remain close to Manbij near the Tishreen Dam to protect the SDF (Phillips

2020:213). This rhetoric later changed to the USA's presence as for protecting the oil into falling to the hands of ISIS and the regime. During the phone call, aside of briefing President Trump about the situation on the ground, General Kobani raised concerns about the safety in Kobane, asking President Trump "to raise that issue directly" with President Erdogan, which he did (Kurdistan 15.10.2019). As such, the YPG and the SDF as VNSAs dictated and set the agenda for NATO allies to discuss, with the superpower clearly lobbying for the VNSA.

The phone call between General Kobani and President Trump was conducted couple of days before the USA's high delegation was set to meet in Turkey for possible ceasefire in Northeast Syria, meaning that the SDF may have had first-hand briefing what the USA's plans and future decisions might be. Turkey widely condemned General Kobani's personal diplomacy with President Trump that reached the same level as Trump-Erdogan's phone call between the two NATO allies, despite being a violent non-state actor. For instance, Turkey criticized the USA's treatment of General Kobani to a same level, seen as a "legitimate political figure" and stressed that if Mazloun Kobani was invited to the USA, Turkey would ask his extradition (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:89). Although so far, none of the high PYD/YPG and the SDF figures received visas from the USA, some members of the Congress have started to lobby for the YPG and the SDF fighters to receive same treatment and be able to come to the USA for protection as contractors who previously worked with the USA military in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite occasional maneuvering between the big powers, the PYD/YPG and the SDF seem to rely less on the Russians and more on the United States as the latter has more to offer in terms of legitimacy, acknowledgement, and recognition while Russia is less interested in working with the SDF. Although the YPG and the SDF have continuously expressed their frustration over the USA troop withdrawal, they still consider the USA as its gateway for international arena and for possible favorable political outcomes to secure the sustainability of the VNSA. The SDF-USA cooperation has largely been characterized by secret deals and agreements and the SDF is trying not to openly comment on its cooperation with the superpower nor share any details regarding this. Most likely, this is done to keep its image as a reliable and trustworthy partner in a changing conflict environment that the superpower can count on.

Nevertheless, the SDF's commander Mazlum Kobane has stressed throughout the years that there is a need for the USA to increase its number of troops in the Kurdish areas: "The 400 figure is certainly insufficient for the coalition to fulfill its mission here. We told them so. I believe the Pentagon shares our view on this" (Rudaw 30.03.2019). Such statements also indicate the fact that the VNSA is able to dictate its military and political needs and expectations from a superpower and this has been possible through the YPG's lobby both in Northeast Syria and in the United States, yet doing this with diplomatic and in a way, non-demanding manner as to follow certain diplomatic rules and show the SDF's reliability. The SDF is well aware that the USA's military also needs them in fighting ISIS, especially as it has saved lives of the USA soldiers by fighting on the ground instead. Nevertheless, as the USA never had clear policy with regard to Syria and the SDF, the latter has relied more on promises of the USA military and its officials rather than Trump's administration whose decisions have been changing based on personal interests, rather than national interests in the region, making the SDF relationship more genuine with the USA military, but less so with Trump's administration changing discourse.

Moreover, Trump's administration seems to not have expected possible reactions from the SDF and the impact it carries. For instance, while the USA Treasury indicated that if Turkey undermined SDF's counterterrorism activities, it would be triggering more sanctions and that Turkey should not allow ISIS prisoners to escape the SDF-controlled prisons (CNN 13.10.2019). However, the SDF had been adaptable enough to make decisions considering its interests rather than rely and wait on the USA to broke deals with Turkey that may and may not happen, considering Trump's sudden discourse changes. Therefore, the SDF was quick to suspend its ISIS operations and move its fighters close to the Turkey border instead amid the USA's changing decisions, rather than wait around for the superpower. Furthermore, as Turkey's military operation in Syria was advancing, the SDF reported ISIS fighters and its affiliates fleeing the camps amid Turkey's offensive (CNN 13.10.2019). However, with regard to the YPG and the SDF's media propaganda, the information is not fully accurate and it is unclear how much did the YPG and the SDF themselves play a role in ISIS-affiliates fleeing from the SDF-controlled camps.

The SDF's demands and its compulsion capacity to maneuver around state-powers

After President Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw its troops and not initially oppose Turkey's military operation in Syria, the SDF's General Commander Mazloum Kobani told the Deputy Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, William Roebuck in October 2019 that the USA had given up on Syrian Kurds: "You are not willing to protect the people, but you do not want another force to come and protect us"..."You are leaving us to be slaughtered. You have sold us. This is immoral" (Starr and Browne 2019).

At the time, General Kobani was lobbying for the USA to either help stop Turkey's military operation or allow the SDF to make a deal with the Syrian regime and Russia in order to allow Russian warplanes to apply a no-fly zone over northeast Syria (Starr and Browne 2019). General Mazloum Abdi Kobani insisted in a meeting with the USA military officials that he needs "to know if you are capable of protecting my people, of stopping these bombs falling on us or not. I need to know, because if you're not, I need to make a deal with Russia and the regime now and invite their planes to protect this region" (Starr and Browne 2019). This clearly shows the tone that the VNSA believes is accurate to address a superpower and its level of impact and pressure it can address the USA with, considering itself as a legitimate party in the Syrian civil war to do so.

Nevertheless, the previous PYD's co-leader Salih Muslim have continuously said that the Kurds would "rather die honorably than allow" Turkey to take over their lands (Phillips 2020:214). Also, some of the YPG officials have indicated that the USA's allowance of Turkey's military operation "shook" trust between the Syrian Kurds and the USA, but that the Syrian Kurds "trust Russia even less. We would prefer to have a residual U.S. troop presence over having Russia control the airspace," being aware that Russia allowed Turkey to use the airspace over Afrin in January 2018, considering it as another "betrayal" by big powers (Crisis Group 2019:9).

As the YPG and the SDF-led Kurds showed willingness to work with the Syrian regime and Russia amid Turkey's military operation in October 2019, the SDF's General Abdi indicated that this was part of the "painful compromises to protect the Kurds from

Turkey's and its Syrian proxy mercenaries 'potential "genocide," while being open to work towards a federal system with the regime (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:89). Furthermore, after the SDF's agreement with President Al-Assad's regime and Russia, Syrian forces were allowed to enter Manbij and Kobane with the aim to stop Turkey from advancing further (Gunter and Yavuz 2020:89). Nevertheless, the VNSAs like the PYD/YPG and the SDF are aware that in non-binding relationships with states, there are no guarantees that these states would protect them amid changing nature of interests.

Gen. Kobani knows how to convince and get the YPG-dominated SDF's message across by maneuvering between different parties, depending on interests. According to the USA government readout in October 2019, General Kobane stressed after the troop withdrawal decision that the SDF respects the territorial integrity of Syria and wants to be part of the future of Syria's negotiation talks: "I do not want to keep my forces as they are now, they were created with the goal of defeating ISIS, but we want them to eventually come under Syrian state"(CNN 12.10.2019).

In a readout, Mazloun Kobani indicated that the SDF is ready to have talks and find an agreement with Turkey: "...we can address all of their concerns, we do not want autonomy, and we want to be part of the political process" (CNN 12.10.2019). As such, the YPG and the SDF have an ability to portray themselves as victimized party amid the civil war who are willing to talk with all parties concerned, including Turkey, despite the VNSA's direct links with the PKK. Moreover, according to the USA internal readouts, General Mazloun Kobane was furious of President Trump's unpredictability regarding withdrawing the USA troops from Syria: "You will not protect us and you won't let anyone else protect us. Your presence has turned everyone else in Syria against us. We partnered with you in good faith and this is what we get in return? I need to know if you are going to stand with us" (CNN 12.10.2019). However, such tone has also been part of the VNSA's public relations campaign as it has tried to victimize itself over the years.

However, despite occasional expressions of disappointment in President Trump's decisions, Gen. Kobani knew how to diplomatically maneuver and keep his respect among the USA high circles. After some time, Gen. Kobani emphasized the SDF's role in fight against ISIS and showed sympathy with President Trump's decision in October 2019 to withdraw of the USA troops from the region, stressing that the SDF guards

around 12,000 ISIS affiliated prisoners “and bear the burden of their radicalized wives and children. We also protect this part of Syria from Iranian militias. When the whole world failed to support us, the United States extended its hands. We shook hands and appreciated its generous support. At Washington’s request, we agreed to withdraw our heavy weapons from the border area with Turkey, destroy our defensive fortifications, and pull back our most seasoned fighters”...”President Donald Trump has been promising for a long time to withdraw U.S. troops. We understand and sympathize. Fathers want to see their children laughing on their laps, lovers want to hear the voices of their partners whispering to them, everyone wants to go back to their homes (The New York Times 13.10.2019).

While trying to be diplomatic and not demanding toward the USA as the YPG-USA relationship has been indicated as “temporary and tactical,” General Kobani has stressed that the SDF is “not asking for American soldiers to be in combat. We know that the United States is not the world police. But we do want the United States to acknowledge its important role in achieving a political solution for Syria. We are sure that Washington has sufficient leverage to mediate a sustainable peace between us and Turkey” (The New York Times 13.10.2019). On Turkey, Kobane has indicated that he is open to talk peace with Turkey without any pre-conditions and is open to mediate between Turkey and the PKK (Zaman 09.11.2020). Moreover, in an interview to the New York Times, Mazloun Kobani highlighted that the USA and the SDF were “comrades in arms - we are on the same front fighting ISIS” (The New York Times 12.05.2019). Therefore, Gen. Kobani tried to present himself as reserved and understanding towards the superpower, despite being disappointed of the USA withdrawal decisions.

