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The leading role of the Kurdish people in the framework of the Syrian crisis

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the revolution in Syria in 2011 and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the already fragile geopolitical balance of the Middle East has seen a quick decline. The rapid escalation of the conflict has led to an unprecedented political and humanitarian crisis in Syria, to which many Western countries answered poorly. At the same time, since 2013, ISIL launched its project to conquer the Middle East and establish an Islamic Caliphate, taking advantage of the difficult situation in the region to put forward its political plan. With Syria in flames and Iraqi militias (especially at first) on the run, the Kurdish population living in the so-called Kurdistan proved to be one of the most relevant actors in the region, particularly the Syrian Kurds who gradually assumed a strategic role in the long-standing crisis, both politically and military. Upon these premises, the report aims to analyse the Syrian crisis from the perspective of what has turned out to be one of the leading actors in the conflict - the Kurds. Through an in-depth study of the decisive role that they have played so far in the Syrian conflict - including their military capacity in fighting the Islamic State, their disputed participation in the peace process as well as their allocation in a possible post-Assad scenario - and the careful scrutiny of international sources and documents on the subject, the paper finally concludes with a few critical observations on the conceivable asset that may be implemented in Syria after the end of the conflict and the potential outcomes for the Kurds.

Keywords: Kurdish question, Rojava, PYD/YPG, Syrian crisis

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Abbreviations

AKP - Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*)
ANF - Jabhat al-Nusra Front
FSA - Free Syrian Army
HNC - High Negotiations Committee
IDP - Internally Displaced People
IHL - International Humanitarian Law
IHRL - International Human Rights Law
ISIL or IS - Islamic State (of Iraq and the Levant) - also ISIS or *Daesh*
KCK - Union of Kurdish Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*)
KNC - Kurdish National Council
KRG - Kurdistan Regional Government (of northern Iraq)
PKK - Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)
PUK - Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD - Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*)
SAA - Syrian Arab Army (or Syrian Army)
SDC - Syrian Democratic Council
SDF - Syrian Democratic Forces
SKC - Supreme Kurdish Committee
SNC - Syrian National Coalition
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YPG - People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)
YPJ - Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*)

1. Introduction: the Kurds, from the struggle toward a State to *diaspora*

Kurds are a mostly Muslim (Sunni) population¹, distributed² among several countries in the Middle East. They are spread in a region that crosses various borders, known as Kurdistan (the land of the Kurds) which encompasses mostly Turkey and Iraq, but Iran, Syria and small parts of Armenia and Azerbaijan, too³. The struggle for independence of the Kurdish population has deep roots and still influences heavily the political and social dynamics of the Kurdish people.

Kurds were promised a State since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, after World War I, but the Treaty of Sèvres⁴ was never accepted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, nationalist founder of modern secular Turkey, who strongly fought against the establishment of a Kurdish State. The same happened with the British-administered Iraq, which did not accept the creation of a Kurdish State, and with

Iran: both States agreed not to recognise any Kurdish state within their territories.

Therefore, in order to prevent any uprising for independence, Kurds were often pressured to abandon their culture, language and territories⁵ in order to become more “Turkish”, “Iraqi” or “Iranian”.

The struggle toward the establishment of a Kurdish State has undergone remarkable changes, mainly during the second half of the 20th century. The 1980s was a decade particularly relevant in this sense, since the countries that hosted Kurdish communities experienced notable political changes⁶, which led to a stronger repression of Kurds and to a consequent *diaspora*. Kurds were often forced to move not only to the main cities of their host countries, but also to other States. As a result, many Kurds now live outside Kurdistan, mainly in Europe and North America⁷.

Things partially changed, mainly in Turkey, with the appearance of Abdullah Öcalan, a political activist who founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - PKK*)⁸, and who fought in arms for the independence of the Kurdish State. The other Kurdish populations, though after strong repression, settled in other States, managed to gain autonomy on the territory they occupied,

¹ Despite the vast Sunni Muslim majority, many other religious groups are present among the Kurds. The total of the population to date is not completely stabilised, since the many changes the Kurdish population has undergone recently. However, the Kurdish population is thought to consist of between 25 and 35 million people. See <<http://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdistan-religion/>>.

² A strong element of the Kurdish organisation of the State is represented by tribes. It is a very important societal and political asset, which has now partially been replaced by the village structure. However, Tribes still constitute a fundamental aspect of Kurdish population. For example, some Kurdish villages bear the name of the tribe which has founded them (See Jongerden J., *The settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds. An analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2007, pp. 25 ff).

³ See Meho L. I., *The Kurds and the Kurdistan. A selective and annotated bibliography*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997, p. 1.

⁴ The treaty of Sèvres was signed on August 10th, 1920, at the end of World War I. It disciplined and affirmed the end of the Ottoman Empire, which was substituted by Turkey. The Treaty, among other things, established an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan. However, the Treaty was never ratified, and was replaced later by the Treaty of Lausanne. See <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kurdistan>>.

⁵ Tucker S. C. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Middle East Wars. The United States in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts*, Vol. I, ABC CLIO, 2010, p. 699.

⁶ Turkey went through a successful *coup d'état* in 1980, which brought to the establishment of the military government for three years; Iran, notably, was invested by the Islamic revolution of 1979; finally, Iraq, with the rise of Saddam Hussein, subjected Kurds to an inglorious campaign of repression known as Anfal. See the analysis carried out on this point by the Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris, available at <<http://www.institutkurde.org/en/kurdorama/>>.

⁷ The *diaspora* of the Kurds brought them to arrive in many European countries, where they settled and actively contributed to the civil and social life. They are currently living in Germany and France, but in many other European countries, such as the United Kingdom and, in smaller numbers in Italy and Finland, too. See <www.thekurdishproject.org/kurdistan-map/kurdish-diaspora/>.

⁸ See Crisis Group Europe, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, Report N. 213, 20 September 2011.

recurring to agreements with the central government, such as in Iraq where, since 1992⁹, the Kurdish region is administered by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Very differently, though, Kurds in Turkey have always been considered a problem for the Turkish government, which has never allowed for any autonomy, let alone independence.

It is often thought that the struggle for Kurdish independence has been a collective, organised fight by all Kurdish communities. However, although in general the direction of the struggle has been toward the same goal (independence from the territorial State where Kurds live), the efforts have been loosely organised by the different communities who generally pursued independent paths¹⁰, often in very different ways. Moreover, despite the strong fight for independence and the numerous uprisings that have characterised the Kurds in the last decades, the attention devoted to them by the political *élites* of the neighbouring countries and by Western leaders has always been fairly low. This is probably due to the long-lasting instability of the Middle East, which has always led to focus the attention on other problems of the region, which potentially had a stronger impact on the regional balance¹¹ (take, *inter alia*, the Arab-Israeli issue; the Iranian 1979 revolution; the invasion of the Kuwait by Iraq; the fight against terrorism in the early 2000s - characterised by the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US - and, most recently, the so-called Arab Springs).