Impact of the YPG and the SDF - backlash to President Trump’s decision

The criticism and backlash that followed President Trump and Erdogan’s personal phone-diplomacy was followed by domestic criticism to reverse of postpone his decision of October 2019 troop withdrawal. President Trump was sensitive to domestic criticism, especially coming from his own Republican’s party while caring less of what the USA’s international partners said, unless they had close personal relations with

President Trump like the French President Macron did who pressured Trump to postpone his decisions earlier. Moreover, it could be said that within the four years of Trump's administration, the October 2019 withdrawal decision was one of the most widely criticized issue, other than the Capitol Hill riots in Washington in 2021. Both of these issues brought both Democrats and Republicans to cooperate and denounce Trump's behavior and decision-making.

According to the Crisis Group (2019:10), the USA administration's unpredictable policies have undermined the USA's reputation as having political credibility and military protection over its partners. Moreover, Gunter and Yavuz (2020:79) claim that many of those who condemned Trump's withdrawal decision, argued that the USA had abandoned its Kurdish allies in Syria; alienated future allies who lost trust in the USA; allowed some ISIS prisoners to escape from the YPG and the SDF-controlled camps and possibly regroup; "rewarded Turkish aggression"; contributed to the survival of the Syrian regime; strengthened Iran's position in the Mediterranean by threatening Israel and empowered Russia to act further in Syria.

Most members of the President's own party were not happy with Trump's 'betrayal' of the USA's Kurdish allies who had been fighting ISIS since 2014 and saw this as weakening of the USA, reversing what the USA had gained in fighting ISIS and finding new allies in the future, as well as giving an upper hand to Russia, China and Iran (Browne 2019). For instance, the Republicans and Democrats both denounced and voted on the issue of Trump's withdrawal decision and Turkey's immediate halting of its military operation with the result in favor of 354 to 60, showing the impact of the VNSA in the USA's political circles (BBC 17.10.2019).

The Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell from the Republican's party also openly disagreed with Trump's decision, saying that the withdrawal from Syria would have "catastrophic outcome" for the USA's interest while demanding the need for the USA to take a leading role in Syria and in the Middle East (Phillips 2019:209).

Similarly, the House Republican Conference Chairwoman Liz Cheney, said that the decision to withdraw troops was a "catastrophic mistake that puts our gains against ISIS at risk and threatens America's national security"... "Pulling out of Northern Syria represents an abandonment of our Kurdish allies despite their vital contributions to the

fight against ISIS, emboldens Iran, and serves as an undeserved gift to the Erdogan regime” (Phillips 2019:210). Moreover, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, also strongly opposed Trump’s decision stating that “as we find ourselves in a situation where the President gave a green light to the Turks to bomb and effectively unleashed ISIS, we must have a stronger sanctions package than what the White House is suggesting” (@SpeakerPelosi, 14.10.2019). This, again, showed the differences between the USA institutions when it came to Syria’s policy reactions towards Turkey.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham was also a vocal critic of President Trump’s decision to withdraw troops from Syria in October 2019. However, during the early years of the YPG-USA cooperation, Graham had been very critical against the USA cooperation with the YPG, openly questioning the YPG’s links with the PKK, forcing the then Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to admit organic links between the two groups and acknowledge that the PKK was a terrorist organization, with Graham insisting during his visit to Turkey, he saw how upset Turkey had been with the “U.S. support for the terror group” (Miley and Yildiz 2019:61).

Furthermore, Lindsey Graham had said in 2014 that for Turkey, the USA-YPG cooperation was the “dumbest idea in the world”...“we are arming people inside of Syria who are aligned with a terrorist group..” (Miley and Yildiz 2019:61). Also, in 2017, Senator Lindsey Graham was questioning high officials in the intelligence circles “whether they were aware that cooperation with the YPG harms relations with Turkey” and whether the USA policy “to supply heavy weaponry to the Kurdish YPG” was contributing to growing tensions between Turkey and the YPG (Miley and Yildiz 2019:65).

By 2019, Graham’s discourse had changed, stressing that “...When it comes to dealing with Erdogan and protecting our Kurdish allies, the Trump Administration needs to up their game”...“We are witnessing ethnic cleansing in Syria by Turkey, the destruction of a reliable ally in the Kurds, and the reemergence of ISIS” (CNN 13.10.2019). Graham also recommended Turkey’s suspension from NATO, should Turkey attack the YPG and SDF while targeting retaliation if the USA’s troops were harmed by Turkey’s military operation, stating that he hoped Trump was “right in his belief that Turkey’s invasion of Syria is of no concern to us, abandoning the Kurds

won't come back to haunt us, ISIS won't reemerge, and Iran will not fill the vacuum" that Trump's withdrawal decision created (Phillips 2019:209). Moreover, Senator Graham believed that such decision would be "a disaster worse than President Obama's decision to leave Iraq" (Phillips 2019:209). This relates to aspects of influence and impact of the ARI framework as the USA high-level officials tried to protect and give further legitimacy and acknowledgement to the VNSA on the highest level possible within the USA's bureaucracy and by taking it to the level of the President.

Moreover, in 2019, Graham was a vocal opponent of Trump's withdrawal of USA troops in Northeast Syria, ahead of Turkey's offensive against the YPG and the SDF (Al-Monitor 04.11.2020). Also, in August 2020, Lindsey Graham spoke with the SDF commander Mazloun Kobane to confirm the recent oil deal between the SDF and a USA energy company and has been an advocate for the SDF being in charge of the deal as well as the oil fields in the region (Al-Monitor 04.11.2020). Graham has been called as a Kurds' Trump whisperer who allegedly advised SDF's General Mazloun Kobani how to approach President Trump, saying that Trump appreciates flattery comments (Zaman 25.10.2019).

Thus, Senator Graham has demonstrated the changing discourse from the top USA officials, before and after the YPG had won the "hearts and minds" of many. From the perspective of the SDF, since Graham started to ease up with his position towards the YPG-dominated SDF, the latter has openly thanked Graham, especially after his first visit to Manbij in 2016. The spokesperson for the SDF Kino Gabriel *tweeted* on 08 July 2018 that the SDF appreciates Graham's "message of friendship and for recognizing Manbij as a place of hope and our friendship with the United States" (@KinoGabriel1, Twitter). The PYD/YPG and the SDF as a VNSA have clearly demonstrated their level of communication and diplomatic skills, having largely been trained by the USA soldiers.

Internationally, most of the countries condemned the USA's green-lighting of Turkey's operation "Peace Spring". Bahrain and Egypt called for an emergency meeting of the Arab League while Saudi Arabia warned that the military operation could have negative consequences for the security in the Middle East (CNN 11.10.2019). Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and the UK also condemned the military operation (CNN

11.10.2019). France, Canada, and Germany imposed arms embargo for Turkey. Moreover, the European Union unanimously passed a resolution in order to stop selling weapons to Turkey (Phillips 2020:211).

All of this related to the level of impact in terms of how the whole region as well as the Western world have acknowledged and positively recognized the VNSA by offering their indirect support by condemning the USA's and Turkey's actions. However, none of these countries really contributed directly to support the VNSA militarily or politically as the YPG and later, SDF would have liked. Nevertheless, the moral support once again proved the YPG and the SDF's resilience and sustainability amid changing nature of conflict and alliances. The only party that was pleased with Trump's decision was Russia, who won the most out of the USA withdrawal decision. President Trump even commented that "if Russia wants to get involved with Syria, that's really up to them," while wishing Russia "a lot of luck" (Phillips 2020:211).

Compulsion capacity of the VNSA to ensure guarantees from the superpower – the oil deal

Amid the USA's withdrawal, the security roles in Northeast Syria were dominated by Turkish and Russian forces that the USA had been updating and coordinating with (AP News 2019). While the Department of Defense was reiterating that the USA-led mission's focus had always been fight against ISIS, for Trump, this was not the first aim, *tweeting* that the oil had been secured and the USA's "soldiers have left and are leaving Syria for other places" (AP News 2019). However, amid domestic criticism, President Trump announced that his administration was keeping a residual force in Northern Syria in order to protect the SDF controlled oilfields from reaching ISIS and the Syrian regime. By 25 October 2019, the Defense Secretary Mark Esper reiterated that the USA would send armored vehicles and combat troops into Eastern Syria to protect the oilfields (AP News 2019).

Since Trump's withdrawal decision, the amount of soldiers that were supposed to withdraw or stay in Syria was further confused by different statements between the USA institutions. Although initially, President Trump said that all the USA troops would

come home, he later specified that not all, but about 1000 troops in the North of Syria would return to the USA while around 200 troops would stay in South of Syria to guard the oilfields at the al-Tanf base (AP News 2019). Moreover, the Defense Secretary Esper commented at the time that the USA troops would stay in Syria not only to guard the oil against ISIS but also to deter against Russian and Syrian troops (BBC 21.10.2019).

Regarding the presence of the USA troops securing the oil fields in Northeast Syria, the Crisis Group (2019:7) argues that the USA's presence by the oil fields in Deir al-Zour and al-Hasaka up to the Semalka border crossing with Iraq is important for the USA to keep a land supply open through the Semalka-Faysh Khabour border crossing for transporting its supplies to Northern Iraq (Crisis Group 2019:7). Thus, the YPG was able to guarantee that the USA would be staying close to these oil fields. Therefore, for the USA, control of this crossing ensures a continuous supply from the USA military bases in Iraq, while for the YPG, Northern Iraq is a gateway to the outside world as well as source for humanitarian and stabilization aid from the international community (Crisis Group 2019:7). Furthermore, keeping the Iraqi-Syria border open allows the YPG to ensure power over 200,000 Syrians working for the PYD/YPG-administered civil and military forces as many of these Kurds and Arabs depend on the PYD/YPG and the SDF for their salaries as they work in the SDF-controlled area (Crisis Group 2019:7).

The SDF started gaining control of important oil fields in North-East Syria from ISIS in 2017 and have tried to repair the damage done to the oil wells ever since (BBC 21.11.2019). Currently, the SDF controls around 70% of Syria's oil resources as well as some of the gas facilities (BBC 21.11.2019). This has given the YPG-dominated SDF confidence that they may pursue the regime into favorable talks because of the oil control and the deteriorating economic conditions that the Syrian regime is facing. However, the Crisis Group (2019:7) argues that controlling the oil fields was the main cause for the YPG to join the fight against ISIS in Deir al-Zour in 2017 while at the time, Syrian regime forces were very close to these fields and the USA's goal was to make sure that the control went to the YPG instead. Although the PYD/YPG and the SDF were not pleased with the withdrawal, they were also not too vocal as the VNSA needed the USA's support for being able to guard the oil fields.

The YPG and the SDF aims to have some sort of cooperation with the Syrian regime to “coexist” and jointly administer Northern Syria together (Crisis Group 2019:8). The YPG seem to think that their access to the oil resources would allow state employees to return to their jobs at oil refineries in exchange for regime to ease its views towards the YPG and the SDF (Crisis Group 2019:9). Such arrangements have previously proven beneficial for the PYD/YPG over the Taqba dam. Therefore, the USA military’s presence has been strengthening the PYD/YPG and the SDF’s civil and military capabilities as well as consolidating its position in future negotiations with the Syrian regime, despite occasional clashes with pro-regime forces (Crisis Group 2019:9).

In early 2020, a deal was reached between the SDF and the USA Delta Crescent Energy company. The company signed the deal with the SDF in order to exploit the oil deposits as well as refine and use some of the oil in Syria but also export it through Northern Iraq and Turkey. However, it was a previously unknown company that was reportedly founded only in February 2019, a year before the actual signing of the agreement (Politico 2020). The company was allegedly politically connected to the previous USA military and diplomatic officials, prompting the Syrian regime to accuse USA of “stealing” Syria’s oil while having been in secret talks with the Syrian Kurds for over a year (Politico 2020).

Although the SDF has refused to comment on and has refrained from sharing any details about the oil deal, it has kept its legitimacy as being a reliable and secure partner that the USA can trust. Moreover, the deal may indicate that considering Trump’s uncalculated political moves, some of the USA political and military officials were secretly trying to secure some guarantees for the SDF, in case a withdrawal scenario would happen in order not to completely ‘betray’ its Kurdish allies. The need to have some guarantees for the SDF was also stressed by the then USA national security adviser John Bolton already in January 2019 who had condemned Trump’s December 2018 troop withdrawal plan, saying that the USA would not leave Syria without receiving guarantees that Turkey would not attack the YPG (The Guardian 08.01.2019).

Allegedly, the Department of Defense and State Department had been working to “enable” the SDF to “harness” the oil while its revenue could help the Syrian Kurds reduce worsening humanitarian situation as well as help managing the SDF-controlled

refugee camps (Politico 2020). According to one of the founders of the company, the previous USA Ambassador to Denmark, James P. Cain, the company had been also talking to the State Department who green-lighted its activities on the premises of “modernizing” the oil and not being in contradiction with the USA laws (Politico 2020). Officially, the State Department has commented that the “Syrian oil is for the Syrian people” and that the USA remains “committed to the unity and territorial integrity of Syria” while people in ISIS liberated areas are free to decide their own matters on local governance, including what concerns the oil (Politico 2020).

Reportedly, the Delta Crescent company was originally founded by a former member of the USA Delta Force who had had close relations with the SDF’s leadership and the company was given a license for operating from the U.S. Treasury in April 2020, despite the USA’s policy of economic sanctions to Syria’s oil sector (Middle East Monitor 2021). This may have been due to the fact that the founders of the company had previously donated to some of the Republican Party members (Middle East Monitor 2021).

However, it is still unclear who fully profits or controls Northeast Syria’s oil fields as the SDF has been known to have sold the oil for local smugglers who transport it to Iraqi Kurdistan and to the Syrian regime. Moreover, this has led to the development of some contracts to Russian companies who work closely with the regime (Middle East Monitor 2021). However, according to the Delta Crescent company, it is selling the oil directly to the international market with market prices while the revenues would go to the SDF rebuild ISIS-torn areas. However, it is unclear how much the company itself is profiting from the oil deal and whether that was really the aim for the USA officials at the time. Nevertheless, the USA had secretly been working towards certain guarantees and contributing to the VNSAs sustainability.

The newly elected Biden-administration seem to have brought somewhat clarity in what are the aims of the USA’s policy in Syria. Early 2021, President Biden's administration stressed that the USA troops are in Syria only as part of a wider campaign of fight against ISIS and not to protect the oil fields (Kurdistan 10.02.2021). This was different to the discourse of Donald Trump who had continuously indicated that ISIS had been defeated. According to the Department of Defense spokesperson John Kirby,

the USA troops “are not authorized to provide assistance to any other private company, including its employees or agents, seeking to develop oil resources in Syria,” with the exception of when the USA troops act in order to protect civilians (Middle East Eye 09.02.2021).

According to the Pentagon, the USA troops are not involved with the Delta Crescent oil company and are focusing on fight against ISIS instead. However, the previous Trump administration's National Security Council Advisor John Bolton has admitted that the argument about the USA remaining in Syria while protecting the oil fields was not the real reason for the continuing USA's military presence and was rather made up by President Trump's advisors (Kurdistan 10.02.2021). Moreover, another spokesperson for Pentagon, Jessica McNulty, reiterated a day after John Kirby had said that the USA is only focusing on fight against ISIS that it is the primary job of the SDF, to secure critical petroleum infrastructure and deny ISIS access to such resources, stressing that the USA has only a supportive role in this (Rudaw 10.02.2021). Although it is yet to be seen whether there would be any major changes towards the USA's Syria policy during President Joe Biden's administration, cooperating with the SDF in “counter-terrorism” operations against ISIS seems to currently be a priority for the administration that is more predictable than the previous administration.

Other than the USA officials assuring that the VNSA would have some kind of guarantees to sustain itself, recently, two USA Representatives brought the Syrian Partner Protection Act as an issue to debate on, calling on Congress to restore it (North Press Agency 29.04). The act includes a project that suggests extending granting visas and special immigration papers to some Syrians and their families, i.e. the Syrian Kurds (North Press Agency 29.04). Moreover, the two representatives defended the proposal by saying that the Syrian Kurds had played a „pivotal role in helping the US defeat the ISIS Caliphate and have been an instrumental partner in the region“...“Our Kurdish allies have put their lives on the line and risked retaliation to help advance U.S. interests and fight our enemies. They deserve our gratitude for their assistance...” (North Press Agency 29.04).

As such, this treatment from a superpower would result on further positive recognition as well as legitimizing the „sacrifices“ of the YPG and the SDF's soldiers

who have been cooperating and developing their relations with the USA since 2014. Thus, the YPG and the SDF as VNSAs have been put on a same level as Iraqis and Afghans who were given this type of visas by the State Department on the ground that people who used to work as translators or advisers, their lives had been threatened by working for the U.S. forces (North Press Agency 29.04). According to the USA State Department, the Partner Protection Act granted visas to about 89,000 Iraqis and Afghans who had worked with the USA over the years (North Press Agency 29.04).

This shows the impact, compulsion capacity and influence that the VNSA has had over the superpower as high officials have been lobbying for the VNSA in the highest USA's bureaucratic institutions. Contrary to Aydinli's (2015, 2016) argument that VNSAs and states do not generally get into a legally binding relationship, the Syrian Partner Protection Act would grant legal status for people who have worked closely with the USA army.

The SDF controlled ISIS-affiliated refugee camps – explicit recognition

With regard to how the PYD/YPG and the SDF are managing ISIS-affiliated refugee camps, states have granted the former with explicit recognition as they regard the YPG and the SDF better managing and setting rules in doing so (Aydinli 2015:437). As such, many states, including France, Germany, Finland, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the UK have been in direct talks with the 'autonomous administration' and recognized them as a legitimate party in doing so, increasing the VNSA's influence further.

As ISIS was losing control of its previously held territory, the question arose over what to do with foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) and their affiliates, including women and children, who the YPG and the SDF had captured over the years and who were living in the SDF-controlled refugee camps. At the same time, this led to thousands of ISIS-affiliated women and children stuck in a limbo with some states choosing to take their citizens back case by case while others have refused to do so, fearing radicalization and terrorist attacks at home. This has led countries like the UK chosen to take away the affiliates' citizenships instead. Although Western states have their own interests in not taking back their citizens, other than women and children, they nevertheless see the SDF as a VNSA suitable for managing this process instead – giving them financial or moral

support which has reached to the level of the USA President Trump and the French President Macron.

According to the UNICEF, there are about 70,000 people who live in the SDF-controlled al-Hol camp in the Northeast of Syria and more than 90% of them are women and children (Euronews 2019). For instance, the SDF has been acknowledged to a level that it has signed an agreement with the United Nations (UN) for an action plan to restrict the recruitment of children under the age of 18 in their forces (Kurdistan 24, 01.07.2019). Moreover, according to the UN figures, around 65,406 people lived in the al-Hol camp in July 2020 (Van Wilgenburg 19.01.2021).

In February 2021, the United Nations urged the 57 countries whose citizens are in the Al-Hol camp to repatriate its citizens as the security and humanitarian situation in the SDF-controlled camps were deteriorating (Rudaw 09.02.2021). Furthermore, there have been increasing numbers of murders being reported in the camp over the past months. On 31 January 2021, the official account of the SDF, the Coordination & Military Ops Center - SDF (@cmoc_sdf, Twitter) stressed that “the #International_Community must act in accordance with the @UN Statement which calls for the repatriation of foreign #ISIS children”, thus addressing the international community and demanding action from states as a violent non-state actor. Thus, the UN gave further legitimacy and international attention to the VNSA in managing these camps, further proving their high influence and impact on an international environment.