It is against this historical and political background that the current role of the Kurds in the fight in Syria and against ISIL must be analysed. In this respect, the Kurdish struggle for independence and for a Kurdish land, in fact, is crucial to understand their

commitment: ISIL's aspiration to definitely conquer Syria and Iraq, and therefore expand the Caliphate, directly involves them. As it will be shown, Kurds are fighting strongly against ISIL, because what seems to be at stake here is the fight for a land that Kurds perceive as theirs, despite national borders, in the hope that, after the fall of the Caliphate, they will be somehow rewarded by central governments, presumably through a higher autonomy, if not independence. As it will be clear, the unstable political situation has also resulted in a *vacuum* of which Syrian Kurds in particular tried to take advantage to expand their area of influence. This particularly high involvement has led Western countries engaged in the region to see the Kurds more clearly as a valid and reliable partner to be helped and financed in its fight on the ground. However, the delicate balance of Western countries with Turkey had prevented them to gain full political respect, as their exclusion from the peace talks may show. Moreover, the already difficult war scenario has gradually coupled with a critic humanitarian situation which is wiping the area, especially the region of Rojava.

2. The Kurdish silent revolution in north-eastern Syria

Syria's north-eastern region of Rojava (alternatively called *Western Kurdistan*) is currently composed of three self-proclaimed autonomous cantons (or regions) - i.e. Afrin, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) and Cezire (al-Jazeera region in al-Hasakah governorate)¹².

Unlike its Iraqi counterpart, this region cannot be formally considered politically independent. In fact, whereas the autonomous KRG in northern Iraq has been officially recognised by Iraq's 2005 Constitution¹³, the

⁹ See <http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&s=030000&r=314&p=390&h=1>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/05/19/kurds-syria-iraq-divided-future/>.

¹¹ See, among others, Torelli S. M. (ed.), *Kurdistan. An invisible nation*, ISPI, 2016.

¹² In Kurmanji dialect, the term "Rojava" means "West", referring to the Western area of Kurdistan. See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, Middle East Report N. 151, May 2014, p. 1.

¹³ Art. 117 of the Constitution states: «this Constitution, upon coming into force, shall recognise the Region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region». See

autonomous status of Western Kurdistan – proclaimed with the Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in January 2014¹⁴ – has not been acknowledged so far neither by the Syrian Government nor by the international community as a whole¹⁵.

These three socialist enclaves encompass a vast majority of Kurds but also Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Chechens, Syriacs, Turkmens adhering to Christianity, Islam and Yazidism, for a total of nearly four million people¹⁶. This polyethnic, multilingual and multi-faith strip of land has been the richest area in Syria in terms of mineral and natural resources, such as water, oil and gas¹⁷, particularly concentrated in the Cezire canton. Nonetheless, Kurds never took complete advantage of these because of the recurrent discriminatory policies historically imposed upon their community.

In fact, since the 1950s the consecutive governments in Syria endorsed the Arab nationalism (or Pan-Arabism)¹⁸ which led to

continuous discriminating and repressing acts towards Kurdish identity, perceived as a hazardous threat to the unity of an Arab Syria¹⁹. Partially in contrast with this trend, the Socialist Ba'ath regime of Bashar al-Assad tried its best to develop its Kurdish internal client since 2000 by tolerating their political and paramilitary activism, promising them advantageous reforms which essentially led to no concrete outcomes while keeping systematic discriminations and repressions upon them.

During those years though, the quiescence of Syrian Kurds started to change. A new generation of Kurdish political groups was proliferating and the struggle for the recognition of their cultural and political claims erupted in the uprising of Qamishli in March 2004²⁰.

Hence, the long-suppressed and denied basic rights but also the defence of their areas of concentration and the wish of a federated region in a potential new Syrian state were the main reasons of Syrian Kurds' active part in the early-stage of demonstrations that started in Dara'a in March 2011 against the Assad regime. Nonetheless, being afraid of an umpteenth reprisal against their people if they had joined the predominantly Arab opposition, Syrian Kurds gradually chose for a position of neutrality, diverting the burden of

<http://www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf>.

¹⁴ For the full text of the Constitution/Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in Syria, See <<http://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>>.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, Middle East Report N. 136, 22 January 2013, p. i. Also See The Jordan Times, *Syria's Kurdish controlled regions approve federal system*, 18th March 2016.

¹⁶ Kurdistan National Congress, *A Transformation Process From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Information File, May 2014, p. 14.

¹⁷ For instance, Rmelan in Cezire Canton has some 2-4,000 oil wells with an average production capacity of almost 440,000 barrels/day. In the same town, there are also 25 gas wells. *Ibid.* p. 5. Also See Kajjo S., *Syria's Kurds and the Struggle for Oil February*, The National Interest, February 2013-<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/syrias-kurds-the-struggle-oil-8090>. Also See Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies, *Kurdish Movements in Syria*, Report N. 127, August 2012, p. 13.

¹⁸ It refers to the Nationalist notion of cultural and political unity among Arab countries. Its origins lie in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when increased literacy led to a cultural and literary renaissance among Arabs of the Middle East. This contributed to political agitation and led to the independence of most

Arab states from the Ottoman Empire (1918) and from the European powers (by the mid-20th century). See <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Arabism>>. Also See Antonius G., *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, London, 1938.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial - Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*, 26 November 2009, p. 8.

²⁰ At a football match tensions rose between Kurdish fans of the local team and Arab supporters and fights eventually erupted between the opposing groups. Security forces responded, reportedly only into the Kurdish section, killing at least seven Kurds. The next day, members of the security forces fired at a Kurdish funeral procession and demonstration, causing a number of additional Kurdish fatalities and injuries. Two days of violent protests and riots in Qamishli and other Kurdish towns in the north and northeast followed. The authorities reacted with force: at least 36 people were killed, most of whom were Kurds, and over 160 people were injured. *Ibid.* p. 10 ff.

the regime attacks mostly across the capital Damascus and Aleppo, the most populous governorate of Syria.

Consequently, Syrian government forces retreated from north-eastern Syria in July 2012²¹, in order to concentrate their military efforts elsewhere, leaving a substantial power vacuum in the area. In an unprecedented silent revolution, the strong and organised Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* - PYD)²² and its armed wings - the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* - YPG)²³ together with the Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* - YPJ)²⁴ - stepped in, assuming and establishing a political and security presence throughout the region, starting from the city of Kobani in Aleppo governorate on the 19th July 2012.

In this scenario, the PYD's growing influence largely came at the expense of other Kurdish groups. In particular, it prevented the emergence of new, rival militias while forcing existing ones - such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC)²⁵ - to cooperate with or join

PYD forces on their terms. For Kurds looking for means to defend their communities, cooperation with the PYD/YPG was just about the sole option. Therefore, relationships between PYD and the KNC gradually worsened because of their divergent goals: while the KNC strived to expand its base by taking part in the anti-regime opposition, PYD tried to become powerful among Syrian Kurds through establishing good relations with the Assad regime²⁶.

It is worthwhile remarking that the PYD is ideologically, organisationally and military affiliated with the PKK. While the PYD rejects this assumption, it remains a member of the Union of Kurdish Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan* - KCK), an umbrella organisation that shares the same leadership and charter as the PKK. Moreover, YPG members were also mostly trained by the PKK at its headquarters in northern Iraq's Qandil mountain range²⁷.

Therefore, benefiting from regime partial disengagement and armed opposition fragmentation, PYD gradually staked out zones of influence, provided essential services as well as ensuring a potential improved status for the community in a possible post-Assad Syria. Opting to remain hushed in the broader conflict, PYD and the secular YPG militias did not fight nor support the regime²⁸, assuming at the same time a sceptical approach toward the opposition, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood²⁹ and the Arab nationalists, and

²¹ Nevertheless, the Syrian government forces remained in strategic areas in and around Qamishli, such as the crossing border with Turkey, the airport and the centre of the town, where security agencies were located. See Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule, Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*, June 2014, p.12 ff.

²² The origins of PYD officially founded in 2003, date to the 1998 decision of then-President Hafez al-Assad to ban the Turkish insurgent movement Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* - PKK) and hand over its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to Ankara. See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, *op. cit.*, p.1.

²³ The YPG was established in 2012 by the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) as a derivation from the PKK to defend the Kurdish-inhabited areas in Syria. It remains the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria. See <<http://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>>.

²⁴ The YPJ was set up in 2012. It currently has over 7,000 volunteer female fighters between the ages of 18-40. See <www.theweek.co.uk/middle-east/islamic-state/60758/ypj-the-kurdish-feminists-fighting-islamic-state#ixzz3GjjLHvDw>.

²⁵ KNC is an umbrella organisation created after the meeting held in Qamishli in October 2011, under the patronage of Masoud Barzani, the president of the KRG. It comprises 16 Syrian Kurdish political factions

not aligned with the PYD. See Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies, *Kurdish Movements in Syria*, Report N. 127, August 2012, p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 28.

²⁷ See International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, Middle East Report, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²⁸ In April 2011, after anti-regime demonstrations erupted in majority-Arab cities, the regime extended citizenship to several thousand Kurds in the al-Hasakah governorate. The unspoken purpose of the concession was to placate the constituency and keep a lid on anti-regime Kurdish protests. It is unclear whether this tactic worked. *Ibid.* p. 8 ff.

²⁹ The Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) is a Sunni, pan-Islamic organisation based in Cairo, whose ultimate aim is the re-establishment of the global Islamic

strongly influenced by Turkey. By November 2013, the Rojava region was formally announced and the PYD assumed the *de facto* governing authority, running a transitional administration where decentralisation, gender equality and ecology were the cardinal principles of governance³⁰.

These unprecedented PYD demonstrations of force, independence and prominent aspiration for autonomy were acknowledged in dissimilar ways by the Syrian Government, the opposition forces, the neighbouring countries and the other world powers, directly or not, involved into the Syrian crisis.

Despite Ba'athist-Kurdish long-standing tensions, there was immediately a tacit alliance between the PYD and the Assad regime in summer 2012, due to the fact that the two sides' short-term interests were overlapping. On the one hand, the PYD was avoiding any armed confrontation with the regime, disengaging it from a costly military effort in north-eastern Syria; on the other hand, the regime was facilitating the PYD takeover of territory in the province of al-Hasakah, the first step in the establishment of Rojava region. The two sides sporadically clashed³¹. Recently, the Assad regime and YPG forces have shared the cities of al-Hasakah and Qamishli and it is reported that the regime has constantly provided military support to the PYD in its fight against opposition armed groups and al-

Qaeda affiliated groups³². This geopolitical context, besides supporting Damascus's position, it has simultaneously augmented Iran's power in the region.

Since autumn 2014, the United States started to support the PYD/YPG through airstrikes, firstly helping them dislodge the ISIL from the city of Kobani. Since then, Washington and the Syrian Kurdish militias coordinated other airstrikes attacks in al-Hasakah and al-Raqqah governorates³³.

It has also been reported a coordinated effort between the PYD/YPG and Russia. In fact, Moscow looked favourably at the *de facto* non-belligerency pact with Assad, considering the Kurdish militias also as a beneficial ally against the terrorist groups in Idlib governorate. However, the biggest benefit of this alliance has been Russian anti-Turkey bent. Nevertheless, PYD officials downplay these ties: they know the Russians cannot aid them as much as Washington can and they are deeply distrustful about Moscow's ultimate motives. Despite this, the parties' short-term goals of defeating the jihadists and pressuring Turkey currently dovetail³⁴.

As to the front of the opposition groups and the PYD/YPG, clashes between them have declined markedly since late 2013. A truce reached in Afrin encouraged mainstream armed opposition groups west of Aleppo city to focus against the regime³⁵.

Being said that, the PYD's hopes of staying neutral in the conflict and building an autonomous Kurdish state were dashed when the PYD was steadily expanding its territorial control at the expense of the rebel and jihadi groups which gradually took the lead in conducting attacks against the PYD. In fact, this scenario quickly escalated into an all-out war between the Kurdish forces and a forceful

caliphate. See The Clarion Project, *Special Report, The Muslim Brotherhood*, June 2015, p. 4 - <<http://www.clarionproject.org/sites/default/files/Muslim-Brotherhood-Special-Report.pdf>>.

³⁰ See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

³¹ Remarkably, in September 2012 and March 2015, the regime conducted airstrikes against YPG positions in Sheikh Maqsoud; in January 2013 the YPG attacked a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) base around Rmelan in al-Hasakah governorate, and in January 2015, a clash over territory in al-Hasakah city killed seven members of the PYD's internal security forces. A similar skirmish erupted in Qamishli in June 2015. See Aron L., *Syria: The First Five Years*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2016 - <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=58814>>.

³² See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, *op.cit.*, p. 8 ff.

³³ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Ascent of the PYD and SDF*, Research Notes N. 32, April 2016, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 6.