Moreover, on 14 May 2021, the OIR Spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto shared the SDF’s *tweet* that again urged the international community to “assist in forming an international tribunal to try members of Daesh,” with the mission *tweeting* that the International Coalition “supports the efforts with the international backing of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Daesh to seek justice and recognition on behalf of all people affected by the war crimes and evil of Daesh” (@OIRSpox, Twitter 14.05.2021). This shows the level of impact, influence and direct explicit recognition that the international community, including the UN and the world superpower keeps providing to the PYD/YPG and SDF, seeing the VNSA as capable and only legitimate actor who manages and needs help in assisting with the ISIS-affiliated refugee camps.

The YPG and the SDF had been quick to adapt and use the situation that emerged after ISIS's defeat to their benefit. Although the USA itself does not have a big amount of FTFs in Syria and Iraq, President Trump has been a vocal advocate of telling European countries and the Coalition Against ISIS members to take their nationals back from the SDF-controlled areas. The YPG and the SDF tried to use ISIS' camps as leverage over Western countries by cooperating directly with the states on the issue. Countries like France, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Finland, the UK and Germany have been in direct talks with the Autonomous Administration and repatriating their citizens from these camps. However, very few countries have actually done so, with the exception of women and children. Nevertheless, several countries like Germany have financially supported the SDF in managing these refugee camps.

The YPG and later, the SDF have been confident enough to pressure the international community to take back their citizens, threatening to release these fighters and their affiliates due to lack of space in the SDF-managed prisons. Most countries have been reluctant to take ISIS affiliates back, especially without sufficient battlefield evidence, as these affiliates are hard to prosecute at their home countries. Moreover, the SDF has called "on the international community to establish a special international tribunal in northeast Syria to prosecute terrorists" in where "trials can be conducted fairly and in accordance with international law and human rights covenants and charters" (Aljazeera 25.03.2019). According to some of the SDF officials, this would be a better solution because ISIS fighters generally get a shorter prison sentence in their home countries due to lack of evidence to prosecute them (Kurdistan 24, 10.07.2019).

Some of the Autonomous Administration's officials, including from the SDF's political party, the SDC, visited European countries in February 2020 for lobbying for the issue but did not gain support for the establishment of such legal body (Kurdistan 24, 13.01.2021). Thus, the SDF has been trying to appeal to the international community by acting as a reliable partner, similar to states. Amid the ambiguous USA's withdrawal decisions since 2018, the SDF's commander Mazloun Kobani had warned the USA officials about the possibility of ISIS's detainees escaping and destroying the stability that had been achieved previously (Phillips 2020:214). For Donald Trump, this was a problem for Turkey and other Global Coalition countries to take care of the issue,

stressing that if ISIS fighters escaped, they would be escaping to Europe instead (Phillips 2020:214). Nevertheless, it is feared that in couple of years there could be a possibility to see a new type of terrorist organization that could emerge from radicalized ISIS' children held in the SDF-controlled camps.

Amid Turkey's military operation in October 2019, the YPG and the SDF accused Turkey of bombing the area close to the camps which led to some ISIS prisoners to escape. However, Turkey has neglected this and has said that the YPG and the SDF have freed ISIS prisoners on purpose in order to victimize themselves and get more international attention. Moreover, Turkey's military operations to Afrin in January 2018 and a third one in October 2019, led the SDF to restructure their forces and announcing that guarding ISIS prisoners and detainees was a "second priority" for the VNSA, leading the YPG-dominated SDF to re-organize its forces from other parts of Syria and transferring them to Afrin (Phillips 2020:214).

On the other hand, it is known that the SDF have been releasing and returning some of Syrian ISIS' affiliated families from the camps in order to have better relations with the local Arab population and tribes within the SDF-governed areas. However, the SDF has urged the international community to take action while on the other, releasing prisoners for the sake of own interests, leaving the radicalization issue to a never-ending circle. The SDF *tweeted* on 29 January 2021 that "With the ascending of crimes in #Al-Hol camp, around 70 families from #Minbij, returned from the camp they stay in, to continue and implement #SDF initiative to return families that want to get out from Al-Hol camp to their houses in all #NE_Syria areas" (@cmoc_sdf 2021). Overall, around 6,500 Syrians have left the camp as part of new reforms (Van Wilgenburg 19.01.2021).

According to Mazloum Kobani, the SDF has had "good relations with the tribes everywhere, and we wish to make them even better"... "we freed some 600 IS militants who are members of local tribes who were established as not having blood on their hands. We also freed some families. But of course we took maximum security measures. We investigated every detail of their past. We are constantly exchanging information with the coalition forces on these issues. We plan to free more such people over time" (Zaman 09.11.2020). This has eased the tensions within the Arab-populated areas and further contributed to PYD/YPG and the SDF's sustainability.

Nevertheless, the USA military and high officials have praised the SDF for their services in fight against ISIS while urging countries to release burden on the YPG and the SDF in administering these camps. According to the previous presidential envoy for the Global Coalition, Brett McGurk, the SDF had done the world a great service in destroying ISIS while it now needs the international community to help what to do with these captured fighters and their families, stressing that this was “really an international problem” (Rudaw 03.04.2019). Such discourse indicates how good personal relations with high officials and the YPG and the SDF’s lobby can lead to the VNSAs higher impact, positive recognition, explicit legitimacy and influence on an international level, according to the ARI framework.

Interview results with regard to ISIS refugees used as a leverage for the VNSA

With regard to ISIS affiliated camps under the control of the SDF, it has started to use its camps under control as a sort of leverage internationally, despite most interviewees for this thesis not agreeing with the word “leverage.” For instance, it was argued that ISIS fighters are not really a problem - backbone of ISIS was broken long ago. Therefore, they are not considered as a leverage (interviewee 4). It was also stated that PYD is represented all over Europe where laws are much more relaxed. PYD has good relations in Europe, especially with the French. They have leverage now over ISIS fighters. For instance, the French do not want their people to radicalize (interviewee 5). There is 100 percent no leverage with regard to ISIS because what assistance do they get? SDF is left alone to deal with ISIS refugees. YPG is not using ISIS as a leverage, despite mentioned in the media, but this is a concern to countries like France and the UK because of radicalization threat. It makes sense for the SDF to ask support from European countries but this is not clear leverage (interviewee 10).

Some participants also argued that having control of ISIS-affiliated refugee camps was a leverage for the YPG and the SDF - Yes, there is a leverage. There is no alternative way - YPG is the only reliable force to fight ISIS. ISIS threat is real (interviewee 11). “Leverage” in this sense is not portrayed in a negative way. It is something that other countries should be grateful of. Kurds do not want to destroy

relations with European countries - YPG needs this cooperation. ISIS is a security threat for everyone. No one wants to take these people back (interviewee 12).

Another interviewee argued that whatever SDF can deliver and want in return, everything can be a leverage (interviewee 14). SDC has the authority within the “administration”. PYD is just one party in TEV DEM. There are other pro-autonomy forces there. PYD is “not the same as PKK”. HDP is also not same as PKK. Abdullah Öcalan is now controlled by the MIT and Öcalan cooperates because he wants his conditions in prison to be better. As such, there is no leverage for SDF. SDF has been in talks with the European countries for 1-2 years. They cannot change these countries to take back prisoners or have economic sources to provide food and medicine to ISIS FTFs. They also need to care for their own people. The SDF handed some women and children to Russians. However, this is not only the SDF’s problem. They did not make any “blackmailing” to Europe (interviewee 16). Another interviewee pointed out that the SDF cannot do anything with ISIS FTFs because they do not have relations with states (interviewee 17). There is leverage but this is not their interest. YPG needs America (interviewee 19).

Interview results of the YPG-USA relationship

In terms of what type of a relationship does the USA and the YPG have, the interviewees generally thought that this relationship is tactical and emerged out of interest at the time, not a strategic relationship. It is often been referred to as interest-based, “marriage of convenience.” According to interviewee 1, it’s all of it together and can be one or the other, depending on circumstances. It can move from one category to the next. There has been a relationship between the Kurds and the USA for decades, it is not specifically YPG-USA relations that we are talking about but we should look at a broader picture, especially the Iraqi case since 1991. There are expectations from the Kurdish side for a reciprocal relationship and support for autonomy. The USA has also put expectations for YPG - that is - fight against the terrorist organization ISIS. Hence, we are talking about a “give-take” issue (interviewee 1).

Another interviewee thought that this is not a proxy relationship, but rather a pragmatic one with mutual interests and mutual benefits. It is based on self-interest.

Syria is not in line of Turkish interests, but only Russia's interest. YPG has moved pragmatically and are flexible (interviewee 2). Interviewee 3 indicated that the YPG is not a proxy of USA, it is an interest-based alliance with the big power USA who needed someone to fight on the ground. USA just “went with the flow”. It was Obama’s policy at the time - USA was more focusing on China instead. When ISIS emerged, the USA “was forced to act” (interviewee 3).

Another interviewee stressed that “YPG is basically PKK”. That is why Turkey is strongly against the YPG-USA relationship. The USA made a big mistake siding with them. It is one of the biggest mistakes of recent decades starting from the Iraqi operation - it all started there. The YPG has a sort of leverage for the USA to sustain itself in the region - this has had a negative effect to Turkey-USA relations and it seems to continue. YPG is one the most important issues, but not the only issue in Turkey-USA relationship. However, it is a sensitive issue - it is hard to understand the USA’s position (interviewee 4). PYD/YPG is a “low level alliance” - more related to a military, not a diplomatic side. It is localized, related to “self-interest”, about defeating ISIS. (interviewee 5). Interviewee 7 indicated that the type of relationship depends on how one defines the nature of a proxy. According to the interviewee, the YPG was not created by USA. PYD was created in 2003 and took over areas in Northern Syria when the regime withdrew. Thus, it is not a proxy in this sense. Relations with PYD are not strategic but it is an ongoing process (interviewee 7). It is a relation of “convenience” as USA took what was available at that time - it was not initially their plan. It is a temporary relationship - a “forced marriage” (interviewee 8).

According to interviewee 9, it is a complicated tactical and a short-term relationship. We have to put YPG to a regional context. The USA was initially not looking to work with the YPG but reality was different. The Kurds were also not specifically looking to work with the USA. There is a rhetoric that the YPG is leftist and anti-imperialist, Marxist. USA is not fond of Marxism but the USA had to make a decision how to fight ISIS. However, “flirtation” between USA and the YPG started late 2014 and it was supposed to be short-term but this evolved into something bigger. The USA can’t leave Syria - it is an important region one way or another. This alliance has even survived Donald Trump. This has shown that the USA-YPG relationship has not

only been tactical. Currently, the support has gone beyond just seeing Kurds as good fighters. Nevertheless, YPG does not have “any money to lobby anything but Turkey has spent millions” on this. However, the YPG has tried to establish itself in Washington with the funds they have (interviewee 9). “This is not a proxy relationship” - YPG did not accept to be as a proxy. This relationship was a “necessity” against a common enemy - ISIS. The USA did not have anyone fighting on the ground. It is not a permanent and not a strategic partnership. YPG had to also make certain alliances with Arabs, some of them transferred to SDF. Thus, the relationship between the USA and the YPG is a “matter of convenience” (interviewee 10).

According to interviewee 11, there was no clear strategy for Syria and Kurds other than cooperating against ISIS. There is no strategic relation between the USA and the YPG but NATO-Turkey-USA relations are strategic. Syrian Kurds and the USA have a cooperative relationship (interviewee 11). It is a transactional, conjunctural relationship between the government of USA and the *Rojava* people. With the USA soldiers, this is a tactical relationship - Kurds have their own agenda (interviewee 13). It is a pragmatic relationship that emerged out of necessity and grew over time. Essentially, it is a proxy relationship. But over time, the degree of relationship value increased. YPG was a reliable proxy on the ground as USA wanted to have no boots on the ground itself - this was the main factor. Obama initially planned to withdraw troops from Iraq and reduce involvement but then in 2014, *Daesh* came. Fall of Mosul changed the entire calculus (interviewee 14). It is all related - YPG was active much before. It had good relations with Assad even before 2011, Kurds were prisoned a lot. In March 2011, Assad released thousands of Kurdish prisoners. “PYD then manipulated the vacuum of politics”. Overall, YPG-USA have a tactical relationship - it is a “marriage of convenience”, not a proxy relationship because YPG. The USA vision at the time was not strategic (interviewee 15).

For the USA, this was not strategical - it is a tactical relationship, focusing on defeating *Daesh*. The USA does not give any political support to *Rojava*. The USA relations with the military wing is much stronger than political wing. It is not a strategic relationship but also not proxy. They have some common interests - fighting ISIS. The USA also has another interest - not let Iranians make transit to control these areas, YPG

is helping the USA in reaching this. The YPG wants the USA forces to stay. PYD/YPG is open for foreign investments. They do not think of nationalization of private companies (interviewee 16).

Another interviewee argued that there is no relationship per say for the USA. The USA says also that YPG is a terrorist organization. There is no relationship with the YPG but only with “the element of the SDF”. Therefore, it is a mutually beneficial relation - it is only tactical, not strategic (interviewee 17). It is a tactical, temporary, transactional relationship. At the time, the USA tried to find ways to fight ISIS. However, “Syria is a sovereign state” - there is “no right to carve out another state”. There is a “lack of full context of what they are”. Some see the YPG as “heroes” but YPG is the same as the PKK. The USA is just doing counter-terrorism in Northern Syria. Therefore, “you adopt politics of your local partner”. There is “no political commitment” but have to maintain this support (interviewee 18). There are no formal relations. They are only military and technical relations. The USA has no desire to see Syrian Kurdish state created in Syria (interviewee 19). It is a tactical, operational cooperation. USA is much more predictable now (interviewee 20). It is a proxy issue of limited liability to reduce the cost of war. Obama needed a ground force not to have same mistakes as in Iraq (interviewee 21). Overall, interviewees agree that it is a tactical relationship that emerged out of necessity in fight against ISIS. However, they disagree whether the YPG is a proxy of the USA or not.

CONCLUSION AND ANALYSIS

According to Hoffmann (1998:4 cited in Aydinli 2015:437), VNSAs are generally seen as being a weaker actor in conflicts with states, and as such, it is natural for them to use terror as a “weapon of the weak”. However, in case of the YPG and the SDF, the VNSAs tried to do everything possible in order to receive “positive recognition” from states, by proving itself a necessary actor to fight a common enemy with states – ISIS. Thus, the only “terror” it used, was rather a “weapon of the strong”, by using it against a worse terrorist organization and thus, making the image of the YPG and the SDF better both in the eyes of international actors and domestic constituencies alike.

While benefitting from the Syrian regime’s attention that was on fighting the Syrian opposition at the time, the PYD/YPG managed to secure its governance in the enclaves of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin already by 2013, which served as a base for its future territorial and political success as since the beginning, the PYD-controlled areas operated in parallel with the Syrian regime’s monetary and infrastructural support. It could be said that such developments have helped to increase the VNSA’s autonomy over time as a system existing together with the Syrian regime was already put in place before the VNSA got ‘autonomous’.

Moreover, the PYD has been successful in managing and developing its local and international network while at the same time, this has been conflictual when it comes to military cooperation on a local level (Ögür and Baykal 2018:44). The PYD/YPG’s trans-border links have provided them with important advantages over its rival parties that has also contributed to the PYD’s success (Tezcür and Yildiz 2019:1). Although this has been done at the time of constantly changing conflict environment, the YPG has managed to keep relations with international powers such as the USA, Russia, and the Syrian regime, adapting to the changing nature of dynamics while securing recognition on an international level.

Autonomy in practice

Recently, the PYD has kept a somewhat low profile compared to the YPG and the SDF in the media as it has tried to give representation and influence to the SDF's political wing, the SDC instead. Both groups are now considered to be official military and political wings of the *Autonomous Administration*. Kurdish expert Michael Gunter predicted in 2014 that as Syria was drawn into the civil war, the longer this would take, the more likely it is that the Kurdish autonomy would become regularized and institutionalized (Gunter 2014:100). In 2021, it could be said that this has been accurate as the PYD/YPG have fought against all odds, including the opposition from the neighboring Turkey which has proven the sustainability and increasing autonomy of the VNSA, despite not having been able to survive without the superpower's military support and training as well as without the territory from the Syrian state.

Many Kurds and rival parties of the PYD are opposing the VNSA's governing style which lacks a multi-party system in practice, despite the PYD's emphasis on democratic values. Moreover, the PYD has a history of taking political prisoners and recruiting child soldiers - accusations that they have recently started to address by signing treaties with the United Nations against child soldier recruitment as well as being newly involved in efforts to establish the Kurdish unity talks with the rival umbrella organization the KNC. Thousands of Kurds have fled Syria to avoid the YPG's forced conscription, while there have been accusations that the PYD's internal police, the *Asayish* have prevented potential conscripts to leave the PYD-governed area (Federici 2015:86).

The PYD/YPG's spectrum of autonomy with regards to the ARI framework has varied throughout the years and changed based on cooperation with other countries, i.e. the superpower USA. For instance, before and at the start of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian regime held influence over the PYD and its military wing, the YPG as the latter had acted in clandestine for several years. Moreover, when the PYD took control of areas in Northern Syria as the Syrian regime was busy fighting the opposition groups and was focused on other areas, the PYD still operated in parallel with the Syrian regime as the latter controlled and operated most of the institutions, paying salaries for people in

the area at the time. However, influence of the Syrian regime over the VNSA gradually decreased as the PYD/YPG became more autonomous in its actions and by 2021, the VNSA controls about 50-70 percent of Syria's oil resources, making them not financially linked to the regime, other than for selling oil and acting in parallel on the same territory. Nevertheless, the PYD/YPG could not have operated without the „permission“ or parallel structures from the Syrian regime and thus, the territory of the state.

However, it could be said that although the PYD and its „Autonomous Administration“ as well as its different structures have wanted to be seen as operating along the lines of state-like structures throughout the years, it has not fought against any state norms, in particular. Despite the PYD advocating for communal structures, it still adheres and follows state norms while it tries to emphasize democracy and human rights, mostly for the international community and acknowledgement. Therefore, with regard to the distance from the state and the ARI framework, the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF are not able to survive without guaranteed territory from the state – the Syrian regime.

Furthermore, it is believed that the PYD/YPG and now the SDF, may not be able to survive and sustain themselves without the USA's military support. Throughout the years, the VNSAs have built up more experience and training, based on the USA's military's support and as such, are now able to defend themselves from other VNSAs and states alike. This would have not been possible without the superpower's support for weapons and training in such a large scale in which the VNSA's training from the PKK would not have proved enough to destroy ISIS.

Nevertheless, the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF would not be able to defend itself from other states or be able to survive state persecution, i.e. Turkey, should the USA completely withdraw from Syria and cut its military support. Currently, the USA is still continuing the fight against ISIS in Syria and keeping its small military presence close to the SDF controlled oil-fields. Therefore, the PYD/YPG's autonomy has varied along the spectrum of distance from the state throughout the years but currently appears to be the highest, according to the ARI framework.

Thus, by 2021, the VNSA is able to exist without state support, except in terms of territory from the Syrian state, and the PYD/YPG and the SDF are able to survive statist attempts to destroy it as seen from the case of Turkey, yet with training both from the VNSA such as the PKK and a state actor such as the USA. So far, the VNSA has been able to survive state persecution, both from Turkey and Syria, making it actively autonomous, based on the ARI framework. Despite all, the VNSA is still sustainable, with a high autonomy, representation, and influence, considering changing nature of conflict and allies in Northeast Syria.