³⁵ See Heras N., *The Battle for Syria's al-Hasakah Province*, CTC Sentinel, October 2013.

alliance of jihadist groups when the latter decided to get control of the Turkish border and over oil and gas facilities in al-Hasakah governorate³⁶.

Turkey considers the PYD movements as firm upholders of the Syrian regime and, above all, as the umpteenth manifestation of the PKK power. Together with this, Ankara also saw the progressive gains of the Syrian Kurds as a potential and dangerous incentive for its own Kurdish population to follow the same example. Thus, Turkey treated the pro-Barzani KNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian Kurds and refused to deal bilaterally with the PYD³⁷.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Turkey tried to prevent any PYD advance in Syria that could have reached its borders. Hence, taking into account YPG's gains, Turkey declared that further moves from the Syrian Kurdish militias west of the Euphrates River - in the potential attempt to link Afrin canton with Kobani canton - would have constituted a redline requiring a military response³⁸. In June 2015, after the YPG took control of the border town of Tal Abyad, President Erdoğan considered it as a massive threat for his borders. Subsequently, YPG were shelled in the following July. In 2016, similar episodes were localised in YPG positions of al-Malikiyah and Menagh³⁹. Ankara is currently pushing for a safe zone up to 48 km long and 95 km wide in northern Syria, to be controlled by brigades loyal to Turkey⁴⁰.

³⁶ Also see par. 4 of this report.

³⁷ See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, *op.cit.*, p.18.

³⁸ Zeyrek D., *Ankara Warns PYD over Demographic Change in Northern Syria*, Hurriyet Daily News, June 2015. See <<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-warns-pyd-over-demographic-change-in-northern-syria.aspx?PageID=238&NID=84296&NewsCatID=510>>.

³⁹ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Ascent of the PYD and SDF*, Research Notes N. 32, April 2016, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Daily Sabah, *Turkey, U.S. Agree on ISIS-Free Zone in Syria*, August 2015. See <<http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/08/11/turkey-us-agree-on-isis-free-zone-in-syria>>.

3. Turkey and the Kurds in the Syrian crisis

As one of the “long-lasting problems” in Turkish politics, the relationship with Kurds has always been an issue for Ankara. The strong political will, culture, tradition and language has brought Kurds to be one of the most “feared” ethnic groups in Turkey, which still does not recognise Kurds as an official minority of the country: Kurds have been classified as mountain Turks⁴¹, which is a clear political euphemism in order to avoid to recognise them in any way.

After the rise of the PKK, founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1974, which strongly advocated armed struggle toward political independence⁴², the situation has gone under periodical rises in tension and has caused numerous victims. In 2015⁴³ the ceasefire that had been reached three years earlier between Ankara and the PKK, ended, and since then the political relationship between Turkey and the Kurds has grown more and more complicated due to the strong commitment of the Kurds in the Syrian conflict and in the rigid attitude shown by the Turkish political establishment in this connection. The complex relationship between Ankara and the Kurds has therefore clearly affected the wider balance of the conflict, with major drawbacks that extend to the other Kurdish populations too. As mentioned above, in fact, Ankara feared that any political and military advancement in Syria could lead to repercussions on its national integrity: after all, Turkey never had good relationships with the Kurds, let alone with the PYD which, just like the PKK, is considered by Turkey a terrorist organisation⁴⁴,

⁴¹ Sagnic C., *Mountain Turks: State ideology and the Kurds in Turkey*, in *Information, Society and Justice*, 2010, pp. 127-134.

⁴² See Özcan A. K., *Turkey's Kurds: a theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, Routledge, 2006.

⁴³ Established in 2012 after years of fighting, the ceasefire ended in July 2015 after a strong attack by IS on Kurdish positions. See <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kurds-ceasefire-idUSKCN0SU1EU20151105>>.

⁴⁴ Broker L., *Any hope for a Kurdish State? The United States, Germany and the Prospects of Kurdish Self-*

even though Europe and the United States do not recognise the PYD as a terrorist group.

On the internal side, Turkey has been going through an extremely difficult time, which has reached its acme with the very recent attempted *coup d'état*, the first to fail in Turkish history⁴⁵. And while, on the internal level, it has seen a slow shift toward a more “Islamic” conception of the State, thanks to the policy enacted by its President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on the international level, the recent events in Syria and the rise of the caliphate have shown clearly the deep contradictions in Erdoğan’s policy.

As aforementioned, at least in the first stages of the conflict, Erdoğan has been accused of supporting the Islamic State⁴⁶ fighting against the Kurds, although Ankara always denied it. These allegations were strongly supported, however, by evidences of bombardments carried out against the positions of the YPG fighting in Syria against ISIL, condemned by the International community⁴⁷: to these allegations, Turkey put forward the justification of provocations coming from the YPG⁴⁸. Moreover, at least in the first months of the fight against ISIL (2014), the refusal to let Turkish Kurds cross the border and join the fight in Syria proved to

be a tentative to block the Kurds and the dissemination of their victories on the ground, probably fearing renewed quests for independence after the end of the fight, right at its borders. The open hostility toward the Kurds has therefore led Turkish politics to (unofficially) back the fight of the Islamic State, in order not to allow for the Kurds to “certify” their role as a true – and independent – actor in the region.

Of course, the reaction of the international community has been critical. As mentioned above, this ambiguity (at the very least) toward the IS has been deeply criticised and has led to strong international pressure to stricter measures, coupled with Turkey’s enhanced role in the Syrian conflict. This is why Ankara has started in the last months to exercise stronger control at its borders with Syria, arresting possible fighters who, in recent years, had a very easy way crossing Turkish border to reach Syria and join the Islamic State. This was mainly possible thanks to the loose control exercised on the borders and to the accommodating political attitude kept by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) which has allowed Turkey to become the main path of the “jihadi highway”⁴⁹. But this is not something that al-Baghdadi could stand with no reaction: the last major attack at Istanbul airport at the end of June 2016, is just an example of the drawbacks of Erdoğan’s double attitude toward the IS⁵⁰.

In this connection, the triangle Kurds-Ankara-ISIL has shown that while Turkish are not intending to support ISIL for religious

Determination, Ed. By the Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2016, p. 15.

⁴⁵ See <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/16/why-turkeys-coup-detat-failed-Erdoğan/>>. Regrettably (but somehow not surprisingly), the failed *coup d'état* has led to a quick increase in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s powers, a derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights (notified on the 21st of July, 2016 to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe – See <<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=2436775&Site=DC&direct=true>>), and a quick repression (which resembles to a purge) toward people allegedly involved in the *coup d'état*, coupled with an quicker shift toward a possible establishment of an Islamic republic.

⁴⁶ See *Turkey’s Role in Supporting the Islamic State (ISIS). Erdoğan and the Kurdish Question* in www.globalresearch.ca.

⁴⁷ Turkey v Syria’s Kurds v Islamic State, BBC Monitoring, Analysis, 23 August 2016. See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ As shown by media reports, this is mainly due to the easy visa policy of the Turkish State, coupled with a huge border that Turkey shares with Syria. See, on this aspect: <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-struggles-to-halt-islamic-state-jihadist-highway-1409777884>>, where the author states: «Turkey became the primary route for foreign jihadists to join Syria’s civil war because of the country’s easy visa policies for travel, its porous 565-mile border with Syria and its modern transportation infrastructure».

⁵⁰ On Turkey’s involvement in Syria, and especially on Erdoğan’s double-dealing with and against the Islamic State, See <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/obama-Erdoğan-russia-jabhat-al-nusra-syria-policy.html>>.

motives, they are indirectly doing so because of their constant efforts to affect the Kurds. Clearly, this is mainly due to the fact that if Syrian Kurds defeat the Islamic State in Syria, and manage to reach a somehow autonomous administration in the area (which has always been difficult under the al-Assad administration), the path for the Turkish Kurds could become easier, benefitting from support that comes from other Kurdish populations, such as Syrian Kurds (Iraqi Kurds being already independent and politically autonomous⁵¹). For Ankara, the struggle of the Kurds toward independence, that has now arrived to be on for several decades⁵², is a serious threat to their territorial integrity and sovereignty. And Erdoğan, who is now much stronger, incredibly legitimised by a failed *coup d'état* that has seen thousands of people in the streets to support him⁵³, could never leave the independence of the Turkish Kurds to the outcome in Syria.

It is true: the European Union and many European States do not seem ready to compromise their relationship with Turkey, especially if this would be in order to defend the Kurdish instances, and, moreover, in consideration of the central role that Ankara has played in restraining the flow of refugees coming from Syria⁵⁴. But, at the same time, the fight against *Da'esh* has become an imperative for the region and for the wider international balance, and therefore Erdoğan is nevertheless facing pressures to enhance its action against ISIL. This, of course, will not change the way in which Turkish see the Kurds and the PKK:

⁵¹ See, *supra*, par. 2.

⁵² Since the Treaty of Sèvres, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kurds have tried, unsuccessfully, to gain independence from the national States.

⁵³ The images of protesters in the street have been shown by many sources of international news, such as Le Monde. See <http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/07/15/turquie-le-premier-ministre-denonce-un-coup-d-etat_4970404_3210.html>.

⁵⁴ Suffice it to think that Turkey is currently hosting nearly 3 million refugees coming especially from Syria. Data available at <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>>, last updated 30 June 2016.

a threat to their national integrity. However, a fight on a double front would be both dangerous and difficult⁵⁵: Ankara must choose on which priority focusing first.

4. The recurrent exclusion of PYD from the Syrian peace process

On a road map to a potential post-Assad age, the Kurds have always encouraged for an inclusive and productive dialogue in which all Syrian would have been represented. Nevertheless, Turkey, U.S. and most of the European countries formally consider the PKK as a terrorist group⁵⁶. Thus, the constant allegations endorsed by Turkey about PYD's indisputable proximity to the PKK have played a crucial role in the continuous exclusion of the Syrian Kurdish dominant front from the major steps of the Syrian peace process.

Additionally, the constant dominance of PYD and the regular tensions within most of the pan-Kurdish cooperation groups – such as the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC)⁵⁷ – has historically impeded the establishment of a unique diplomatic representation for Syria's Kurds within the international community, which simultaneously led to a defect of PYD's international legitimacy. Coupled with this, its tacit alignment with the Assad regime has also cost significant credibility in the eyes of both

⁵⁵ See

<<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/trouble-turkey-Erdoğan-isis-and-kurds>>. The author also underlines the fact that Ankara may have now started to prosecute ISIS combatants, having realised that the Islamic State constitutes a threat to the entire humanity, including them.

⁵⁶ Since 2011, terrorist organisations, such as ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra Front and other groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, have been constantly excluded from the Syrian peace process. See UN Security Council resolutions 2170 (2014) and 2178 (2014) - <<http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/>>.

⁵⁷ It was a transitional governing body comprising the PYD and KNC, based on the power-sharing “Erbil Declaration” signed by the two parties under the tutelage of Masoud Barzani on July 2012. It soon broke down over mutual recriminations. See International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

the non-Kurdish opposition and the international community.

Due to these circumstances, the PYD was excluded from *Geneva II*⁵⁸, the UN-brokered peace talks held in January-February 2014, under the guide of UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi. In this occasion, the Kurdish voice was solely represented by the Barzani-backed KNC as part of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)⁵⁹.

Thereafter, the opposition forces gathered in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) in December 2015 in order to resolve the recurrent and thorny issue about which forces would have been part of the official opposition delegation taking part at the approaching *Geneva III* – also known as *Intra-Syrian Peace Talks*, held in February-March 2016. As direct outcome, it was established the 34-member High Negotiations Committee (HNC)⁶⁰, also called *Riyadh Group*. This was the segment of the Syrian opposition supported by the Sunni axis made up of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – as such, PYD was evidently excluded from this event.

In response to Riyadh conference, PYD convened in al-Malikiya (Al-Hasakah governorate) another opposition conference, gathering more than 100 representatives from the secular moderates, in clear contrast with the sectarian and Islamist mould of the Riyadh Group. Thus, as a political wing of the Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF)⁶¹, it was established the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)⁶². Despite PYD's efforts in obtaining international recognition though, Turkey advocated and obtained the exclusion of PYD from Geneva III. Once again, KNC – strongly sustained by Turkey – was the only Kurdish front represented in the peace conference.

Thus, although the PYD/YPG were since mid-July 2012 in full control of a significant part of northern Syria and both the United States and Russia looked favourably at its participation at *Geneva III*⁶³, the PYD's major rival in the Kurdish spectrum was the only one gaining more and more international legitimacy, visibility and gravitas⁶⁴.

A new series of peace talks are expected in August 2016, aimed at launching a comprehensive political transition for Syria. UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, has recently stated that:

The Kurdish voice must be heard [...], but there are some difficulties in ensuring that they could be part of the Talks. One of them is that they have been announcing that they are in favour of federalism. This issue is provoking on all sides reactions. We will be finding a way to have their voice heard. There are informal discussions with them at

⁵⁸ The warring parties were not part of the Action Group of *Geneva I*, held in June 2012. See <<http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>>.

⁵⁹ The also called *National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* is a coalition of opposition groups that was formed in November 2012 during opposition meetings in Doha, Qatar. See <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/50628>>.