Representation in practice

Compared to many other VNSAs, the PYD/YPG and now the SDF's autonomy and ability to operate as state-like structures have significantly increased its autonomy, representation and influence throughout the years. By providing security and financial support to people who have been "liberated" from ISIS as well as providing jobs, the PYD/YPG were able to generate loyalty among its new members and recruits, further increasing its representation. Aydinli (2015:431) argues that a VNSA's regeneration potential is automatically limited if its future group members are narrowly defined, i.e. ethnic group or limitations within a certain geographical region, the membership's boundaries are also restricted, while ideologically defined groups have a larger pool of potential recruits. Although the PYD/YPG and now the SDF's potential pool of recruits is limited to Northern Syria, it has also seen new members joining from neighboring Turkey as well as had international „volunteers“ serving as foreign fighters in the YPG's ranks, especially during and after the Kobane battle.

The PYD/YPG and the SDF have also been flexible in involving minorities and Arab tribes to their military and political ranks. By doing so, it has increased the VNSA's representation and influence both locally and internationally. Moreover, the PYD/YPG have been able to build up legitimacy, based on security provision and portrayed inclusive-looking governance amid the Syrian civil war in which the rest of Syria was caught up with heavy fighting. The influence of the YPG has also increased

since the successful defense of Kobane, which won „the hearts and minds“ of both local and international community.

Although the ARI framework puts most emphasis on the VNSA's representation from the perspective of non-state actors, states and international organizations as representation providers have largely been ignored. For instance, the UN has provided representation and legitimacy for the YPG-dominated SDF, especially in terms of signing official agreements with the VNSA regarding curbing recruitment of child soldiers as well as urging the international community to take back ISIS-affiliated refugees from the SDF-controlled camps. Furthermore, the SDF has been granted with a position of being a capable and the only legitimate actor who manages the ISIS-affiliated refugee camps – taking care of managing one-issue area and thus, have explicit legitimacy from states with respect to the ARI framework. As such, states see the SDF as being capable and knowledgeable to manage certain areas of interest.

The Internet has also been a major source of the VNSA's image and representation fixing, as well as the source to recruit more members to its ranks, especially with regard to foreign „volunteers“ who joined the YPG amid the Kobane battle. However, the use of the Internet as a VNSA's recruitment strategy and the role that it plays in 'regeneration' has not been addressed in the ARI's framework. Moreover, both the YPG and the SDF tend to portray “counter-terrorism” success stories in their social media, with the SDF demonstrating its role in the Global Coalition against ISIS. At the same time, the Coalition against ISIS is also actively sharing and *retweeting* the SDF's counter-terrorism successes against ISIS in the region which have been serving as a major morale and recognition boost for the VNSA.

Motivations for joining the VNSA

Other than financial motivations for joining the PYD/YPG and now, the SDF, provision of services have also been an important factor for the VNSA to increase and keep its loyalty and representation high. In the case of the PYD/YPG and later, the SDF, one of the aspects that motivates not only the YPG and the SDF's fighters but also the constituency that the PYD governs, is the fact that the *Autonomous Administration* has been capable of providing services and security to the people it governs as well as the

fact that the YPG and now, the SDF pay financially much higher salaries to its fighters than the Syrian regime or other VNSAs in the region do. This has motivated both fighters and people from the Syrian regime-controlled areas to work for the *Autonomous Administration* instead.

The SDF soldiers are almost double paid compared to regime soldiers, depending on their rank (Haenni and Quesnay 2020:7). This has contributed to the sustainability of the PYD-led administration as the Syrian regime has currently no better alternative economically, despite Iran and Russia supporting the regime. Moreover, such higher salaries compared to other VNSAs or the Syrian state itself, helped to keep the VNSA's representation as there were no other groups who could compete with the salaries of the SDF and the autonomous administration. Thus, the SDF and the PYD/SDC officials were continuously able to attract new members to its ranks as well as generate loyalty as indicated in the ARI framework. Moreover, this also helped to sustain loyalties within the VNSA as its secular, minority-focus and openness to Arab tribes and religions, it helped to keep the loyalties strong within the PYD/YPG and the SDF.

So far, financial motivations for the VNSA have not been "outbid" by other sources and contrary to Aydinli's (2015:436) argument, been rather binding. However, as the PYD/YPG are based on secular rather than religious ideologies that are more binding, the VNSA has been less deterrent-free as many who join the YPG and now, the SDF's ranks, do not believe in the PKK's ideology. Rather, stability and security have been motivating factors for many people amid the ongoing Syrian civil, especially after ISIS' governance.

Influence in practice

As opposed to states, VNSAs must constantly prove themselves and their influence is based on action. Moreover, the PYD-led *Autonomous Administration* and the YPG had to be proven as a case, which the successful fight against ISIS during the Kobane battle did as VNSAs tend to build up autonomy and influence by practice. This shows how the PYD/YPG proved its influence through defending Kobane while eventually, securing sustainability up to this day. In terms of sustainability, Aydinli (2015:436) has argued that a VNSA has better chances to survive if it is able and willing

to make significant changes, ranging from strategies, tactics to organizational principles and practices. For instance, this could be seen by the YPG's ability to adapt to changing conflict environment and being open to transforming its principles of Kurdishness and work together with Arab tribes and minorities, especially after the Kobane siege as it swiftly transformed into the SDF.

According to Aydinli (2015:432), VNSAs may improve their legitimacy and its constituency base by making use of its „Robin Hood“ image. This is what the PYD/YPG had done by the end of the Kobane siege as it successfully protected the region, even before as the PKK and the YPG played a role in helping the Yezidi population in Sinjar in Northern Iraq to escape amid the Peshmerga forces' withdrawal from the area. This helped to create further legitimacy among local and international actors alike.

By the end of the Kobane siege, the PYD/YPG had successfully increased its legitimacy in terms of influence as with the lead of the USA, the Global Coalition, including more than sixty countries as well as the USA's military mission, it felt obliged to respond and recognize the VNSA due to its successful fighting record shown during the Kobane siege and by helping to rescue the Yezidi population earlier in Northern Iraq. By its successful performance during the Kobane siege, the YPG was able to maintain its representation and influence as well as keep the “loyalty” of its members based to the ARI framework.

On a strategic level, the fight against ISIS has led to support and legitimacy of the PYD/YPG's *Rojava* project and the YPG has presented itself as an important Western ally with regional influence amid recapturing about 17,000 square kilometers of land from ISIS by mid-September 2015 (Federici 2015:85). Regarding its sustainability, the PYD/YPG are aware that having good relations with both local and the international community matters due to geopolitics - it is a landlocked area, largely surrounded by “unfriendly” countries and actors. As such, by the end of the Kobane battle, the YPG emerged as the main winner, especially in terms of their international acknowledgement and impact. Although the YPG may have not fully calculated where would they be in seven years and who would they end up cooperating with on an international level, the situation played well into the hands of the PYD/YPG which led to further cooperation

with the biggest superpower and the ability to maneuver between other powers such as Russia amid changing nature of conflict dynamics.

Although the YPG had been fighting jihadists and the FSA forces since 2012, it was the Kobane battle in which the fight resulted in a positive outcome for the Kurds by bringing them more legitimacy, recognition, and influence, both locally and internationally. The defense of Kobane increased the PYD/YPG's legitimacy to a point in which the PYD/YPG officials were invited for talks with world diplomats such as the French administration and high officials of the USA administration, a level to which is difficult to reach for many small states through diplomacy. As such, France has been the most supportive advocate for the Syrian Kurds compared to other European countries which resulted in President Francois Hollande's meeting with the PYD/YPG women representatives in February 2015 in Paris and later, President Emmanuel Macron's calls to support the SDF in managing ISIS-affiliated refugee camps (Gunes and Lowe 2015:13). This shows the effect that the YPJ women fighters have had in advocating the VNSA's overall views, often through the YPG-related propaganda media channels. However, the UK has been less supportive and has prosecuted several foreign fighters who have fought in the ranks of the YPG against ISIS (Gunes and Lowe 2015:13).

Although heavy military operations against ISIS have gradually decreased as ISIS was largely declared defeated in March 2019, the USA-SDF's military cooperation is still ongoing, with gradual increase in the USA counter-terrorism operations, with both partners highlighting its successes on the battlefield via social media. While the USA had not been keen on the PYD-led political project previously, it has now adopted a more tolerant viewpoint and supporting the Kurdish unity talks. Furthermore, the YPG has started to promote further recognition from the international community amid its successful fight against ISIS, advocating for self-determination while it had pursued a "third" way with regards to the Syrian regime previously. Thus, the trans-border and transactional character of the Kurdish question has contributed to the PYD/YPG's political aims as well as their ability to influence superpowers and regional players alike (Zabad 2017:230). Moreover, the VNSA's autonomy, representation and influence grew with its transformative capacity and fight against ISIS. As such, it could be said that ISIS

served as the main driver for the VNSA's success and influence, despite ISIS' destructive nature.

Sustainability and impact

Despite obstacles over the years, the PYD/YPG now being transformed into the SDC/SDF still continue to exist, despite military incursions from Turkey and growing tensions between the pro-Syrian regime forces and the VNSA. Also, the Syrian regime's officials have previously indicated their interest in taking back territory from the PYD/YPG and the SDF. For now, this seems unlikely as the VNSA and the regime still operate with parallel structures as well as share oil resources. As such, being control of almost 50-70 percent of oil resources in Syria has given a major sustainability and motivation boost to the PYD/YPG and now the SDC/SDF as the VNSAs are able to sustain themselves and provide services to the population they govern.