⁶⁰ HNC included a certain number of armed groups, excluding ISIL and Al-Nusra Front (ANF). Members of the HNC ranged from the US-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) to Ahrar al-Sham, the largest Salafist-Islamist organisation funded and supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. See Candar C., *Under Pressure from Turkey, UN excludes PYD from Syria Talks*, Al Monitor, 29th January 2016.

⁶¹ SDF is a coalition of Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Syriac Christian fighters, but completely dominated by YPG. It has been created in October 2015. The other militias involved in the Syrian Democratic Forces are either long-standing PKK allies or proxies, such as the armed wing of the Syriac Union Party, or more recent allies drawn from the Sunni Arab tribal landscape in this part of Syria and from the remains of small Sunni Arab rebel groups. See LUND A., *Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: a Primer*, Syria Deeply, January 2016. See

<<https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/22/origins-of-the-syrian-democratic-forces-a-primer/>>.

⁶² See <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-manaa-idUSKCN0WK1U8>>.

⁶³ The WorldPost, *The Enemy of My Enemy: Russia and the Kurds Reshape the Syrian Civil War*, February 2016.

⁶⁴ See International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-22.

all time, but inviting them will require some homework⁶⁵.

Certainly, any other Turkish rejection of a potential PYD participation at the upcoming conferences would further complicate the peace process as a whole.

5. Syrian Kurdish forces vs. ISIL and other Al-Qaeda affiliated groups

Over the last few decades of powerful terrorist insurgency in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish militias steadily proved to be one of the most rigid and capable military force on the ground to deal with the Salafist⁶⁶ terrorist groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda, particularly the self-proclaimed ISIL, Ahrar al-Sham⁶⁷ and Jabhat al-Nusra (ANF)⁶⁸.

In focusing particularly against ISIL, the new established YPG-led SDF represents the largest of the non-government fighting forces in Syria, relying on approximately 40-50,000

combatants⁶⁹. On the other hand, ISIL counts on about 30,000 fighters⁷⁰ mainly localised between the cities of al-Raqqah and Deir el-Zour⁷¹ as well as in the middle of the 100 km of territory which separate Afrin from Kobani canton.

YPG has been viewing ISIL as an existential threat to its population that must be contained, rolled back and ultimately destroyed. As already mentioned, the main reasons behind the Kurdish efforts in fighting ISIL are strictly linked with their vital necessities of both protect their respective areas and secure a position in the political future of Syria. On the contrary, ISIL has clearly showed its stake in creating instability in the region and strategically gaining control of natural resources and farmlands in northern Syria. Moreover, it has also been acting with the aim of worsening the conflict between Turkey and the PKK/PYD, pushing the latter to divert their military efforts on each other rather than against ISIL⁷².

In fact, in the unstable scenario of the Syrian civil war, the plausible launch of the Kurdish offensive against ISIL coincided with the clashes erupted between the YPG and Islamic rebel factions on the July 2012 over the

⁶⁵ See

<<http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=4604>>.

⁶⁶ Salafis are social and religious fundamentalists who believe in a return to the original ways of Islam. The word *Salafi* comes from the Arabic phrase, *as-salaf as-saliheen*, which refers to the first three generations of Muslims (starting with the Companions of the Prophet), otherwise known as the Pious Predecessors. The 100-year-old Sunni-based Salafi school of thought aspires to emulate the ways of the Prophet Mohammed. See <<http://www.theweek.co.uk/world-news/6073/what-is-salafism-and-should-we-be-worried-by-it>>.

⁶⁷ Also known as *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*, or the *Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant*, is a Sunni Salafist militant group operating in Syria that aims to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government. See Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organisations Project - <<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523>>.

⁶⁸ ANF was formed in late 2011, when Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent AQI operative Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Syria to organize jihadist cells in the region. In 2012, al-Nusra began to rise to prominence among rebel organisations in Syria for its reliable supply of arms, funding, and fighters that came from a combination of foreign donors and AQI. See Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organisations Project - <<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>>.

⁶⁹ Karam, Z. and Mroue B., *U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces Emerges as a Force against ISIS*, December 2015. According to globalsecurity.org, SDF would consist in at least 25,000 Kurdish fighters, with a smaller element of Syrian Arabs, numbering 5,000 to 6,000 as of May 2016. See <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/sdf.htm>>.

⁷⁰ Zenko, M., *How Many Bombs Did the United States Drop in 2015?* Council on Foreign Relations, February 2016. Differently, Mr. Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in August 2014 declared the presence of 50,000 IS fighters only in Syria. See Al Jazeera, *Islamic State "has 50,000 fighters in Syria"*, August 2014.

⁷¹ Geopolitical Futures, *Islamic State's Current Standing*, 7th December 2015. See <<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/islamic-states-current-standing/>>.

⁷² International Crisis Group, *Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N. 49, April 2016, p.7.

control of territory and oil resources⁷³. Thereafter, since the declaration of the autonomy of Rojava in November 2013, ISIL and the other groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda carried out a wide number of attacks in Western Kurdistan.

One of the most emblematic battles between the two fronts is certainly the ongoing one for the city of Kobani, in Aleppo governorate. This erupted in September 2014, when ISIL fighters overran the small northern town, forcing almost all of its civilians to flee into Turkey. International air strikes led by the US helped to push back IS fighters, allowing YPG to eventually regain control of the town at the beginning of 2015. Nevertheless, ISIL militants launched a fresh attack on 25 June 2016⁷⁴ in order to retake it. On the very same day, SDF entered in the city of Manbij, also in Aleppo governorate, an ISIL stronghold since 2014 and a key supply route between the Turkish border and ISIL's *de facto* Syrian capital of al-Raqqa⁷⁵.

In the persistent battle against ISIL, Russia and U.S. have gradually aligned their forces with the YPG militias and SDF, in the attempt to crumble ISIL's strongholds. In addition to this, the regime also reportedly offered weapons to YPG forces.

As the YPG was increasingly becoming the most effective force against the jihadist groups, U.S. amplified then their assistance in October 2015, airdropping tons of ammunition to the YPG-backed SDF⁷⁶. Taking into consideration the U.S.' reluctance in sending ground troops

to Syria, YPG/SDF can be definitely considered as their current proxy ground troops in the fighting against IS. During 2015, also Moscow started to provide the YPG with ammunition and arms as well as air support in their effort against the jihadists. This ongoing communication resulted in the opening of the first foreign representation of Syrian Kurds in Moscow on February 2016⁷⁷.

Therefore, joint U.S.-Russia support to the YPG/SDF significantly contributed to their military success against ISIL and other terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Russia in itself considers U.S. as a valid partner in fighting the above-mentioned groups. Being said that, it is worthwhile remarks that these alliances seem to be more tactical and tied to the anti-IS campaign and regional proxy conflicts, rather than a long-term strategic alliance or support for an autonomous Kurdish region.