It is argued that the PYD-dominated administration and the YPG are seeking for a long-term understanding in the form of "coexistence" with the Syrian regime, meaning that in the future, the YPG-dominated and the regime would administer the North East Syria together (Crisis Group 2019). At the moment, this seems unlikely, given the regime's growing confidence to take the YPG-controlled areas back. The PYD seems to hope that as the Syrian Kurds are in charge of significant sources of income compared to the Syrian regime, President al-Assad would ease its position towards the Kurds and accept mutually beneficial arrangements (Crisis Group 2019). This is especially so as the SDF now controls Syria's biggest oil fields, including the Rumaylan in al-Hasaka, which amounts to about 95 per cent of Syria's pre-conflict oil and 50 per cent of its gas extraction (Crisis Group 2019). The SDF also controls the Taqba dam, controlling the resources of Euphrates River (Crisis Group 2019). Thus, control over such oil resources is a significant source for its sustainability. At the same time, the SDF has indicated readiness to adopt it forces with the Syrian regime forces, still possibly contributing to its sustainability.

Despite military operations from neighboring Turkey, the YPG and now, the SDF's potential recruits and members have been motivated enough to join the VNSA,

despite state and non-state threats like ISIS. However, this is also largely related to financial motivations that are not yet outbid by other actors. The YPG's victory over the Kobane battle and the SDF's further territorial gains from ISIS have also boosted the morale and motivation of its members as well as the people governed. By being flexible and adaptable, the VNSA has proven its ability to survive as the YPG has transformed itself and made significant changes to its tactics and recruitment strategies. The YPG was quickly able to transform itself into the SDF and cooperate with different regional tribes and minorities. As a new practice to calm tensions, most recruitment to the VNSA is done through the SDF who is now officially providing security to the *Autonomous Administration*, rather than members being recruited to the YPG. This is also done to diminish any possible tensions between the YPG and the SDF fighters.

Transformative capacity and compulsion

By being able to include Arabs and minorities to the YPG's ranks, the newly transformed SDF regeneration potential was increased. For instance, as Aydinli (2015:431) has argued, VNSA's regeneration potential is limited if the variety of possible future members are „narrowly described“. As such, by transforming the YPG into the SDF, the VNSA was able to increase its regeneration capacity by having a greater pool of possible recruits. Moreover, the YPG and now the SDF were able to efficiently build up legitimacy among its members and potential members by successfully fighting ISIS, advancing territorially as well as provide financial rewards and security to its members and people governed, being part of the criteria for 'regeneration' capacity under 'representation' (Aydinli 2015:432). By including minorities to the SDF's ranks, and showing the SDF's ability to defend these groups' religion and ideology, it further increased the legitimacy and loyalty among people governed as well as current and potential members.

Although Aydinli (2015:432) argues that most VNSAs achieve high level of recognition and legitimacy by using illegal actions and means, this has not been the case for the SDF as it has openly cooperated with the Global Coalition and the USA led military mission, done on legal basis. As seen over the years, the PYD/YPG and the

SDF's representation capacity in terms of its regeneration, attracting new and maintaining its current members as well as constantly being able to generate loyalty has left the group with overall high representation. Moreover, the VNSA does have high influence and impact in terms of its compulsion capacity to work together with the world superpower and regional powers amid its flexibility to maneuver between regional powers and local constituencies alike, having transformed itself into the SDF and the SDC in order to generate more loyalty, both domestically and internationally. Combined all this, states have been compelled to react and act to the VNSA on all levels of the ARI framework.

Overall remarks

It is argued that for politically motivated VNSAs, for instance, the PYD/YPG and the SDF, using violence is likely to create state reaction and gain VNSA's recognition in order to achieve political goals (Aydinli 2015:438). As the degree of violence increases, so does the level of negative recognition (Aydinli 2015:438). However, the YPG and the SDF were adaptable and transformative in terms of promoting states to increase positive recognition and image towards the VNSA while developing its influence and impact over the years, leading the top USA officials to stand up against "betraying" its Kurdish allies. This can be considered as a diplomatic success from the PYD/YPG and the SDF's side.

Aydinli (2015:439) argues that if a powerful state starts to act differently due to VNSA's actions, the latter is seen as an influential actor at the global level and considered to have high potential for global actorness. After seven years of cooperation with a superpower, the YPG can be seen having high potential for global actorness. Being able to dictate to the USA's military and administration its needs, the YPG and the SDF have developed high influence. Furthermore, the SDF's legitimacy has highly increased as the USA, France and other international actors have felt obliged to respond and recognize the VNSA. Although for countries like Russia and Syria this has been interest-based, they

nevertheless have acknowledged the presence, influence, and legitimacy of the PYD/YPG and the SDF.

As seen over the years, the PYD/YPG and the SDF's representation capacity in terms of its regeneration, attracting new and maintaining its current members as well as constantly being able to generate loyalty has left the group with overall high representation. As for managing overstretch, the PYD/YPG and the SDF seems to have managed it well and has shown that it has fought wars as well as defeats successfully, as illustrated by Aydinli (2015:432).

Despite the USA's withdrawal decisions and changing nature of alliances amid the Syrian civil war, the VNSA was still able to keep generating loyalty among its members as to this day, the VNSA has the authority to pay the highest in salary to its political and military members. It could be even said that such financial rewarding has increased as the group is able to sustain itself with the revenues coming from being charge with the oil wells and its cooperation with the USA controversial private oil company. This has also heavily contributed to the VNSA's financial sustainability and compete with other violent groups and the Syrian state alike.

In terms of "representation", it is not only about attracting or maintaining members, but it is also about balancing such efforts with potential consequences of "excessive growth" (Aydinli 2015:434). A violent non-state actor can overly enlarge amid its regeneration success that it becomes hard to manage it effectively or it may lose its shared identity and eventually, its functionality and boundaries (Aydinli 2015:434). However, with the PYD/YPG and the SDF this seems not to be the case as the VNSA has been focused on one geographical area. Therefore, it could be said that the PYD/YPG and the SDF have refrained from overstretching the group as it has many rivalries and opposition in the region. Despite the YPG and the SDF having expanded territorially to Arab populated areas over the years, the VNSA is still focused on Northeast Syria, despite trying to lobby its democratic values and goals internationally to receive further political recognition.

Despite having declared ISIS as largely defeated, the superpower's relationship with the SDF continues, relating to path dependence. This means that although the YPG, and later the SDF started cooperation with the USA that has allegedly been only based on

the fight against ISIS, despite President Trump declared ISIS to be defeated earlier, this path of the fight against ISIS became the reason to proceed the cooperation. With regard to the ARI framework, that path dependence can be connected to the ARI framework—possibly, a joint enemy helps built up a common path, but the case of the PYD/YPG and the SDF shows that this relationship is not limited to path-creation cause and can take on its own life as the relationship between the superpower and the VNSA is ongoing despite ISIS having declared as largely defeated.

The USA's role

According to Gunter (2019:167), in 2015, the USA had five priorities in Syria: 1) respond to the Syrian regime's possible chemical attack against the opposition in August 2013; 2) protect Israel; 3) oppose Iran; 4) curb ISIS and other terrorist groups' affiliates; 5) and maintain Syrian unity. However, when the Syrian regime used a chemical attack on the Syrian opposition town of Ghouta in 2013, this was not enough of a reason for President Obama's administration to step in, despite declaring this as the USA's red line. On the other hand, it is illegal for the USA under international law to have bombed Syria unless authorized by the United Nations (Gunter 2019:168). As such, the USA had "neither an intelligent entry nor exit plan" at the time with regard to Syria at the time (Gunter 2019:167).

The same is true seven years later, with different institutions and administration officials bargaining with each other whether the USA should completely withdraw its troops or stay in the area in order not to fully betray its local Kurdish allies on the ground who have lost thousands of lives and can be considered as a proxy of the USA in its fight against ISIS, especially after 2015, with the creation of the SDF. It could be argued that this was not so before YPG's transformation to the SDF who fought against ISIS regardless of the USA's presence at the time. Nevertheless, working with the Global Coalition against ISIS has enabled the USA to act in Syria as well as in Iraq, with a focus on "degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh" (Global Coalition 2020). This has, both directly and indirectly, largely contributed to the YPG and the SDF's overall autonomy, representation and influence as without ISIS and without working with the

USA-led Global Coalition mission, the VNSA's growing influence would have been questionable.

Joe Biden's new administration and prospects for the future

Although the newly elected Joe Biden's administration has not yet taken a clear position regarding its policy in Syria, the fight against ISIS and military cooperation with the SDF remain dominant for the USA, especially as NATO has recently declared that additional troops would be sent to Iraq. This also means that the USA's cooperation with the SDF will continue and may be intensified in the coming year, despite the USA officially not declaring so. Moreover, sources interviewed for this thesis that were close to the Biden administration, indicated that President Biden would keep similar policies in Syria as President Obama had done.

President Biden announced in February 2021 Munich Security Conference that "America is back" and ready to cooperate with its transnational allies (Kurdistan 24, 20.02.2021). Moreover, although the USA officials have continuously repeated that they do not support the PYD-led political project, the USA has officially been supporting the Kurdish Unity talks. Although the Biden administration has not indicated further troop withdrawals from Syria, the USA's position on to which level it would support the Kurdish political goals, have been ambiguous. According to the Department of Defense press secretary John Kirby, the USA had about 1000 soldiers in Syria in February 2021 while specifying that these numbers vary "due to operational requirements" (Kurdistan 24, 10.02.2021). Currently, the USA has its troops located at al-Tanf in Southeast Syria, near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders (Kurdistan 24, 10.02.2021).

As for the SDF, its top commander Mazloun Kobane has had a VIP image when the USA officials have visited the Northeast Syria and want to talk to the SDF. The SDF's top commander has expressed hopes and not hiding his expectations from the new administration, demonstrating himself and the PYD-dominated *Autonomous Administration* as capable for diplomatic relations with a superpower on an international level. For instance, Mazloun Kobani indicated in an interview to the Voice of America news that the Syrian Kurds are "hopeful that the mistakes of the previous administration will be corrected" (@jseldin, Twitter 25.02.2021). Moreover, the SDF commander

Mazlum Kobane has expressed hope that the President Biden's administration would double the size of the USA troops in Northeast Syria instead (Szuba 2020). Sinam Mohamad, the envoy of the Syrian Democratic Council, based in the USA has lobbied for the YPG and the SDF and for the Biden administration to “recognize North and East Syria” (Szuba 30.12.2020). According to Mohamad, the SDF has a “military partnership with the US. And for that, we ask to translate this military partnership into a political one, so the administration of northeast Syria will be recognized politically as a part of a decentralized Syria...” (Szuba 2020). As a level of acknowledgement, recognition and interest the USA has given to the Syrian Kurds, such lobbying was done in a think tank event while sitting on the same panel with the previous Syrian envoy James Jeffrey - introducing the Syrian Kurds’ position in a high-level line up, showing the level of impact and influence that the VNSA has built up since 2014 when the cooperation with the USA started.

Criticism of the ARI framework

Although assessing (V)NSAs influence is difficult, Aydinli (2015:435) has argued that a VNSA is seen to have influence if it shows its capacities of being sustainable as well as constitute compelling and transformative challenge to states and the state-centric system. Although in the case of the PYD/YPG and now the SDF, it could be said that it does not constitute direct threat to the Syrian state as the VNSAs reiterate that they do not have secessionist tendencies, from the perspective of Turkey, this VNSA is seen as posing a threat to Turkey’s national security. One of the criticisms of the ARI framework has also been the fact that it does not prioritize among different ARI aspects but sees the autonomy, representation and influence as equally important. However, influence seems to be the most important aspect with regard to the PYD/YPG and the SDF as modern-day VNSAs.

The ARI framework is mostly focused on whether the (V)NSA influences states’ behaviors rather than behavior of other (V)NSAs. However, regarding the YPG, another aspect of its ‘influence’ is the fact that its cooperation with the SDF is also critical in analyzing the YPG’s actorness. Furthermore, the PYD/YPG and the SDF officials have continuously been in contact with officials in the United Nations and state actors who

have also recognized and acknowledged the VNSA on a global level. While Aydinli (2015:435) argues that VNSAs cannot legally be part of international institutional arrangements neither can they legally affect international politics, the YPG as an actor has started to change such claims. For instance, the PYD/YPG and the SDF have been recognized by the highest international organization, the United Nations, and has signed agreements with the latter with regard to addressing the issue of child soldiers. The PYD/YPG and the SDF officials have also signed agreements with the World Health Organization to facilitate COVID-19 vaccines to its *Autonomous Administration*, showing that such legal institutional arrangements are indeed possible. Furthermore, unlike Aydinli's (2015, 2016) ARI framework, the USA was constantly looking ways to legalize and make its cooperation with the YPG more official and the YPG's transformation to the SDF provided this option. Therefore, working together with the Global Coalition was a success as it gave recognition in terms of legalizing its cooperation with states.

Although Aydinli (2015:437) argues that neither explicit nor implicit recognition is an option for NSAs and thus, it would be better off adopting a method of creating disturbance to a level in which states could not stay indifferent to the (V)NSAs, the PYD/YPG and the SDF never created such disturbance to states, i.e. to Syria or the USA. Moreover, both states as well as Russia, reacted to a level which the YPG's impact was compelling, but in a rather positive and cooperative matter in terms of the fight against ISIS. Thus, other than Turkey's reaction to the PYD/YPG and the SDF operating close to its borders, both the USA and the Syrian regime's approach towards the VNSA resulted, so far, in positive recognition. However, in terms of Turkey's approach to the PYD/YPG and the SDF, this has indeed resulted in negative recognition towards the VNSA.

According to the USA State Department, the Partner Protection Act previously granted visas to about 89,000 Iraqis and Afghans who had worked with the USA over the years (North Press Agency 29.04). Contrary to Aydinli's (2015, 2016) argument that VNSAs and states do not generally get into a legally binding relationship, the similar Syrian Partner Protection Act would grant legal status for people who have worked closely with the USA army, showing that there are exceptions to the ARI framework and the framework would need to be updated with regard to changing transnational

environment that the (V)NSAs operate in. This shows the impact, compulsion capacity, and influence that the VNSA has had over the superpower as high officials have been lobbying for the VNSA in the highest USA's bureaucratic institutions.

The aspect of 'transformative capacity' in the ARI framework is mostly related to the states and approaches the issue from states' perspective. However, in the case of the YPG, the VNSA proved its capacity and adaptability to change its strategies and operability by transforming itself to the SDF. Furthermore, not all VNSAs have disruptive aims that related to negative recognition – the YPG's aim was to receive positive recognition from states from the beginning.

Furthermore, the aspect of 'representation' is not only about members of the VNSA but could also be about how they present each other, i.e. the YPG and the SDF have built its image online via the *Twitter* diplomacy. Moreover, the VNSA has tried to indicate that the YPG and the SDF are one of a kind in the region, keeping Northeast Syria safe by promoting secular values, appealing to the Western world and appearing in most influential outlets in the USA – again, a level to which many valuable journalists or small-state leaders have not reached. Moreover, Gen. Mazloun Kobane can be seen as the face of representation of the YPG and the SDF as a group, rather than look at representation as only of "common identity," as indicated in the ARI framework (Aydinli 2015:431). Within the SDF, the only common identity seemed to be fighting ISIS, rather than common views or religious beliefs.

Aydinli (2016:9) argues that the fewer ties between a VNSA and individual states, the more is the VNSA considered autonomous. However, in the case of the PYD/YPG and SDF, this has proven quite the opposite as having relations with states – the Syrian regime, the USA, Russia, as well as have links with the European states and the Global Coalition has been beneficial for the VNSA as it has significantly contributed to their sustainability and influence both regionally and internationally. Aydinli (2015:431) also argues that a VNSA's regeneration potential is automatically limited if possible group members are narrowly defined, i.e. ethnic group or limitations within a certain geographical region, the membership's boundaries are also restricted while ideologically defined groups are a larger pool of potential recruits. However, the PYD/YPG have been flexible in involving minorities and Arab tribes to their military and political ranks, i.e.

the SDF and its political wing, the SDC. By doing that, it has rather increased their representation and influence both locally and internationally. Furthermore, in terms of autonomy, this can also be included as having autonomy from non-state actors. For instance, the PYD/YPG have been dependent on the PKK regarding experience and training and this experience will always “follow” them, not being able to be autonomous from the VNSA.

Formalization of cooperation – outlier in the ARI framework?

Unlike Aydinli’s (2015, 2016) ARI framework, the USA was constantly looking ways to legalize and make its cooperation with the YPG and later, the SDF more official as the YPG’s transformation to the SDF provided this option. Working together with the Global Coalition is seen to be beneficial for VNSAs as such kind of legal military cooperation opportunities are rare to find for the latter. Moreover, this led the VNSA to directly cooperate and be recognized by countries in the Global Coalition, enormously increasing the VNSA’s independence from states, yet remain connected to the Syrian regime through its “third” or neutral way of looking at the conflict dynamics. Such legalized military cooperation also boosted the morale and loyalty of people towards the YPG, and later the SDF who became the official security provider in the PYD-governed region. This new level of formal cooperation also contributed to the YPG and the SDF’s impact as the superpower changed its course and legalized military cooperation in order to better work with the VNSA, despite previous views of not getting involved in the region, especially in Syria.

In fact, the USA-led Global Coalition heavily contributed to the VNSA’s representation, gave them a motivation boost to “liberate” more territory in Syria that was not populated by the Kurds as well as has played a role in the VNSA’s sustainability as many new members saw joining the YPG and the SDF as the only hope to make ends meet financially. Moreover, people from the Syrian regime’s side have also chosen to work under the PYD-administration as the latter pays much more in terms of salaries. As such, there is no alternative for the VNSA who would outbid them in financial means and services provision, including the Syrian state, making the PYD/YPG and now the SDF one of the most influential violent non-state actors in the region.

Thus, contrary to Aydinli's (2015, 2016) argument that VNSA-state relationship tends to be illegal, this is the opposite when it comes to the PYD/YPG and the SDF. Although this may be an exception to the ARI's framework, it may also be due to the fact that (V)NSAs of today try to act like and operate as state-like structures. For instance, this has been the case with the Islamic State who tried to establish their Caliphate in the region while being consisted of highly educated and profiled members as well as with Taliban, whose influence in the future of Afghanistan has been growing with several states in Central Asia (un)officially cooperating with the VNSA at their border outskirts. Several states have also expressed willingness to officially talk and negotiate with the VNSA. Now, when the Afghan government has collapsed, the superpower would again be in a position to somewhat formalize its interaction with the Taliban and thus, increase the actorness of VNSAs overall. Overall, just as Raudsik (2017:63) drew parallels in his research that the emergence of ISIS in Iraq gave an opportunity for the Kurds to gain international legitimacy, the same has been relevant for the PYD/YPG-led Kurds in Syria.

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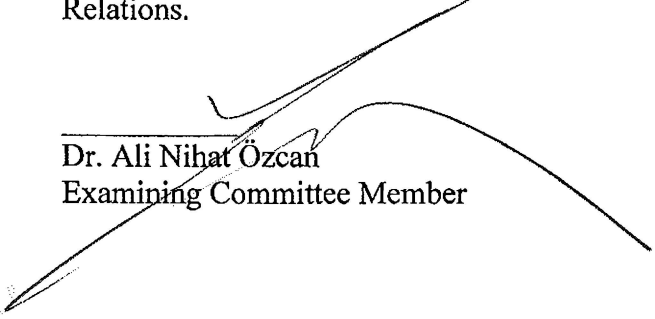
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