Although Turkey denies it, its early tacit support to ISIL - which allowed jihadists from all over the world to transit its territory and cross into Syria - has been well documented⁷⁸. In fact, Turkey considered them both as potential counterweights to the PYD and a precious help in potentially bringing down the Assad regime⁷⁹. Moreover, Ankara has also used special force channels and secret agents among radical Islamist groups to incite fighting and shelling Kurdish settlements in Rojava region.

6. Humanitarian crisis in Western Kurdistan

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria is believed to be the worst following the Rwandan genocide of 1994⁸⁰, with 13.5 million of people still in need of humanitarian assistance and

⁷³ Wilgenburg W., *Islamic State's Threat to the Kurds in Syria and Northern Iraq*, Jamestown Foundation, 19th December 2014.

⁷⁴ BBC World News, *Battle for Kobane: Key Events*, 25th June 2015, See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>>.

⁷⁵ Al-Jazeera, *Syria: Kurdish-led Forces Enter ISIL-held Manbij City*, 26 June 2016.

⁷⁶ Most recently, U.S. forces also took over an expanded airstrip south of the PYD-controlled town of Rmelan to more easily resupply the SDF troops and deliver weapons. See Ward C. and Lister T., *Inside Syria: The Farm Airstrip That's the Center of the U.S. Fight against ISIS*, CNN, February 2016, <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/02/middleeast/syria-isis-us-airstrip/>>.

⁷⁷ Khlebnikov A., *The Kurdish Card in the Syrian Power Struggle*, February 2016, See <<http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/kurdish-card-syrian-power-struggle>>.

⁷⁸ GUNTER, M., *Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey*, Middle East Policy Council, spring 2015, Volume XXII, N.1, p.1 ff.

⁷⁹ See Crisis Group Europe, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, Report N. 225, April 2013.

⁸⁰ See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13431486>>.

protection⁸¹, about 470,000 people killed, 1.2 million injured⁸² and nearly 4.9 million of refugees mostly received by Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan⁸³.

From the peaceful demonstrations of March 2011, the crisis has rapidly escalated into a non-international armed conflict⁸⁴ to which applies International Humanitarian Law (IHL) through the Common Art. 3 of 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocol II of 1977⁸⁵. The latter entails that civilians in Syria are fully entitled to both protection and humanitarian assistance under customary IHL and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Nonetheless, evidences have systematically showed that most of the parties to the conflict have explicitly disrespected these obligations⁸⁶.

⁸¹ According with the current figures, 11.5 million Syrians require health care, 13.5 million need protection support and 12.1 million require water and sanitation, while 5.7 million children need education support. About 2.48 million people are food insecure, while more than 1.5 million need shelter and household goods. See <<http://www.unocha.org/syria>>.

⁸² According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), See <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured>>.

⁸³ Official UNHCR data, See <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>>.

⁸⁴ Arimatsu, L. and Choudhury M., *The Legal Classification of the Armed Conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya*, International Law PP 2014/01, March 2014, pp. 12-15. Also See *Syria: ICRC and SARC maintain aid effort amid increased fighting*, Operational update, July 2012. Further details on: *Report of the 31st ICRC International Conference on IHL and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts*, Switzerland, November-December 2011.

⁸⁵ Syria has ratified these Conventions in 1953 and even though it is not a contracting party of the Additional Protocol II, the provisions of the latter apply to the crisis because it forms part of customary International Humanitarian Law. See Henckaerts, J.-M. and Doswald-Beck L., *ICRC Study on Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Volume I, Rules, 2005.

⁸⁶ Crimes against humanity (Art. 7, par. 1-3 of the ICC Statute) and war crimes (Art. 8, par. 1-3 of the ICC Statute, with particular reference to par. 2c and 2e) have been steadily committed by Syrian Government, non-State armed opposition groups and United Nations-

The PYD/YPG have also been accused of some IHL/IHRL violations, mostly harassment, arbitrary arrests or disappearances of their political rivals and forced displacement of civilians⁸⁷. Yet, these are certainly not comparable with the atrocious crimes perpetrated by other warring parties - among which, executions, deprivation of liberty, enforced disappearances, torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, use of chemical weapons and, not least, the denial of humanitarian access⁸⁸.

The intensity of fighting in the Syrian crisis has fluctuated among different regions, depending on the actors involved and the strategic value of the objectives at stake.

Among the most intense hostilities, the brutal warfare between YPG/SDF against ISIL and other terrorist groups in Aleppo, al-Raqqah and al-Hasakah governorates has caused numerous humanitarian impacts on civilian population with several casualties, injury and massive displacements⁸⁹.

Furthermore, the human conditions in north-eastern Syria have gradually worsened due to two coincident elements. Firstly, the enormous flux of internally displaced people (IDPs) arriving from other parts of Syria seeking protection. Secondly, the economic embargo and subsequent intermittent border closures imposed both at the Turkish border by Turkey and partially at the Iraqi border by

designated terrorist groups. See Report n. A/70/919 of the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the *Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 9th June 2016 - <<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/164/95/PDF/N1616495.pdf?OpenElement>>.

⁸⁷ Nevertheless, PYD/YPG have constantly denied these allegations. See Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule, Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*, June 2014, p. 19 ff.

⁸⁸ See Report n. A/70/919 of the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the *Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 9th June 2016, p. 3 ff.

⁸⁹ See United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, Advance Edited Version, 11th February 2016, p. 5 ff.

KRG for congruent reasons⁹⁰. This has gradually led to alarming shortages of essential goods and services in the region, such as electricity, water, food, gas and medical supplies, with subsequent prices increase.

The double blockade has also partially been imposed on humanitarian assistance – consisting in movement of staff and supply of relief aid from Turkey and north-western Iraq – intended to Rojava⁹¹, adding further access constraints to those already imposed internally by the warring parties⁹². Hence, the combination of the above-mentioned conditions has progressively caused a massive humanitarian crisis in the region – particularly in besieged and hard-to-reach locations⁹³ – generating enormous flows of refugees seeking asylum in the neighbouring countries and Europe.

⁹⁰ As already mentioned, Turkey has no intention whatsoever to tolerate and, even less, accept the PYD attempt of independence in north-eastern Syria. On the other hand, KRG would also have a clear stake in controlling Rojava due to shortage of natural resources and agricultural products on its soil. Moreover, KRG is politically dependent on Ankara, and in relation to Rojava, it has tended to follow the policy Ankara has desired so far. See Biehl J., *The Embargo Against Rojava*, 22nd November 2014. See <<http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/embargo-against-rojava/>>.

⁹¹ At the moment, only two (out of nine) sporadically open crossing points are available for humanitarian assistance in Rojava, i.e. Musitpinar-Ain al-Arab from Turkey and Fishkhabour-Simalka from Iraq. For further details, See Map II, *Overview on humanitarian access and areas of influence in Syria*.

⁹² For instance, insecurity and shifting conflict lines, restrictions on freedom of movement, closure of key access routes, etc. See Report of the UN Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139, 2165, 2191 and 2258, (S/2016/631), 20 July 2016, p. 7 ff.

⁹³ According to UNOCHA, a hard-to-reach area is an area that is not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors for the purposes of sustained humanitarian programming as a result of denial of access, including the need to negotiate access on an ad hoc basis, or due to restrictions such as active conflict, multiple security checkpoints, or failure of the authorities to provide timely approval. See <<http://www.unocha.org/syria>>.

7. Concluding remarks

As we have tried to point out in the preceding pages, the commitment of the Kurds in the Syrian crisis has been, and still is, remarkable. Their role has concretised in political struggle and military engagement, in order to defend their land under ISIL's threat. At the same time, Syrian Kurds have seen the right moment to establish and deepen their independence in the Rojava region, which is however struck by a grave humanitarian crisis. Therefore, a few conclusions based upon the elements we have analysed may be drawn.

While the engagement of the Western countries has been primarily military, the commitment of the Kurds has been of course military, but especially political. Syrian Kurds have fiercely fought to gain autonomy and influence in the area they inhabited, in the hope of a future improvement of their rights in Syria, after the years of deprivation they experienced in the Assad era⁹⁴. They have remarked their presence in the territory and, at the same time, shown strong military power against ISIL. Nevertheless, the low attention of the Western countries for their instances and the closeness of the PYD with the PKK have regrettably prevented, more than once, Syrian Kurds from entering the peace talks brokered by the United Nations. The humanitarian situation, which includes the complete collapse of the State's institutions in Syria, moreover, shows the worst side of the conflict, with millions of refugees⁹⁵ and internally displaced people (IDP) struggling to survive after they have lost everything they possessed. Turkey, who has long feared that claims of independence at its borders with Syria could lead to emulation by Turkish Kurds, has to rethink its shadowed support for ISIL not only

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ According to the last official estimates elaborated by the UNHCR, updated at the end of June 2016, Lebanon alone hosts more than 1 million refugees. However, more and more people arrive without official registration, which makes the estimates a probably underestimated number. See, on refugees in Lebanon: <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>>.

due to international pressures but also because it is paying now the price of a double game with it.

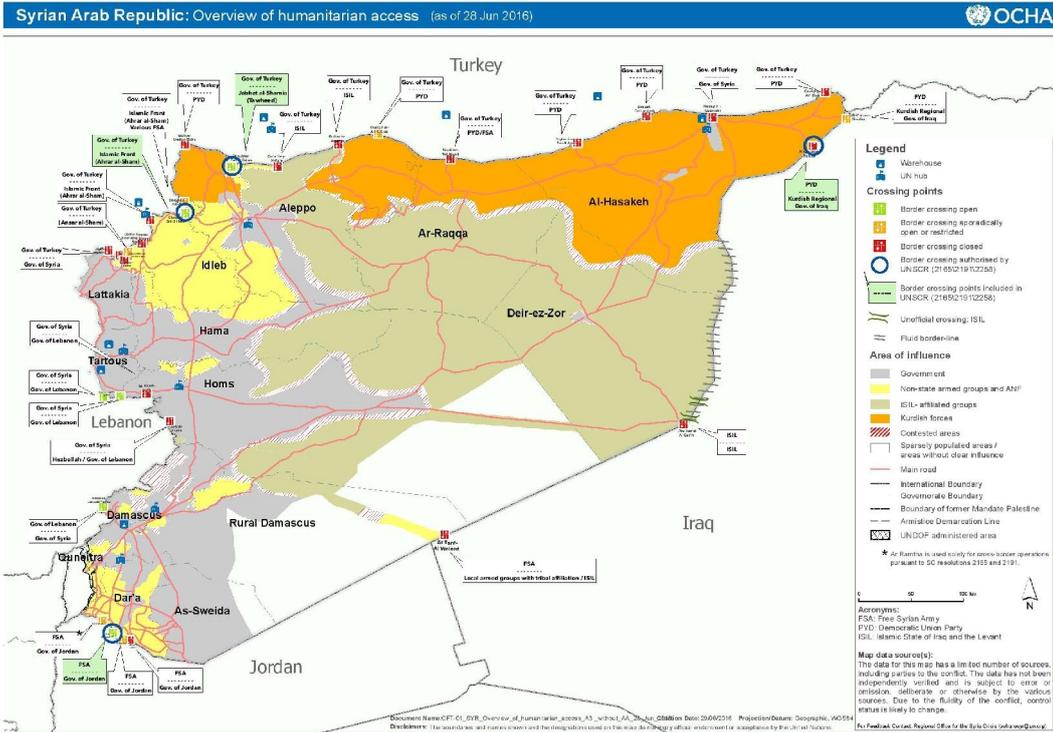
In this complex scenario, unfortunately, the path toward the end of the Syrian conflict seems far from imminent. However, the commitment in this direction must be comprehensive, and endorsed both by Western countries and by regional powers. This is crucial not only in order to put an end to the devastating humanitarian crisis, but also from a more “egoistic” perspective: the situation in the Middle East directly impacts on Europe, especially now that Turkey is threatening to end the agreement it has signed only a few months ago with the European Union⁹⁶, to halt the flow of migrants.

However, it is still too early to presume how and when the conflict will end and, moreover, to speculate on what role the Kurdish population will have in a post-conflict scenario. Kurdish instances, at least, seem to be back on the international political agenda, though as we have seen, always with a low legitimacy due to the lack of a united representation of Syrian Kurds in the international community. Moreover, sparks of renewed quests for independence have been lately brought onto the scene⁹⁷, to demonstrate that the role they have played in the conflict cannot be underestimated and they are not willing to be subject anymore to vexations: in this connection, a decentralisation in Syria, which took into consideration all the different autonomous instances would prove helpful in a future post-conflict scenario⁹⁸. We will see if this will bring to a renovated effort for a true independence of the Land of the Kurds.

⁹⁶ See the news that have been reported by the BBC: <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36373973>>.

⁹⁷ See the proposal made by the Governor of the KRG, Mr. Barzani, who has called for a non binding referendum on independence of the region, <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-the-referendum-lead-to-an-independent-kurdish-state>>.

⁹⁸ *Syria at War, five years on*, United Nations Escwa, Saint Andrews University, 2016, p. 70



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